City of Jacksonville
Historic Preservation Commission
WINTER 2010 NEWSLETTER

Fixing Up Your Old House: Wood Floors

From an article by Mary Ellen Polson (Old House Journal)

Minor floor imperfections can add to an old home's charm with familiar floorboard creaks, slight undulations, or gouges worn smooth. Expected squeaks, sags, or slopes aren't usually structural. With a little know-how, you can easily silence faulty floorboards and repair minor damage. The good news is that if flooring problems are from old age, the conditions probably won't worsen anytime soon. Trouble-shoot floors by walking around the room.

Squeaks, Creaks, Springy Spots: You'll likely hear problem spots before seeing them. A squeak usually means a floorboard isn't making adequate contact with the supporting joist below. Deeper-sounding creaks often mean the joist is inadequate. Either case can cause spongy spots. Reattach loosened boards with a pair of nails driven into the heart of the squeak, or discretely anchor them with screws.

Gaps Between Boards: Both plank and tongue-and-groove floors can develop unsightly gaps as the floor ages from compression shrinkage. In high humidity, floorboards expand and compress its neighbors. When dry air returns, the boards shrink, but don't fully decompress. Since shrink/swell patterns persists even in the oldest floors, its best to do nothing, particularly if the gaps tend to close up during the humid months. If the gaps are especially large or pronounced at certain times of the year, consider the following alternatives.

- For gaps that appear in dry, cold weather, increase the humidity level in the house by running a humidifier. This may encourage shrunken boards to expand.
- Fill gaps with flexible paste or fiber filler that adapt s to the floor's shrink/swell pattern. Homemade fixes include mixing sawdust with a binder like varnish, shellac, or white glue, or hemp rope soaked in linseed oil or glue. Press the sawdust mix into the gap; use a large flathead screwdriver or small putty knife to pack soaked hemp rope into the crack. (Apply two layers for a deep crack.)
- Gun in elastic caulk that cures to rubber. Only apply a flexible marine or silicone caulk to cracks halfway through their shrink/swell cycle (normally in spring or fall). Carefully mask the crack edges to keep the caulk off the floorboards. Wide cracks may need filling with a pliable backing material, like cloth or weather-stripping.

For year-round wide gaps, fill cracks with wood strips ripped to a slight taper. However, introducing new wood into the situation can compound the problem. Glue or toenail the strips with brads to each board, or face-nail them to the joists or subfloor. The repair may need to be hand-planed or sanded to match the floor level.

Minor Floorboard Repairs: To replace one or two bad boards, first find replacement wood that closely matches the good original flooring. Some tips for matching wood:

- Locate wood of similar species, age, and size (width, depth, and profile). Look for similar ring patterns (rings spaced closely or loosely together). Match the cut: annual growth rings of flat-cut (flat-grain) boards run parallel to the board face; rings on rift-cut, quarter-sawn or vertical grain flooring usually run vertical and uniformly to the grain's face.
- Unless you have rare or unusually fine flooring, find sources close to home: local salvage houses, or even your own closet or attic, may yield the best match.

Replacing a Floorboard : Most older floors are individual (plank) or interlocking (tongue-and-groove) boards laid together. Replacing one bad section on a plank floorboard is fairly easy, but if boards run the full length of the room, a small patch may be obvious. If there is no subfloor, any repair should span at least one joist and share support on another. Fasten a sturdy block of wood, or cleat, next to the joist to support the new board in order to "share." Before making any repairs, first find out if the floorboards are face-nailed (heads exposed) or blind-nailed (heads concealed between boards, usually driven at an angle) and use that same method for repairs.

Surface Repairs: Fill minor holes and gouges with wood putty. To repair a crack in an otherwise sound board, glue down any long splinters, then fill it with wood filler or putty.

Treating Stains: Chlorine, oxalic acid, and hydrogen peroxide are the best stain removers for wood floors. All work primarily by bleaching; each is most effective only on certain types of stains. Before you apply any strong agent, test it in a spot that doesn't show.

