

OLD HOUSE BASICS



SCOTT SIDLER

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

You might be wondering who I am and why this book is for you. Funny you should ask! My name is Scott Sidler and I am an actor turned historical contractor. Weird, but true.

For 20 years I worked as a sometimes starving and sometimes not-so-starving artist. Performing around the world I got the amazing opportunity to see and experience so many incredible things. But it wasn't until about 2001 when I started to feel the desire for something more.

As a stage performer the art you create is fleeting. You never get to hold it in your hands or even see it with your own eyes. A show opens and closes and then it is gone forever with no record other than the Playbill. But I am the kind of person who wants something tangible. Something I can feel with my own hands and see with my own eyes. And it wasn't until moving into a particularly sad little apartment in New York City that I realized what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

This apartment was a beat up old building from 1909 that had blood-red shag carpeting, peeling vinyl floors in the kitchen and the most hideous 16 square foot bathroom I had ever seen. But the location was great! Ha!

Well, even though I didn't own it I set about restoring it myself. I couldn't stand its worn down appearance. You see, home improvement is in my genes. My great-grandfather was a carpenter, my grandfather a painter, and my father a contractor. And, I had grown up in old houses much of my life, but it wasn't until this one apartment that I realized what was missing.

I wanted to make things with my hands. I wanted to repair the beautiful old woodwork and tile that I found hiding beneath layers of old asbestos tiles. I found the satisfaction of saving old homes and restoring them to their original splendor and it was awesome!

The sad part about this apartment was that after I had spent \$4,000 of my own money refinishing the floors, repainting, and remodeling the bathroom, and a whole lot more the landlord took note and decided to raise my rent because it was in such great condition. Lesson learned: Never renovate someone else's apartment for free.

Eventually, I started my own historic restorations business in Orlando, FL. You can find us at AustinHomeRestorations.com, and I began TheCraftsmanBlog.com to help folk just like you learn to care for and appreciate their old homes. The response has been incredible!

This eBook is my way of giving back some of the important things I have learned over the years. Things that will be very valuable to any old home owner or enthusiast.

And this is just the start. Our blog and its offerings continue to grow. You can find archives full of how-to articles, old house architecture, green and natural building, and plenty of resources to help you along the path of owning an old house.

I really hope you enjoy this book and come back to visit [The Craftsman](http://TheCraftsman.com) often!

WHY DO I NEED THIS BOOK?

Old homes are tricky. They're not complicated (actually they are quite simple to care for) they are just different from houses today. They were made of different materials with different techniques than their modern day counterparts. And understanding those differences is the best way to save not only the intrinsic historical value of your home but also its financial value.

Remodels and improvements that would add value to a new house can unknowingly erode your old home's value. In this book, I've compiled a list of things every old house owner should know. I call them the "Old House Basics." Knowing these 20 basic pieces of information can save you from making some of the most typical mistakes others make.

Learn your "Old House Basics" and you'll save yourself a whole heap of time, frustration and money over the years. Remember these are just the basics. If you want to delve deeper I'd suggest reading through the wealth of articles on The Craftsman Blog or purchasing my full length book [Living in the Past: An Owner's Guide to Understanding & Repairing an Old Home](#)

THE BASICS

1. ***Wood Floors (Older is better)*** - The wood floors in your old home are made of solid wood. If your house was built before the 1940's they are likely "old growth" timber which is a much better quality than wood available today. It is harder, more rot-resistant, less prone to insect damage. Old wood floors can easily be refinished or repaired over and over through the years. So don't replace or cover up something of such high quality with an inferior product like laminate or engineered wood floors.
2. ***Don't Give Up on Your Original Windows*** - They may be old and a bit drafty, but they are the most prominent feature of your historic home. Believe it or not, replacing them is the worst thing you can do to your home's value. Old wood and steel windows can easily be restored and weatherstripped by a local craftsman. The result is a historic window that is equally as energy-efficient as a modern window, but with more character than any replacement window.
3. ***Just Keep it Painted*** - If a list of to-do items were ranked by importance, to assure your home remains in good working order, proper painting would be at the top. Keeping the outside of your home painted properly will keep water at bay and prevent rot. When your paint wears out, your home's elements are exposed to the weather. And the elements immediately start to ruin the structure and finish of your home. So, if you want your home to last, keep it painted.
4. ***Plaster is a Good Thing*** - The walls in an old home are inevitably made of plaster. Compared to drywall, plaster is thicker, stronger, better at sound proofing and easier to repair in an unnoticeable way. It's worth maintaining and not replacing if at all possible. The reason most homes don't have plaster today is because it's just too expensive.
5. ***Antique Light Fixtures (A Bright Idea!)*** - You might be thinking that your antique fixtures are a fire hazard. Well, they might be, but it's nothing that can't be fixed by any lamp shop. Don't toss the old fixtures. Get them rewired and they will be as safe as a new fixture. Give them a cleaning and put them back into service. Antique fixtures add so much value to an old home, especially if they are original.

6. ***Linoleum is NOT Vinyl*** - Most people think that vinyl and linoleum flooring are the same. They are not! Vinyl is made from petroleum products. Linoleum? It's made from all-natural products like canvas and linseed oil (hence the name Lin-oleum). Linoleum is naturally anti-microbial, continues to harden over the years, has color throughout its body (unlike vinyl which has a thin color layer on top). Linoleum may not be the cheap fix you think it is. Think twice before you tear it out.

