

LOOK TO THE ROOFTOPS

Whether it's mansard, gabled, hipped, or low slope, keep that roof tight and fully functional to hold water out and protect all that lies beneath.

BY NANCY HEISER

THOSE WINDS AND heavy rains of winter and early spring are behind us for now, and the glory days of summer may tempt us to ignore damage that the weather may have done to roofs. But left alone, deficient roofs have a way of turning into bigger problems. And the roofs on historic or older homes may require special attention. Take some time this summer to examine what's over your head.

"We at Greater Portland Landmarks get many phone calls about how to deal with roof damage. We've put some essential information together for our members and the public," says Hilary Bassett, Executive Director.

KNOW YOUR ROOF

There's more to repairing a historic roof than nailing in a few loose shingles.

"The first thing to consider when repairing the roof of a historic home is determining what it is made of and whether it is original," says Cordelia Pitman, Director of Preconstruction Services at Wright-Ryan Construction in Portland.

Next, find out how the roof is functioning. Do you have pinhole leaks, or is the whole roof failing?

Each type of roof has particular challenges and benefits. Can you just replace a few shingles on your slate roof? If so, you'll want to be sure you are doing so with the same



A slate roof like this one poses many challenges, with its multiple angles, gutters, flashing, decorative trim, and skylight. Repairs are often best left to a qualified professional.

color and quality. Do you have an exposed copper roof? If it's broken, you're probably going to replace the whole thing, as you'll find it nearly impossible to match the original. Do you have terra cotta tiles? Then, "you really need to talk to a skilled craftsman or an architect who has done a fair amount of this type of historic preservation work and who can lead you in the right direction," says Pitman.

Finally, consider the roof's profile and how the roof meets the gutter. Most older buildings have no insulation under the roof deck. But if you add a few inches, you are changing the profile of the roof, and this may not only change its appearance but can create problems with water leakage.



A historic restoration on Portland's West End is underway. Roofs add visual interest to the skyline.

SLATE ROOFS

Back when Mainers mostly cut their own lumber for homebuilding, they used wood shakes for their roofs, or even sod. Later on, particularly on large homes, roofs were made of slate, much of it quarried in Monson. Several historic homes on Portland's Western Promenade feature slate roofs. Asphalt shingles only became popular during the housing boom after World War II.

Victor Wright, owner of The Heritage Company based in Waterboro, is an expert in slate and copper roofs. He is also a purist. "I am dead set against artificial slate roof material," he says. In his experience, no manufactured

product holds up nearly as well as the real thing. To replace slate shingles, "you want to use salvaged slate or a new slate that matches the original as close as possible," he says.

Have someone who knows slate roofs do the repair, he adds. This is not only safer — many roofs on high-end older homes have steep pitches — but helps avoid more damage. "If you move incorrectly on a slate roof, you can snap the slate, which is quarter-inch stone," he says. A cracked slate left on a roof can lead to a damaging leak.

Slate roofs may require special attention, but the homeowner will be rewarded by an attractive and very long-lasting roof. Wright's company recently worked on a pre-1900 home on Portland's Spring Street whose roof was more than a century old. "We took all the slate off and put it back on again, using 35% salvaged slate," he says. They used copper nails, to avoid rust and ensure that the fastenings will last as long as the roof material. Says Wright, "That slate will serve that house another hundred years."

MEMBRANE ROOFS

Membrane roof systems have been used on low-slope (flat) roof decks since the late 1800s. Prior to World War II,

membrane roofs were largely made of tar, gravel, and felt. More modern materials, such as rubber or thermoplastic, were used later on. The technology has improved even since the 1980s, and current materials provide a much better seal against water and withstand UV rays better than even a few decades ago. Asphalt shingles are not used on low-slope roofs.

People don't usually see membrane roof systems, but historically suitable repairs are still important. If you can see a historic roof from the street, the appearance of the material matters. For instance, you wouldn't put a membrane roof on a lower porch roof if you can see it from a public way.

Newer reinforced membrane roof systems are much "greener" than earlier ones, and some are even colored white to reflect light, but these should only be installed in spots where they won't be seen.

In addition, it's difficult to add insulation underneath a membrane roof system without compromising the street view. "We're often balancing aesthetic appeal with the type of membrane and attachment method," says Mike Davis, Business Manager of Roof Maintenance Services at the IRC group in Lewiston.

