Vermont Division for Historic Preservation

Inspection Checklist for Historic Buildings

Anyone who lives in or owns an old house, especially one that they love and treasure, always wants to know more about how to identify and correct problems before they become costly repairs. Often simple, timely repairs can prevent thousands of dollars in damage. Recognizing problems before they become critical will help you plan and budget for work on the building when you need it. Likewise, this checklist is designed to help homeowners assess, evaluate, and plan a good maintenance program to protect their property.

Since all buildings are different, the checklist is general in nature and can be adapted to fit specific cases. It can be used for conducting annual building inspections or inspecting a property prior to acquisition. This checklist is not intended to take the place of an evaluation by a professional building inspector, architect, engineer or contractor, and if building faults are identified through use of this checklist, such persons should be consulted for professional assistance in correcting the fault.

Do not be alarmed or discouraged if you identify a number of faults. This checklist will help you recognize potential problems, set priorities, schedule work and control the costs of maintaining your building. Remember that it is cheaper in the long run to repair, restore and maintain an older home than purchase a new one--and it frequently yields dramatic returns upon appraisal or resale.

Roof

The roof is typically the first line of defense against water infiltration and its maintenance is critical. Water from rain or snow or ice dams, can often travel great distances down the interior of walls and along construction surfaces and cause damage far away from the source. A leaking roof if left unchecked, can cause corrosion, and rot, and destroy historic materials, finishes, and eventually the structural components of a building.

All roofs require periodic inspection and maintenance in order to perform as designed and to provide a long and effective service life. Roofs should be inspected at least once a year, preferably spring, to repair damage. All building owners should establish a periodic roof inspection program; however, walking on roofs can be dangerous and only persons who are familiar with safe roofing practices or a roof installer should undertake inspection and maintenance. Inspecting the roof with binoculars can usually determine if an up-close inspection is necessary.

Roof Materials:
A number of roofing materials can be found on historic buildings in Vermont. They are generally listed in order of their durability, but poor installation, a lack of ongoing maintenance, ice dams and other factors can significantly shorten the life of any roof material.
Common Vermont Roof Materials
1. Slate (75-150 years)
2. Standing Seam Copper (75-100 years)
3. Standing Seam Galvalum/Galvanized Steel (50-75 years)
4. Corrugated Metal – (20-25 years) mostly on barns
5. Asphalt Shingles (15-30 years depending on shingle quality and installation)
6. Wood Shingles/Shakes (10 – 25 years depending on shingle quality and installation)
7. Tar & Gravel (15-20 years) or EPDM (50 years)—flat roof
8. Asphalt Roll Roofing (10-15 years)

Pitched Roof: commonly shingles or standing seam
___ Slate -- are there any missing, broken, or fallen slates? Are the metal roof valleys rusty?
___ Standing Seam Metal – is the roof material rusting?
___ Corrugated Metal – are there holes or loose or missing fasteners? Are nails “popped-up,”
    loose or sticking above the sheet metal?
___ Wood shakes or shingles – are shingles missing, curling or cupping on the edges?
___ Asphalt Shingles – are shingles missing, curling on the edges or losing mineral coating (granules)?

Flat Roof: commonly tar & gravel or asphalt roll roofing, but can also be covered with an
   EPDM membrane. EPDM is a rubbery roof coating mostly seen on commercial buildings and is
   significantly more expensive than tar and gravel.
___ Are there bubbles, blisters, or cracks in the membrane? The roofing should be tight to the
    deck and not move or feel soft under foot. Pay particular attention to areas around roof
    penetrations (vents, skylights, pipes, etc.), ponding areas, and cracks in parapet (a parapet is
    the low wall that hides roofline and are frequently seen in historic commercial buildings)?
___ Is the connection between the roof and parapet walls sound?
___ Is the coping, metal flashing covering the parapet, in good condition?
___ Are the roof drains and scuppers, drain holes in the parapet wall, clear of debris?

Gutters: can become victim to snow and ice damage, but help protect lower building walls from
   moisture damage.
___ Are there loose, rotted or missing gutters or downspouts?
___ Do the gutters slope uniformly, without low areas, to downspouts?
___ Are gutters clean and free-flowing?

Cornice (eaves):
___ Is paint peeling or blistering, especially on the underside?
___ Check the edge of the roof overhang for evidence of ice dams and observe the eaves and
    soffit for evidence of deterioration and water damage.

General
___ Too many layers of shingles? More than 2 can create problems. Consult with local roof
    installer if uncertain.
___ Is there water staining on the walls? This is a good general indication of water penetration.
   A good way to pinpoint smaller leaks is to look in the attic space, if open and accessible,
   during or after a steady rain.
Metal Flashing:
___ Is there loose, missing, or rusted sheet metal flashing at chimneys, valleys, ridges, parapet walls, roof penetrations or other roof terminations?

