

# Design



paint palettes  
& placement  
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Perhaps the single biggest decorating decision homeowners face is what colors to paint the outside of the house. It's easy to be overwhelmed by endless choices, how many colors or tints to use, and where to put them. When facing a blank slate (or sheet of paper, or primed clapboards), it's wise to remember that creativity needs limitation. In the case of color choices, *context provides guidance*, suggesting certain paths and closing others. To narrow your choices down to appropriate colors that please you, let paint color selection be a process of elimination. By Patricia Poore



## *Folk Victorian, 1882*

LAMBERTVILLE, N.J.

*Scheme by owners with the help of their designers*  
In this four-color paint scheme, body color is a light olive and the shutters an understated green-black. Following the credo that the brightest or darkest colors are reserved for trim, the window casings are red-brown, with sash and recesses picked out in red and a rich brown.

Body: Renwick Olive 2815

Shutters: Rookwood Shutter Green 2809

Window Casings: Rookwood Medium Brown 2807

Sash, trim accent: Rookwood Red 2802

All colors from Preservation Palette, Sherwin-Williams





## Queen Anne/Stick, 1889

ELGIN, ILLINOIS

*Scheme by Historic House Colors*

This won Rob Schweitzer his third award in Chicago's "Finest Painted Ladies" contest. He credits the exclusive use of period colors—every one appears on late 1880s paint-color cards; careful placement; optimum contrast.

Body top: Downing Straw 2813  
 Body bottom: Renwick Olive 2815  
 Body bands: Rookwood Dark Green 2816  
 Trim: Roycroft Vellum 2833  
 Sash: Tricorn Black 6258  
 All colors from Sherwin-Williams

BEFORE



PHOTOS COURTESY: HISTORIC HOUSE COLORS

First is the context of the house to its surroundings: to neighbors' houses, to nature, to the quality of light. Context is also provided by "given" colors: a red brick or cool granite foundation, weathered shingles gone brown or seagull grey, the color of the asphalt roof. Guidance comes, too, from architectural context—the house itself. (Furthermore, colors chosen inside the house may provide context for choosing exterior paint.)

What about authenticity? There is only one truly historic color scheme for your house: the colors it was painted when it was built or during the period you are interpreting. But evidence may be gone, the original scheme may have been ill advised, or you may simply hate the old colors. It's always a good idea to consider the style and era of your house when making a renovation or decorating decision, and certainly that's true here. Victorian colors and placement will bring out the character of a Victorian house, while a pale Colonial Revival scheme could turn it into a white elephant. That said, there are many, many choices within each period. Most people, even the most restoration-minded, actually prefer an interpretation of a historic scheme, adjusted for today's preferences and real neighborhoods. Related note: The "historical color collections" put together by paint companies have been edited and adjusted for modern tastes.

Can you pick a successful paint scheme yourself? If the house and scheme are relatively simple, and you test by painting large samples on the building, you probably can, especially if you are using a tried-and-true combination of neutral

colors. Otherwise you may want to consult with a paint-color specialist. Some of them are versed in historical colors and architectural style, too. Most work through the mail or by using digital magic and the Internet. (There's a list on p. 95; also check locally.)

The case studies shown in this article may give you an idea, but you can't necessarily copy a scheme and get success. Lynne Rutter says that people call her all the time asking for specific colors they saw on a client's house, but she doesn't divulge them. "First of all," Lynne explains, "my clients paid me for custom work and a unique palette. But even more important, using the same colors won't get the same result—every house is different in its elements and context. For example, San Francisco row houses present only the façade; my scheme shown [on p. 77] likely would not work on an East Coast house facing west with a lawn on three sides."

Early on, paint color options were based on fashion tempered by available pigments. Most pigments in the 18th and early 19th centuries were inorganic earth (mineral) pigments: raw umber, burnt umber, yellow ocher (sienna and burnt sienna) and red ocher (Spanish red and Spanish brown). Used alone or in combination with white lead or lampblack, earth pigments created a surprisingly vibrant range of colors. These "stone colors" are generally compatible with old houses because they match traditional building materials in long use.

We think of classical color in the early 19th century. Once again, exterior color mimicked stone, as did construction in

*continued on p. 76*



## CLASSICS THAT RETURN

Some paint-color combinations just click, and thus they reappear, subtly different each time: dusky blue with white, salmon with fern green, wine red with olive green. Other schemes take hold for 50 years and then fade away: Chocolate brown with French vanilla was a staple early in the 20th century, but it's a reviled scheme now. Some schemes work both ways; the green house with white trim has been as enduring as the white house with green trim.

