The Dangers of Burning Paint

by William Crosby

Unless you want the thrill of becoming a volunteer fireman, don't even consider using a blowtorch to remove paint from the wood fabric of your historic building. Butane, propane and gasoline torches used to hasten the chore of stripping wood are risky around a new house and even more dangerous around an old one. Furthermore, state code requires anyone using a torch or open flame to obtain a permit to remove paint, have an approved fire extinguisher nearby, and remain on site for at least one hour after the work is done. If fire breaks out due to the misuse of a torch, insurance companies will fight paying off the claim. So if the idea of using an open flame to remove paint on your building doesn't scare you, it should.

Here is why: There's the obvious reason—the open flame can easily scorch and ignite wood. Additionally, most frame buildings have an air space between the exterior sheathing and siding and the interior lath and plaster. This cavity usually holds an accumulation of debris (dust, bird's nests, leaves, etc.) that is easily ignited by an open flame. In fact, dust is combustible at a **lower** temperature than wood. A spark can smolder for hours undetected, bursting into flame later when no one is around to sound the alarm.

Heat guns can soften paint on solid surfaces before it is scraped. Use extreme caution.

It is better to use one of the following methods of paint removal recommended as safe for both the operator and for the building fabric. Hand scraping or sanding, although time consuming, are effective and gentile. Heat plates or heat guns can soften paint prior to scraping. Only use on solid surfaces and ornamental areas. Chemical strippers can be used effectively, again with hand scraping, to remove paint from flat surfaces and decorative details. Strippers should be used with extreme caution because they are both toxic and combustible.

The following methods of paint removal are **not** recommended: A blowtorch. Remember that fires can easily start in dead air pockets and in crevices. Sandblasting is an abrasive method that damages wood by raising the grain and creating a fuzzy surface after blasting. Repainting the wood even becomes difficult! Water blasting is abrasive and has the added problem of forcing water into the building's cracks and joints; this causes rot and further paint failure.

Remember *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards* recommends that "the surface cleaning of structures shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible." Still, the list of historic buildings destroyed or severely damaged by fire resulting from the use of flame or heat to remove paint is growing alarmingly long. Burning paint on old buildings is so dangerous that unless you are willing to loose your building, *the only time to burn paint is never!*