7. ***The "Maintenance Free" Free Zone*** - "Maintenance Free" items can be a real threat to your old home's value. If someone is trying to sell you a "maintenance free" home product an alarm as should go off in your head. Run the other direction, because "maintenance free" usually means it "cannot be maintained." Many of these items do more damage than they do good. A typical example of a "maintenance free" item that detracts from the value of an old home is vinyl siding.

8. ***Replace With Replicas*** - If some element is missing or broken and you can't find a historic replacement, then a replica is your best bet. Restoration Hardware, House of Antique Hardware, even Pottery Barn are all good places to start finding replicas of old home parts. A replica helps to keep the style of the home consistent, and a consistent style is always good for value.

9. ***Insulation Isn't That Important*** - Too many people tear out the old walls of their home and remove original moldings and features all in the name of adding insulation. Insulation is important, but there are ways you can insulate without tearing down the walls and ceilings. Spend a little time investigating non-invasive methods such as clapboard removal for blown-in cellulose or foam fills.

10. ***Wood Can Always Be Refinished*** - Even when it has been beat up beyond recognition, wood can almost always be refinished. Whether it's floors, balusters, baseboards, trim or any number of wood items in your old home, chances are it can be refinished. If it's going to be painted you can repair huge flaws using epoxies or other patching materials that can save you the added expense of buying replacements.

11. *Salvage Yard Salvation* - The architectural salvage yard is like the old home toy store. They have historic pieces for most anything you need to replace including; windows, doors, hardware, sinks, tubs, lights, siding, and so much more. And not only can you find all this great stuff, but it is usually available at a huge discount. Do a search for local architectural salvage stores and you'll usually find at least one or two in your area.

12. *It's the Trees, Stupid* - Siting a home and wisely incorporating landscaping in strategic areas is often overlooked today. But in the old days, homes were planned with trees planted on the south and west sides of the home to shield it from the hot summer sun. Before you chop that tree down think about how long it will take for another mature tree to grow up and take its place keeping your home cool in the summer and your utility bills low.

13. *Death to Particle Board* - If you're thinking about adding a piece of built-in furniture or anything else that will become a part of your home, think twice before choosing particle board. Particleboard is something that screams cheap and has no place in a historic home. Real wood doesn't have to cost that much more and will fit perfectly with your home. Long term value is the key here, and particle board just won't last.

14. *Form Follows Function* - Especially in much older homes, form follows function. The design of a particular item gets its shape and placement from the function it performs. In old homes, there were rarely things like faux wood beams or fake columns. Every element had a purpose, even if you're not sure what it is. Before you remove something, make sure you know what it is and just how important to your home it might be. You don't want things falling down around you.

15. *Plastic, What's That?* - The use of plastic products in historic homes is infinitesimally small compared to today. This is due in large part to the fact that most plastics didn't exist when these homes were built. That's not to say there aren't places to use them. In general, you're best to stay away from plastics if possible because they are often incompatible with the other elements in your home.

16. *Old Brick are Softies* - If your brickwork needs repair, you should be careful to use bricks and mortar from the same time period as the existing brickwork. Not only does a repair that doesn't match the original brickwork look terrible, but old bricks and mortar are softer than modern bricks and mortar. Intermixing generations can cause your old bricks to self-destruct by falling victim to something called spalling. Find a mason who specializes in historic buildings before you have any work done.
17. *Making Waves is Good* - That old wavy glass in your windows can be annoying if you're not used to it. But believe it or not, that glass is worth more than the new stuff. The new stuff is just too perfect for some of us who long for the character of hand-blown glass windows. And the wavy, or glimmer glass as it is sometimes called, is quickly disappearing from old homes as it breaks or is thrown out. There's no reason to replace it, save for a stray baseball that is.
18. *Call a Specialist Not a Contractor* - You need a specialist for your old home not just a general contractor. If you are having work done, make sure anyone you hire understands and is sensitive to working with the unique materials in your old home. I've seen too many historic homes have their value destroyed by well intentioned but clueless contractors who had no idea how to work on an old home.
19. *Little Stuff Isn't so Little* - All the innumerable details of your old home like light switches, door knobs, window hardware, moldings, trim, lights, plumbing fixtures, etc., add up to define the character of your home. Replace them with generic home store stuff and you strip your home of its identity and value.
20. *It's Not Good Because It's Old, It's Old Because It's Good* - This pretty much sums up the whole old home experience. Some people will think it's weird to save and restore all the little little pieces that go into an old home. But the reason these pieces of your home have survived so long is because they are quality products made in a time when it was more important to make something right than to make it fast. Don't get confused that you should save these parts because they are old. You should save them because they are good.

GOING FURTHER

If you've enjoyed this book and you want to learn more about old homes or need help on an upcoming project, I'd love to hear from you. You can email me at Scott@TheCraftsmanBlog.com. I'd also love to connect with you on our social media pages at [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Pinterest](#).

And if you do contact me, you can be assured you'll get an answer. Maybe it's a particular topic you'd like me to do a post on, a video tutorial of a skill you're dying to learn or just a simple question. I'm here for my readers and will make every effort to get you the tools you need to make your project a huge success. That's what [The Craftsman](#) is all about!

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