A complementary scheme of earthy reds and greens dates to colonial times and reappeared in the late Victorian era, then was popular for bungalows. The bungalow era also saw watery grey-blue, clay colors, dark green, limestone and greige used again and again. Colonial Revival Foursquares are classic with the body in straw or yellow and the upper storey in mushroomy taupe. Tudors were often treated to browns when they were built; today a moldy sage green is more likely. Stone colors—neutral brown, red-brown, grey and moss green, straw, buff, terra cotta—are perennially in favor as they mimic natural building materials.

**TOP:** Green body with white trim: a basic scheme here subtly embellished by Rob Schweitzer for a house in Westfield, N.J.



### More Online

Find out more about Victorian polychrome paint schemes at [oldhouseonline.com/12-rules-victorian-polychrome-paint-schemes](http://oldhouseonline.com/12-rules-victorian-polychrome-paint-schemes)

*It's not just what you like—you have to consider elements of the house, the neighborhood. Separate yourself from choosing your "favorite colors" and go with a scheme that will make the house look its best for years to come. —Lynne Rutter in her weblog, The Ornamentalist*

# COLOR IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The bungalows, American Foursquares, and English cottages of older neighborhoods too easily fade into the background. A historical paint job brings these houses to life. Let's start with bungalows. These small, sometimes rustic, ground-hugging houses go hand-in-hand with Arts & Crafts naturalism. Earthy browns and greens were favored. But by now the Colonial Revival, with its pastels, buffs, and off-whites, had already begun. By the time of World War I, yellow, sage, and tan were popular. White was ever popular as a body color, paired with dark green, grey, or black on trim or shutters. Houses were painted in pale or soft yellow, light green, and grey tones—with the introduction of white now used as the trim color.



Cream trim, lighter than the olive-green body color, enhances the Colonial Revival spirit of this American Foursquare, drawing attention to the columns, corner pilasters, and balustrades.

## HOW TO PAINT A FOURSQUARE

Whether styled with Arts & Crafts elements, Prairie School allusions, or Colonial Revival classicism, the American Foursquare is a common type of the period 1900–1930. These houses can be blocky, but a sympathetic color scheme gives them proportion and period sensibility. Rob Schweitzer has noted four different approaches to painting a Foursquare: (1) Single body color with contrasting trim, the roofing often supplying a second main color. (2) Stucco or concrete colored during application or painted afterward, in light colors such as tan, grey, or vellum, for Prairie School-influenced houses. Here the trim—defining elements like belt courses included—typically was painted in a darker color such as olive or hunter green. (3) Two-tone schemes, with different body colors top and bottom, which emphasizes horizontality. One floor is finished in a darker, naturalistic brown or

green (it may be stained shingles rather than a paint color); the other floor is painted a light sand color or yellow. The trim is often the lightest color. (4) Motif color, which plays up a design element of the house, such as diamond insets in the stucco or pilasters and balustrades on the porch.

Two-toning became popular around 1915, emphasizing the horizontal lines of bungalows and “shirtwaist” Foursquares. For semi-bungalows, those with a second half-storey, the upper floor was set off by a trim board and perhaps clad in dissimilar siding, painted in a different color or left natural or stained. “There is no rule about which value went on top, lighter or darker,” says Rob Schweitzer. Putting the darker value on top brings down the apparent height of the house.


Foursquares and even bungalows built in the 1920s tended toward Free Classic or Colonial Revival styling. Colonial Revival colors were very popular, as were “natural” houses of stained wood and stone. Exterior colors for the middle class tended to be the inexpensive, durable colors: browns and greys.

*Beware the hostile use of white! A Sherwin-Williams counter card of 1901, the year of Victoria's death, shows a highly ornamented house with all of its exuberance painted out in white. The 19th century is done, it seemed to say. But the house lost.*

—John Crosby Freeman, *The Color Doctor*



From a Sherwin-Williams color card: an English type of Craftsman-influenced shingled house pairs white trim with the period's terra cotta and tan. The green roof is part of the scheme.



## *Bungalow— Foursquare, 1911*

PORTLAND, OREGON

*Scheme by owners with architect Wade Freitag*  
With its gabled “bungalow” roof and porch, and lots of artistic details, this Foursquare is a looker—and now it has a great color scheme for harmony in nine colors. Or nine paint cans: some colors are tints and shades of each other, or even a flat and semi-gloss of the same color.