INSPECT AND REPAIR

With any roof system, keeping water out is key. A complete inspection, inside and out, of the roof structure and covering will determine their condition and any potential sources of leaks.

Wright suggests owners of slate roofs do a visual inspection on an annual basis. Stand on the ground and look across the first row of shingles, counting them one by one. Do this across the entire roof. Even though it's a feathered roof system, you'll be able to see vacant spots because of color differences. "It will be like a puzzle piece is missing," he says. Then, make sure the flashing on lips, ridges, and dormers is tight and neatly fitted.

One of Wright's customers on Portland's West End called him the day after 90-mile-an-hour winds passed through their neighborhood. "They knew something wasn't right. We found the copper ridge had blown off. We were able to go and simply put it back on," says Wright.

Keeping an eye out for potential problems and addressing them early pays off in the long run in any roof system. It's important to have a roof inspected proactively, says

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Davis, to save money on costly repairs to the building's exterior and interior later on. "After the windstorms of last winter, people may have damage they don't know about yet."

For instance, some historic homes have a small membrane roof on a flat part of the building and slate shingles on other parts. "We may find cracks in masonry or failure in building joints between two types of roofs or flashing details," Davis says. "Inspection is really a job for a qualified, low-slope roofing contractor," he adds. "We can use tools like infrared sensors, that are a non-destructive way of looking for water infiltration."

PREVENT FUTURE DAMAGE

Regular maintenance adds to the life of any roof. To help prevent roof problems, clean gutters and downspouts and flush them with a hose. Consider placing wire mesh over downspout openings to prevent debris from collecting and water from backing up. Inspect the underside of the roof from the attic after a heavy rain for water stains.

Take steps to prevent ice dams in winter, which occur when warm air escapes the house and melts the snow on the roof. This water refreezes before it can run down the gutter or off the roof. The resulting backup traps water beneath it, which can force its way into the house under the roofing material.

To help prevent ice dams, improve your attic's insulation against heat loss. Consider installing flashing material to the first few feet of roofline. Think about using properly installed electrical heat tapes next winter. As with all repairs in a historic district, contact your municipality's planning office to ensure that your project is suitable.

If you feel inspecting rooflines and cleaning gutters is best left to someone else, find a qualified company to do it every spring and fall. Several companies in Maine provide a regular maintenance service for historic roofs. ■

Check for Compatibility

BEFORE WORKING ON THE ROOF of an older or historic home, it's important to identify any qualities that contribute to the character of the building to avoid inappropriate repairs. In you live in a historic district, check with the historic preservation program manager at your municipality's planning office. In Portland, that's Deb Andrews (207-874-8726).

"It's often as simple as a phone call or an email," she says. Often, if a homeowner is doing an in-kind replacement of shingles, for instance, no further review is needed.

But sometimes it is. For instance, fire codes prevent you re-roofing with wood shakes if the home is in a densely built area. It's a bad visual choice to put architectural shingles on a roof that used to be slate. People who are covering old gutters or flashing or even putting on new asphalt after old should check with her office, too. "There are more details to reroofing a historic building than one might assume," she says.

Andrews also welcomes inquiries from people who have older homes and simply seek advice. Homeowners can come in and view the office's many samples of roofing materials or check out the 1924 photographs of every building in Portland, taken for tax revaluation purposes. The archive is an excellent resource for people who want to renovate or repair to



A membrane roof covers the flat part of this historic home's roof, above the decorative grill where it can't be seen.

recapture the original look of their older home.

Images of properties in Portland's historic district are also available in GPL's Frances Peabody Library. Field Services Representative Christopher Closs can help with questions about roof repairs on older buildings, and our *Maine Restoration Directory* lists companies that work on historic homes.

Find a Qualified Contractor

You're ready to repair or replace the roof on your historic home. How do you determine if your contractor is qualified? "Ask for a list of completed projects and look at them," says Deb Andrews, Historic Preservation Program Manager in Portland's planning office. "Talk to homeowners. Look at a similar project a few years out and see how it is holding up." Be sure your contractor has experience in the type of work you are requesting. Ask for proof of competence by seeking customer references and pictures of the completed work. As with any building contractor, request proof of liability and workers' compensation insurance. Discuss work guarantees, product warranties, timeline, and the payment schedule. A contractor should be able to discuss the work and explain it to your satisfaction.



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