

Northbridge Town Hall: Historic Exterior Paint Whitinsville, MA

Historic Exterior Paint Colors

[N.B. SW = Sherwin Williams]

SUMMARY

All sash: Sherwin Williams Chateau Brown 2028 gloss
(including original oculus)

All window trim: Sherwin Williams Quartersawn Oak 2836 semi-gloss or gloss

All door trim: Sherwin Williams Quartersawn Oak 2836 semi-gloss or gloss

All doors: Sherwin Williams Chateau Brown 2028 gloss

PORTICOS –

Columns: SW Quartersawn Oak 2836 semi-gloss

Capitols: SW Quartersawn Oak 2836 raised ornament and narrow ring
moldings only.

- Flat ground or band behind raised ornament to be the dark brown SW 2028 Chateau Brown•

Modillion blocks: SW Quartersawn Oak 2836 semi-gloss

- Flat ground for modillion blocks only: SW Chateau Brown 2028 semi-gloss•

Architrave & frieze: SW Quartersawn Oak 2836 semi-gloss

Ceiling moldings: SW Quartersawn Oak 2836 semi-gloss

Recessed ceiling panels: SW Quartersawn Oak 2836 matte
(only)

ROOF TRIM

Raking molding of gable end and eaves TBD

- Soffit and fascia holding modillion blocks: SW 2028 Chateau Brown semi-gloss•

Architrave, frieze, and dentils: SW 2836 Quartersawn Oak semi-gloss

Introduction

This building served as the Whitinsville Social Library when it was built, c. 1872. Like other mill towns of the period (Lowell, Saxonville), the mill owners provided halls and libraries for the personal benefit of the many workers and other mill personnel. The Library here had the same name as the village of workers, the name of the family who built the mills and founded the village of its workers: the Whitins.

Currently, however, it is the Town Hall of a wider community, Northbridge. The exterior shows typical Victorian design features, such as high window surrounds crowned by elliptical arches with a centered keystone (second story level, primarily a large meeting space), paneled doors with flat recessed panels, and smaller details such as the rosettes which band the columns and pilasters at the two main historic entrance porticos.

Architecturally, the Northbridge Town Hall is unusual. It certainly is a Victorian building. On the other hand, there is a strong neoclassical element in the two porticos and roofline with full classical entablature. Foundation blocks, steps, and belt bands of pink Milford granite further exemplify a classical design feature. That the two (classical and Victorian) design features can co-exist harmoniously in a handsome building is impressive.

The original exterior wood of the building was painted in a restrained Victorian manner.

Methodology

A single historic photograph (c1899) provided a general opening view of the exterior paint colors, at least in terms of lighter and darker areas, seen both in full light and in shadow. The microscope (two, actually—field scope of 20x and laboratory binocular scope of up to 100x) revealed that, at most, the building appears to have been painted overall at least 10-12 times. As is the case now, some areas get painted more often than others. The layers of paint examined individually and in cross sectional sequence for this report were only the first four finish layers. North daylight was the illumination; samples were treated with UV to reverse the normal discoloration due to aging linseed oil in the samples matched.

A very thin whitish primer was painted throughout with at least three, and sometimes more, brownish paint layers. Close attention to the samples, especially to determine which areas had one brownish layer over another with no traces of accumulated microscopic soot particles.

By the time the doors, windows and porticos were all painted the same color, i.e. there was a layer of uniform color and thickness found on all the areas sampled, it was finally clear that originally two brown paints co-existed: a dark tone, and a medium tone. That means that the lighter brown (“Quartersawn Oak”) was painted over every painted surface, and then certain surface details were “picked out” with the deep brown color (Chateau Brown). Such a practice was typical of Victorian painters.

Conclusion

There is a logic to the use of the deeper darker color on specific areas and details: -

- On doors, the dark color both emphasizes the entrances as distinct from the brick and the rest of the trim, and shows far less soiling.
- On sash, the dark color tends to let the windows seem a little larger, especially when in daylight with only interior space behind the glass, the panes seem almost black.
- On the soffit and fascia of the roof trim, and on the portico roof overhang, the dark background lets the modillion blocks stand out.
- On the flat ground area to which the small rosettes (“flowers”) in high relief are attached, they stand out decoratively from the dark background.

Thus, both the tints or hues of the trim paint, and its locations, are typical of Victorian taste and aesthetics.

The particular brown colors on this building harmonize with the brick. The Sherwin Williams Quartersawn Oak color is from its original historic palette first published in the early 1970s, with color formulations taken directly from the Company archives. Sherwin Williams was one of the first two companies to manufacture paint that could have a shelf life in cans, and 1871 was early in the history of that company.

The Northbridge Town Hall has unusual significance in its blend of earlier neoclassical details with conventional mid-Victorian exterior trim colors.