Body: Louisburg Green HC-113

Trim: Tate Olive HC-112

Accents: Yorkshire Tan HC-23

Colors from Historical Color collection, Benjamin Moore



*More Online*

For a tour inside this house, go to [oldhouseonline.com/inside-a-Craftsman-Foursquare](http://oldhouseonline.com/inside-a-Craftsman-Foursquare)



## SIMPLE HOUSES, SIMPLE SCHEMES

Two-color and monochromatic schemes can be as arresting as any. It's not the hue but the placement of shades and tints that's key, enhancing the architecture and subtly highlighting detail. Above all, don't fight the architecture—that's what happens when, for example, dark colors go on projections and light tints in shadowed recesses, or when excessive "picking out" in color turns a cohesive element like a bracketed cornice or balustrade into a series of separate pieces.

Neutral doesn't mean bland, however. "To make a simple house more interesting," says James Martin of Denver's *The Color People*, "don't paint your little Cape Cod flat grey. Instead, consider using a warm beige-grey or a green-grey." More advice from Martin: Instead of cold white for trim, use cream or an off-white with a hint of color to it: coffee, peach, green. Forego painting the shutters and doors black, choosing a black-green or a blue-black instead. "These ambiguous 'off' colors add complexity and change with the light, giving your home almost an emotional aspect," he says.

**TOP:** Its old vanilla scheme made this bungalow-era house disappear. Rob Schweitzer picked a soft suede body color with dark grey-green trim.

*The [exterior] colorist movement really began in the late 1970s with the Painted Ladies, a term coined by book authors Michael Larsen and Elizabeth Pomada for restored Bay Area Victorians painted in boutique color schemes.*

— James Martin, *The Color People*

wood. In both the Federal and Greek Revival styles, many houses were painted white. But painters added lampblack and pigments to imitate English Portland stone, buff Caen stone from France, and regional stones found in America. In the 1840s, tastemaker Andrew Jackson Downing decried the use of white paint as an affront to the landscape; he thought picturesque house styles like Gothic and Italianate should be painted in harmony with nature, in soft stony shades of brown and grey, in colors that suggested the forest, the rocks. In his book *Cottage Residences*, he included one of the first published paint charts, advocating three warm shades of grey that evoke New York slate and bluestone, along with three shades of brown that look like wood or sandstone. Another favorite color of Downing's mixed yellow ochre with white and brown to create a stony gold color. Italianate houses, of course, were meant to evoke the stone villas of Italy; thus buff and straw stone colors are a good choice for these houses, which would have had brown trim during their heyday.

Then came the exuberant Victorian period of architecture—and paint manufacture. From about 1870 until 1900, subdued colors were still used but they were joined by the new colors of manufactured paints. Innovations in chemistry, such as coal tar dyes, led the way to new colors like mauve. A fashion evolved for elaborate houses (think turrets and gingerbread trim) to be painted in complex polychrome (many-color) schemes.

