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THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN REPAIRING OR REPLACING YOUR HISTORIC WOODEN WINDOWS

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Your historic windows are a valuable part of your historic building. When you think about it, they compose a large part of your exterior, usually 30% or more! Viewed simply from a cost perspective, you will be better off in the long run if you can repair your original windows rather than replace them even if the cost is the same or a little more.

Repair or replace? You will probably need to get several people to evaluate your windows to get an accurate price for repair. Make sure they have rebuilt and repaired windows before. Let them know that saving these windows is important to you. A common mistake is to have a sales rep for one of the window companies evaluate the window conditions. His job is to price and sell windows, not to know how to repair windows or even to know whether or not they can be repaired.

If replacements are necessary, the first preference should be for sash replacements only. The sashes are the parts of the window that go up and down. If you can replace only these, you will be better off historically and financially. Replacement window sashes can be made by major manufacturers and local millwork shops.

If new windows are necessary, evaluate your situation. From the historic and architectural perspective, the window should be exactly like your old windows, and this is best done by a custom cabinet or millwork shop. If a stock window from one of the major manufacturers like Pella, Anderson, or Marvin fits your window opening and matches your window pane configuration, one of these windows may be acceptable. Your goals should be to have the window look as much like the originals as possible. Keep in mind that new windows from a manufacturer will not look exactly like your historic windows, so if accuracy is one of your goals or your house is important, have your windows made by a custom millwork shop.

If your window openings vary more than 1 ½" or so from the window manufacturer's stock window, then a custom window is in order. The major window manufacturers make custom products, but there are local millworkers who do an excellent job and can match your original windows exactly for about the same money, often less. Local, custom made windows are the best historical choice for any replacement window, and will probably be the best choice for cost and history when custom windows are necessary.

Don't be lured by promises of low or no maintenance. "The only things windows do by themselves is deteriorate," says preservation consultant John Leeke, and this is true whether your windows are wood or metal, new or old. One problem with low maintenance windows is that they are frequently made out of materials which are harder to repair: Wood, for example, is easy to work and repair, but aluminum is harder to work, and replacement parts may not be available when you need them in the future. Ask anyone who owns historic metal windows about finding latches or locks for confirmation of this! Usually

low maintenance windows substitute routine maintenance like painting and replacing glazing compound for more costly large repairs, or more frequent replacement.

Wood or metal windows available at local building supply stores should be considered a disposable product. Our office experience has been that these windows are poor matches for historic windows and last only about 10 or 15 years. We began to notice in the early 1990s that windows of this type used as replacements in the mid-1970s' restoration boom were rotten, while original windows repaired at that time (even on the same building) were in good condition. Bottom quality wood windows are put together with cheap fasteners which loosen with wear and aging; the wood usually is plantation-grown with as few as 4 or 6 growth rings per inch, which means soft wood that rots easily. By comparison, wood used in old heart pine windows will often have 50-100 growth rings per inch.

What about commercial metal windows? There are some commercial-quality metal products that can be used in large projects which provide a good match for the original windows, but they are usually too expensive when made in small quantities to be economical on a small-scale building or house. Most available metal windows have a very wide sides on the sashes and a flat, wide shape on the outside. The muntins (the little pieces that divide the glass into panes) are shallow, and are often plastic grids located on the inside of the window or between two pieces of glass. All of these things make a big difference in how the window looks. Even when they have double panes and "thermal breaks," metal windows can conduct heat and cold into the house at a much higher rate than wooden windows, and there is new evidence that thermal breaks and insulated glass lose their effectiveness in a few years. Metal windows at most building supply houses are lower quality. They are very thin and will not fit the width of your window openings well, and will be a poor match for the way your historic windows look.

What about storm windows? They can be an overall part of an energy saving scheme. Far less expensive than storm windows and also the most effective thing you can do to save energy with windows is to thoroughly caulk all the joints at the window, especially the one between the facing of the windows and the clapboards, and to make sure glazing compound is in good condition. Installing good weatherstripping where the sash fits into the window frame would be the next most effective move. There are many easy to install weatherstripping systems made of plastic, but our experience with them is that they need to be replaced every two or three years. They are inexpensive and if you are willing to accept this routine maintenance, this may be a good solution for you.

Storm windows come in both interior and exterior types. Interior windows are preferred by many preservationists because they preserve the most historic look outside for the public view of your building, and window treatments often cover them on the inside. They are also the most energy efficient because the theory behind all storm windows is to keep conditioned air in, not outside air out. Exterior windows are more commonly available, and often less expensive. Select an exterior window the same color you plan to color your window sash. Make sure the meeting rail where the upper and lower sash come together lines up with your window. Both types of storm windows have ventilation holes that prevent condensation and need routine maintenance. If these holes are painted or caulked over, condensation can rot window sills in only a few years.

Windows are one of the most important parts of your historic home or building. They are important from a historical point of view in expressing historical and architectural character, as well as allowing in light for pleasant living, and preserving your building by keeping water out. Take time and care making decisions about repair or replacements. For the good of your building, either repair your original windows or buy the best replacement window you can afford to buy. A cheap window is a false economy for preservation and the pocketbook.

Millwork and Window Suppliers in Alabama

There are many other millwork suppliers in Alabama who do good work; however, these are ones that the Alabama Historical Commission has used and from whom we have had good products. These people manufacture doors, windows, and custom moldings. Others may also provide excellent products, and we would be interested in hearing of your experience. Some suppliers may offer installation or other goods and services:

Folmar Architectural Millwork

270 Industrial Park Road

Montevallo, AL 35115

Plant: 205-665-7485

Sales: 2824 Linden Avenue, Birmingham, AL 35209; 205-870-1061.

Jaynes Millwork

129 Taylor Road

Florence, AL

256-767-3216

Marshall Lumber Company

3200 Day Street

Montgomery, AL 36108

Sash and Door: 334-263-0525

Lumber: 334-262-3816

Winslett Millworks

1926 5th Avenue N

Bessemer, AL 35020

205-428-3667

Beeper: 205-954-5387

Consolidated Cabinets

Columbus, Georgia

706-327-7255

Gulf Coast Millworks

Halls Mill Road

Mobile, AL

251-661-5758