Structure:
___ Does the ridge of a pitched roof or any portion of a flat roof sag? Some permanent deflection is normal, but excessive deflection should be checked by a contractor or structural engineer.
___ Are bricks, stone or mortar cracked or missing at chimneys or parapets?

Exterior Walls

General: for all walls including clapboard, shingle, and masonry
___ Is the paint peeling, blistering or cracking (alligating)?
___ Is the wall out of plumb, unlevel or are there bulges?
___ Is wood trim sound, firmly attached and painted?
___ Are there open joints around door and window frames or woodwork?
___ Are the walls water stained?
___ Is there any mold or mildew on the wall surface?

Masonry Walls:
___ Are there any major cracks in the masonry? Hairline and horizontal cracks usually do not represent a problem. Vertical cracks through masonry units and mortar joints or diagonal cracks signal problems and should be checked by a mason or a structural engineer.
___ Are any masonry units missing, loose or deteriorating?
___ Is the mortar soft and crumbling?
___ Are any bricks spalling or crumbling?

Foundations:
___ Is there vertical or diagonal cracking in the concrete or masonry?
___ Is the concrete or masonry spalling, crumbling or deteriorating?
___ Is the mortar in the masonry loose or crumbling?
___ Is there any wood, especially structural members, within 6" of the ground? Also look for areas where rain splash back hits the wood.

Windows:
___ Are all wood window components, exterior and interior, sound and painted?
___ Is any wood at the exterior sill, frames or sash decaying? Sills are particularly vulnerable.
___ Is there evidence of excessive moisture penetration around the sash or at the sills on the interior?
___ Is the putty around the panes of glass firm and painted?
___ Do the sash operate smoothly?
___ Are sash loose in their frames?
___ Are sash cords broken or missing?
___ Does condensation build on interior or exterior storm sash during the winter months? (Some condensation is normal, but high amounts of condensation can deteriorate wood quickly.)
Attic:
___ Is there evidence of water leaks? Leakage is very common at chimneys and eaves. It’s best to look during or soon after a good rain.
___ Are there signs of vermin infiltration (usually pigeons and bats)?
___ Is there insulation in the ceiling or roof rafters?
___ Is the attic vented?

Decks, Porches and Balconies

Decks, porches, and balconies are exposed to the elements to a greater extent than most other parts of a building and are therefore more susceptible to deterioration.
___ Are there loose or deteriorated structural or decorative components?
___ Are masonry or concrete piers plumb and sound? Make sure that structural connections to the building are secure and protected against corrosion or decay.
___ Are the exterior stairs and railings in good condition? Check wooden steps and railings for proper support and strength and for rot. Inspect steel stairs and railings for rust, strength, and attachment. Deteriorated stairs or railings should be repaired or replaced.
___ Are there signs of excessive deflection and deterioration on the porch floor?
___ Is there a positive pitch of the porch floor or deck away from the exterior wall?

Interior Spaces

___ Is the plaster on the walls or ceiling damp, loose or cracked? Water damaged plaster below windows and diagonal stress cracks originating at the tops of window openings are very common.
___ Is there any evidence of water infiltration (stains) on the ceiling, around windows or on the lower walls?
___ Are walls bulging or out of plumb?
___ Does any portion of the floor sag? Some permanent deflection is acceptable, but excessive or progressive deflection may indicate structural failure and should be checked by a contractor or structural engineer.
___ Do floors deflect (sag or bounce) when walked on or loaded? Excessive “live load” deflection can indicate undersized structural members and should be checked by a contractor or structural engineer.
___ Do doors open and swing freely on hinges? Binding may indicate uneven settling in walls or floors.
___ Are stairs sound and stable with an appropriate handrail?

Cellars and Crawlspace:
___ Do the walls and floors show signs of excessive moisture?
___ Is there evidence of standing water or periodic flooding?
___ Are there signs of vermin infiltration or insect damage?
___ Is there any wood, especially structural members, within 6" of the ground?
___ Are unheated basements and crawlspace vented?
___ Are floors above unheated basements and crawlspace insulated?
___ If a dirt floor, is there a vapor barrier (plastic sheeting) covering it?
___ Does the area smell of mold or mildew?
Plumbing:
___ Is there any evidence of leakage underneath the sinks or toilets?
___ What is the water supply pipe material? Brass and copper are the best. PVC pipe has not been around as long as copper or brass, but performs well. Galvanized steel or iron pipe will not last as long as any of the above. Lead poses a potential health risk.
___ Is there good water pressure? Test by flushing the toilet and running all faucets at the same time.