During the Colonial Revival that had

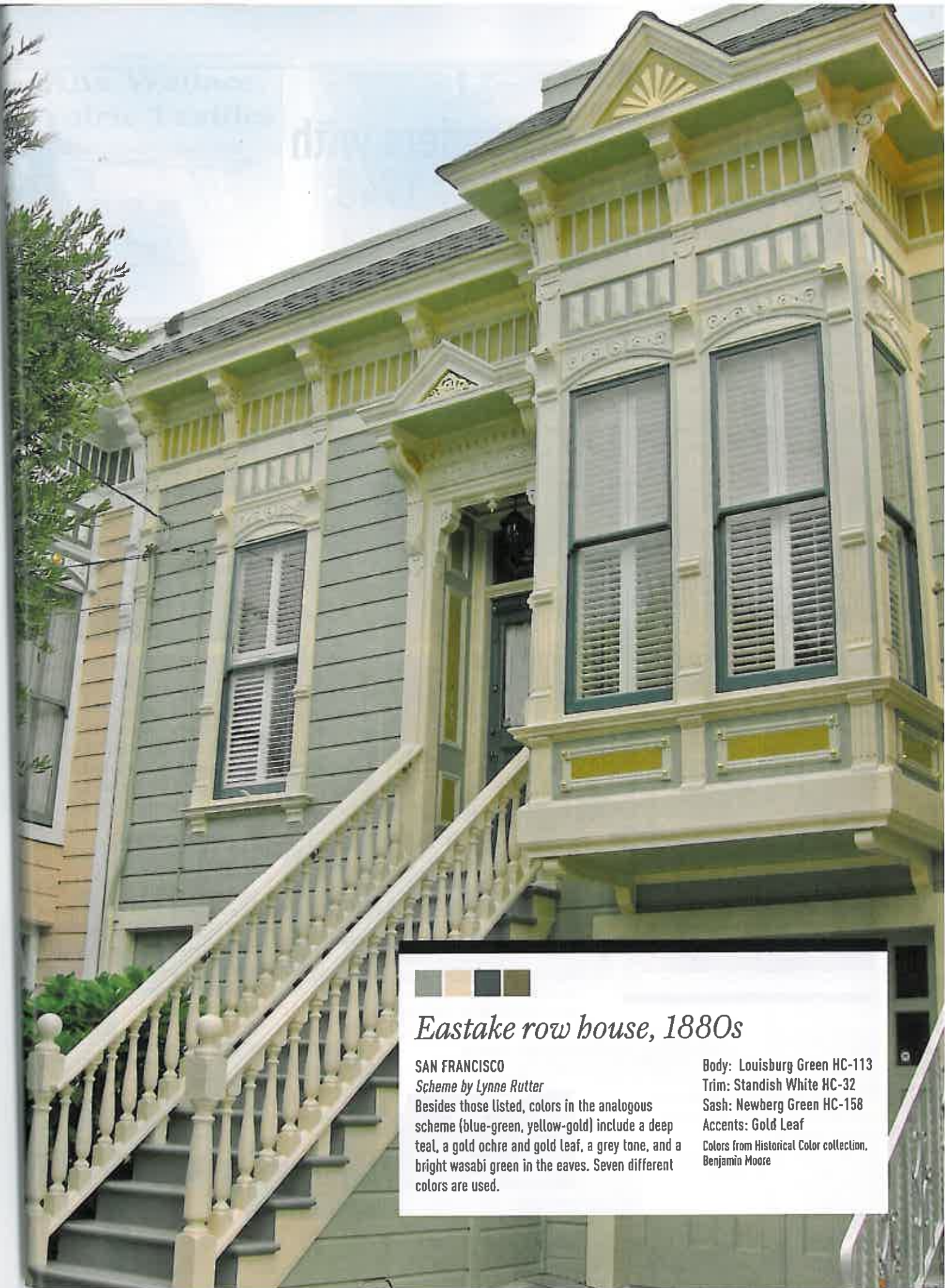
begun by the 1880s, house colors moderated back to lighter and softer tones. Houses were painted in pale or soft yellow, light green, and grey tones, with the introduction of white used as a trim color. The number of colors used in a scheme declined in comparison to late Victorian schemes, which had used at least four and up to nine different colors.

Whatever period, whatever scheme, remember that highlighting should organize and lend scale—not create a polka-dot effect. Color placement can make a house seen taller and narrower—or conversely, it can make it seem to hug the ground. Dominant colors and lighter values—that is, those colors that "advance"—should be placed on details that project. This will further lend moulding profiles, column capitals, and raised panels a three-dimensional quality. On the other hand, subordinate colors and darker values—those that appear to recede—should be placed in recesses to emphasize depth. Such placement accentuates the natural shadow effect of recesses.

Finally, a hint that bears repeating: You must paint large-scale samples of chosen colors in place. Buy quarts. Outside, paint a section at least four feet square where body, trim, and accent colors come together (like clapboards and corner board and shutter stile). If you are dissatisfied with your sample, it's not back to square one. You'll know, by looking at the color in place, what the problem is: the green is too blue, the contrast too great, etc.

FOR RESOURCES, SEE PAGE 95.





## *Eastake row house, 1880s*

**SAN FRANCISCO**

*Scheme by Lynne Rutter*

Besides those listed, colors in the analogous scheme (blue-green, yellow-gold) include a deep teal, a gold ochre and gold leaf, a grey tone, and a bright wasabi green in the eaves. Seven different colors are used.