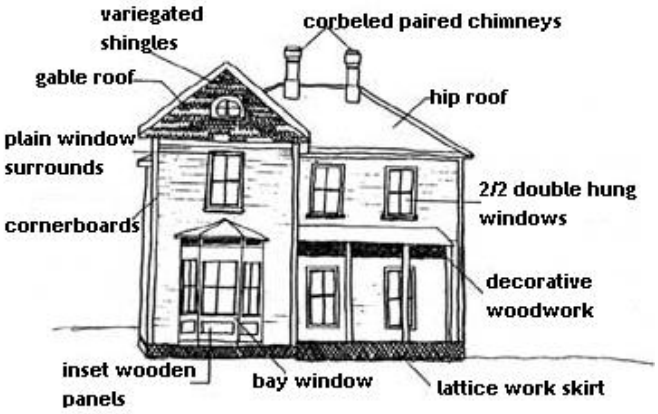
- *Chlorine*: Use on aniline dyes and ink stains. Mix common laundry bleach (a solution of about 5 percent sodium hypochlorite) or dry swimming-pool chlorine with hot water. Even low concentrations of chlorine can burn skin and eyes, so wear long rubber gloves, eye protection, and provide plenty of ventilation.
- *Oxalic acid:* Mixed with warm water and as strong as possible, this organic acid removes blue-black water stains, iron stains on oak, and lye-blackened wood stains. It's usually available in dry crystalline form at hardware stores or wood finishing suppliers. Dissolve the crystals in hot water until you get a saturated solution—i.e., the crystals won't dissolve any more. Oxalic acid is poisonous, so use it with care.
- *Peroxide:* Sold as a caustic solution in a concentration of up to 30 percent, hydrogen peroxide is effective for lightening woods ("blonding") and last-chance stains.

What Style is Your House?

Queen Anne (1880-1910)

This asymmetrical style was introduced to the United States at the 1876 Exposition in Philadelphia by the British and takes its name from their 18th century queen. Its influence comes from the 16th century English Gothic styles, but matured in America, though it is found virtually everywhere. Often described as "the more fanciful, the better," Queen Anne became very popular at the turn of the century, in part because woodworking mills could mass-produce turned posts, mouldings, and other trim pieces.

The Queen Anne style retains the picturesque massing and asymmetry of the Victorian era that preceded it, but provides a decorative prelude to the Colonial Revival style, which would become important in the early 20th century. Queen Anne is eclectic in that it is the only major style that combines elements of gothic and classic architecture intentionally. This style uses a variety of materials; it is not unusual to see stone, brick, clapboard and shingles on the same home, though most are of wood frame construction.



Queen Anne's typically feature dormers and multiple or corbelled chimneys. Round off-center towers and recessed second story porches were also common, as well as belt courses of vertical wood. Walls commonly have coursed shingles, clapboards, and inset panels of sawn wooden ornaments combined with irregular roof lines and decorative wrap-around porches and lattice skirting below. Porches also usually feature elaborately turned posts and balusters. Roof lines are often steeply pitched hips with lower crossing gables. Gable ends and porches usually boasted ornate trim, turned woodwork, friezes, shingles, fish scales, "gingerbread" or "bric-a-brac."

As the style moved into the 1900s, the towers were omitted and the over all style became more simplified, balanced, and formal with lower roof lines. Porches, entrances, and cornices of this era employed more Colonial Revival details.

Queen Anne style typically had small square or diamond paned windows, and even more often 2/2 double -hung sash. Bay windows were another popular feature. At its peak of popularity, Queen Anne's were frequently painted with five or six different colors to accentuate the fanciful detail work and textures.

The Farmhouse Queen Anne is a combination of Vernacular Farmhouse simplicity and form, mixed with Queen Anne ornamentation. Typically smaller than a traditional Queen Anne, these were usually less complex, but commonly found in this region. While the ornamentation may be simplified, a variety of materials remain common to the Queen Anne Farmhouse, with combinations of shingles and clapboards routinely seen on wall surfaces, and sawn or turned wood on porches. Often featuring a gable-roofed dormer or clipped gable roof, this style is often only 1½ story.

"What Style is Your House?" was a regular feature of early HPC Newsletters; some information in these articles may have already been published or compiled from other sources like Old House Web and about.com.