Heating and Ventilating

Steam Heat:
___ Is the boiler tank leaking?
___ Is there evidence of leaking pipes? Look for stains and rot on floor around pipes. Rusted pipes, broken traps or valves and pipes clogged with mineral scale build-up generally cause leaking. The boiler’s water level should be monitored periodically. In addition, the low-water cutoff should be flushed once a month to prevent buildup of mineral scale.
___ Obstructions? Remove any drapes, furniture or other objects blocking radiators. These obstructions interrupt airflow and decrease your system’s efficiency.
___ Are the steam pipes insulated with asbestos? If the asbestos is damaged, call an abatement contractor as damaged asbestos can release fibers that can become a health hazard.

Forced Hot Water Heat:
___ Is the boiler tank leaking?
___ Is there evidence of leaking pipes? Look for stains and rot on floor around pipes. Rusted pipes, broken traps and pipes or pressure relief valves clogged with mineral scale build-up generally cause leaking. Check the temperature pressure relief valve by lifting the valve lever and allowing a small amount of water to flow into a bucket. Replace if no water flows from the valve.
___ Obstructions. Remove any drapes, furniture or other objects blocking radiators or baseboard units. These obstructions interrupt airflow and decrease your system’s efficiency.
___ Are hot water pipes insulated with asbestos? If the asbestos is damaged, call an abatement contractor as damaged asbestos can release fibers that can become a health hazard.

Forced Hot Air Heat:
___ What is the date of the last furnace inspection or service? Yearly inspection is recommended.
___ Are all belts tight and in good condition?
___ Do filters need to be replaced?
___ Does the motor and fan need to be oiled?
___ Are any registers blocked by furniture or inadvertently closed?

General:
___ Is heat distributed evenly?
___ Do thermostats work correctly to control room temperature?
___ Do you have electric baseboard heat? Although cheaper to install than gas or oil heat, in Vermont they are substantially more expensive to operate.
Electrical

Unsafe wiring can be deadly. It can cause shocks, fires, and other electrical hazards. However, a visual inspection of wire insulation on accessible circuits will usually determine whether an electrician should perform additional tests.

___ Is the main electrical service to the building adequate? 100 amps is minimum by modern standards.
___ Does the house have circuit breakers or fuses?
___ Are the breakers or fuses the correct size? Generally 20 amps for new wiring. For older wiring, no more that 15 amps is recommended.
___ Is the insulation frayed on existing wires or are bare wires exposed in an unsafe location?
___ Is there any sub-standard aluminum wire, surface mounted lampcord or extension cord or “knob and tube” wiring in active use?
___ Are there GFI (ground fault interruption) type receptacles or circuit breakers installed in laundries, kitchens, and bathrooms? If so, test their operation. These types of receptacles were not required before 1990, but are easily installed as replacements.
___ Do all light switches and lights attached to walls work properly? Turn on all light switches and lights that are permanently attached to walls.

Building Grounds:

___ Do all downspouts have splash blocks to divert rain water away from the base of the building?
___ Do lawn sprinklers spray on the building?
___ Is there any vegetation contacting the walls or the foundation of the building? Vegetation can hold moisture in wood and masonry walls and foundations.
___ Does the grade around the building divert water away from the foundation? The grade should be reversed so the water flows away from the foundation.
___ Are all hose faucets working properly?
___ Are all drains, including floor drains, working properly?

Fire Safety

___ Does the building have functioning smoke detectors? Ideally, detectors should be wired to a power source, and also should contain a battery.
___ Are there fire extinguishers on the premises? Are they fully charged?

Lead Paint

If a “historic” house is broadly defined as being at least 50 years old, this means that almost every historic house contains some lead-based paint. In its deteriorated form, it produces paint chips and lead-laden dust particles that are a known health hazard to both children and adults. Children are particularly at risk when they ingest lead paint dust through direct hand-to-mouth contact and from toys or pacifiers. They are also at risk when they chew lead-painted surfaces in accessible locations. In addition to its presence in houses, lead paint chips and dust can contaminate soil in outdoor play areas.

Vermont’s guidelines call for removing lead hazards, which does not always mean removing the lead. If pained trim is in good condition, i.e. not peeling or flaking, it can remain without posing
a hazard. Lead safety is generally achieved through treatment of deteriorating paint, friction surfaces like window jams and sashes, surfaces accessible to young children, and lead in soil. Lead-based paint that is not causing a hazard is thus permitted to remain, and, in consequence, the amount of historic finishes features and trim work removed from a property is minimized. Homeowners should consult the guidance issued by the Vermont Department of Health. Never power sand old lead painted surfaces because it causes lead dust that can cause lead poisoning if ingested.

Please refer to preservation brief, “Appropriate Methods for Reducing Lead-Paint Hazards in Historic Housing” for more information on the treatment of lead in a historic home. Copies this preservation brief and many others are available online at http://www2.cr.nps.gov/tps/briefs/presbhom.htm