Body: Louisburg Green HC-113

Trim: Standish White HC-32

Sash: Newberg Green HC-158

Accents: Gold Leaf

Colors from Historical Color collection,  
Benjamin Moore

## BEGUILED INTO STEWARDSHIP

p. 14 **EXTERIOR PAINT** *body custom-mix California Paints* californiapaints.com *shutters/door 'Clarksville Gray' Benjamin Moore* benjaminmoore.com *fence/gates Mythic Paint* mythicpaint.com **LANTERN Concord Collection Northeast Lantern** northeastlantern.com **SHUTTERS custom reproduction Timberlane Shutters** timberlane.com **FENCE Old Adirondack, Willsboro, NY** oldadirondack.com

p. 15 **CUSTOM MOULDINGS Kurt Plank Construction**, N. Ferrisburgh, VT (802) 425-3876 with reference to "Federal Style Patterns 1780-1820" by *Mary Beth Mudrick (Wiley, 2005)* **HALL PAINT walls AFM Safecoat afmsafecoat.com matched to 'Swan's Mill Cream' by Benjamin Moore trim 'Pure White' AFM Safecoat stairs 'Clarksville Gray' Benjamin Moore** benjaminmoore.com

p. 16 **PARLOR PAINT walls 'Bitter Root', trim 'Pure White' AFM Safecoat afmsafecoat.com** **HARDWARE Ashley Norton** ashleynorton.com **SWITCHES Classic Accents Inc.** classicaccents.net **TABLE LAMP antique brass Conant Metal & Light** conantmetalandlight.com **SECRETARY antique ARMCHAIRS Lee Industries** leeindustries.com **NEW TURKEY RUGS ABC Carpet** abchome.com **SWAG VALANCES 'Aster; White' embroidered silk Kravet Couture** kravet.com *trim 'La Petite Silk Tassel Fringe in Cranberry' Samuel and Sons* samuelandsons.com **FABRICATION Celia Y. Oliver, Shelburne, VT** celiayoliver.com **LIGHTING sconces 'Addison' silver, chandelier 'Winston 29' Remains Lighting** remains.com **FLOORING FSC local beech SEALER AFM Safecoat afmsafecoat.com**

p. 17 **PAINT COLORS walls 'Wedgewood Gray' Benjamin Moore** benjaminmoore.com **SCONCES 'Early Georgian Storm Wall Sconce' Vaughan** vaughandesigns.com **CHANDELIER antique FLOORING FSC cherry SMALL SIDEBBOARD antique LARGE SIDEBBOARD mahogany ca. 1880 Galerie Du Louvre, Montreal** galeriedulouvre.com **TALL CUPBOARD Louis Philippe antique Marche aux Puces** marcheauxpuces-saintouen.com **TABLE The Federalist thefederalistonline.com CHAIR FABRIC 'Antinori' Nancy Corzine Silk** nancycorzine.com **WINDOW SWAGS 'Maldives' celadon silk taffeta Kravet Couture** kravet.com **ROMAN SHADES 'Sargent Silk Taffeta' Schumacher** fschumacher.com **FABRICATION Celia Y. Oliver, Shelburne, VT** celiayoliver.com

p. 18 **NEW WINDOWS Marvin (custom) marvin.com BUILT-INS (not shown) Hal Moore, Saranac Hollow Woodworking** saranachollow.com/artist.htm

p. 19 **PAINT COLORS 'Celery Powder', trim 'Pure White' AFM Safecoat afmsafecoat.com PENDANT 'Orson' Remains Lighting** remains.com **FIRECLAY SINK Shaws shawsofdarwen.com FAUCETS Cifial cifialusa.com Newport Brass newportbrass.com SEAT FABRIC 'Paisley Print' cotton-linen Schumacher** fschumacher.com **ROMAN SHADES 'Magnolia' embroidered linen Zoffany zoffany.com FABRICATION Gabriela McCormick Home Gallery, Peru, NY (518) 643-8495 GRANITE BOWL Matt Horner Stonework** matthornerstonework.com **RANGE Viking vikingrange.com FRIDGE KitchenAid [with custom panel] kitchenaid.com COUNTERTOPS Indian granite TILE custom artisan-made**

**Related Resources**  
**EARLY LIGHTING American Gas Lamp Works** americangaslamp.com *outdoor gas lighting in colonial styles Garber's Crafted Lighting* garbers-craftedlighting.com *early-style lighting fixtures Historic Housefitters* historichousefitters.com *reproductions of 18th-century lighting Lanternland* lanternland.com *traditional outdoor lights & lanterns*

**HISTORICAL SHUTTERS Americana** shutterblinds.com *wooden shutters and blinds Shuttercraft* shuttercraft.com *authentic wood shutters in period styles Timberlane Inc.* timberlane.com *custom shutters in many styles and materials*

**EXTERIOR DOORS Vintage Doors** vintagedoors.com *solid wood entry doors and screen doors*

**BRUSHING UP ON PAINT BRUSHES, TOOLS, STRIPPERS American International Tool Industries** paintshaver.com *paint stripping & removal tools Franmar Chemical* franmar.com *Soy-Gel eco-friendly paint strippers Eco Strip* eco-strip.com *makers of Speedheater infrared paint remover tool Hyde* hydetools.com *paint prep tools, including scrapers, power washing equipment Porter-Cable* portercable.com *orbital sanders, power paint removers Silent Paint Remover* silentpaintremover.com *infrared heat paint removal tools Stanley Tools* stanleytools.com *full range of hand tools Wagner* wagnerspraytech.com *FLEXiO paint sprayers & pro systems Wooster Brush* woosterbrush.com *brushes, rollers, and painting supplies*

**EPOXIES, CONSOLIDANTS Abatron** abatron.com *epoxies for building & restoration Conserv Epoxy* conservepoxy.com *wood rot repair epoxies Donald Durham Company* waterputty.com *putty for wood, plaster repair West System Epoxy* westsystem.com *versatile two-part, marine-grade epoxy*

**SELECTED PAINTERS & CONTRACTORS Austin Home Restorations** austinhomerestorations.com *historic specialists in central Florida Bob Peters Painting* bobpeterspainting.net *paint contractor serving Western Massachusetts Derick Bardon Careful Painting* carefulpainting.ca *Vancouver-area professional painters Kevin Palmer Painting* kevinpalmerpainting.com *professional company serving Connecticut Lewis Custom Painting* lewiscustompainting.com *Denver, CO painters Mr. Fix It Memphis* mrfixitmemphis.com *handyman repair services David Ford and Aaron Sturgis, Preservation Timber Framing* preservationtimberframing.com *repair of traditional buildings in New England ProTect Painters* protectpainters.com *nationwide professional painting company*

**TIME TO PAINT HISTORY-INSPIRED PALETTES AFM Safecoat** safecoatpaint.com *plant-based oil paints Benjamin Moore Paints* benjaminmoore.com *Historical Colors collection BioShield Paint Co.* bioshieldpaint.com *VOC-free and clay paints; color pigments C2 Paint/The Coatings Alliance* c2color.com *New 20th Century Colors collection; 18" x 24" paint samples California Paints* californiapaints.com *Historic Colors of America collection Duron Paints* duron.com *Mount Vernon and Historic Charleston palettes Epifanes* epifanes.com *alkyd primers & top coats Farrow & Ball* farrow-ball.com *traditional English palette in original formulas Fine Paints of Europe* finepaintsofeurope.com *earth-friendly, high-pigment paint Homestead House Paint Co.* homesteadhouse.ca *historical palettes KT Color/Aronsons* ktcolorusa.com *Le Corbusier collection Mythic Paint* mythicpaint.com *zero-VOC paint in historic color collection Old Fashioned Milk Paint Company* milkpaint.com *traditional milk paint Old Village Paints* oldvillage.com *milk paint from natural earth pigments*

**Pittsburgh Paints** ppgvoiceofcolor.com *Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater Colors Collection Pratt & Lambert* prattandlambert.com *Williamsburg-inspired palette Primrose Distributing/Olde Century Colors* oldecenturycolors.com *synthetic milk paint for wider applications Real Milk Paint Co.* realmilkpaint.com *mixable natural milk paint Sherwin-Williams* sherwin-williams.com *Preservation Palette Solvent Free Paint* solventfreepaint.com *organic linseed-oil paint Valspar* valspar.com *National Trust line of documented colors available at Lowe's*

**PAINT COLOR CONSULTANTS Barbara Jacobs Color & Design** integralcolor.com *home & business color consultation in the Boston area or color-by-mail service, digital views Bonnie Krims' Color Studio* bonniekrims.com *architectural color consulting John Crosby Freeman, The Color Doctor* oldhouseauthority.com/ *Home/OldHouseColors on-site or by-mail consultation int/ext, resid/comm, group rates, lectures CJ Hurley Century Arts* cjhurley.com *color consultants, custom painting James Martin, The Color People* colorpeople.com *pioneer color consultant working nationwide Jill Pilaroscia, Colour Studio Inc.* colourstudio.com *professional color consultant & author Kristie Barnett* thedecorologist.com *consultation, palette options, custom and flat fees Robert Schweitzer, Historic House Colors* historichousecolors.com *color choices and placement mapping; works by mail or through an online data form Lynne Rutter* lynnerutter.com *murals, decorative painting, color consultation Ken Roginsky, The Old House Guy, oldhouseguy.com meticulous digital photo-realistic color placement from your photo, color consulting, placement maps Susan Herschman, studio-one-design* .com *color consulting interior and exterior*