

Bethinking of Old Orleans

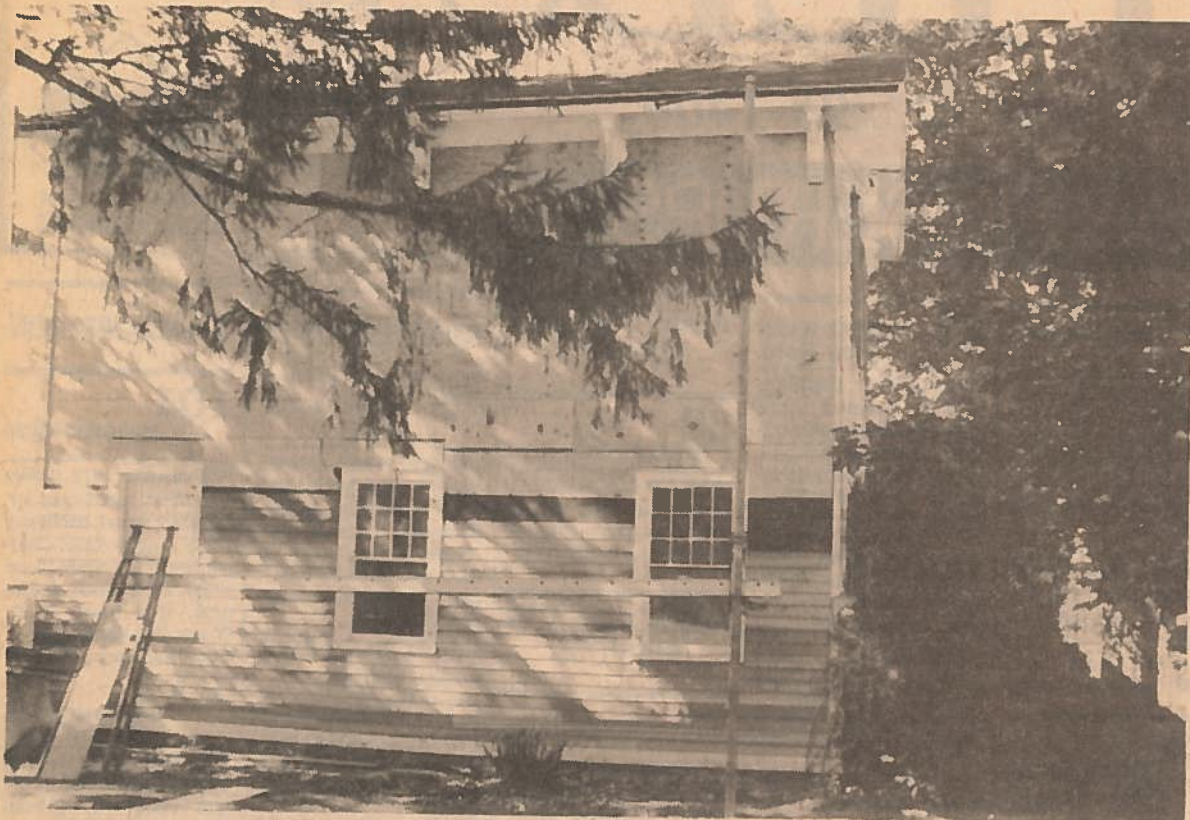
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RESIDING ?



I believe we have an inborn human tradition that when we don't like something we cover it up. Probably no better example exists of this phenomenon than re-siding old houses. Let me be perfectly succinct here. I deplore vinyl and aluminum siding on historic and architecturally significant homes. Too many times I've seen architectural details removed or covered up because someone believed they were reducing maintenance. In the last century aesthetics were a priority. It's plain our late 20th century society has other priorities. Knowing what is appropriate is not one of them. When I see people devalue their property by destroying significant features of the architecture with new siding, I'm at the very least appalled and annoyed that these individuals aren't more sensitive to our architectural heritage.

Recently I observed an historic building located in an adjoining county where the "great cover up" took place. Sheathed now in a tacky garb, the integrity of this structure has been destroyed. The former beautiful front doors with curved tops were replaced with new ones not in sympathy with the building's style. The window tops were likewise altered to fit the unbending quality of the siding material and the tower is now unfortunately done up in some strange disguise.

By contrast and on a more positive note, let me show a good example of where restoration is enhancing an historic structure. I allude to the accompanying photo which is the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Leo LaCroix located in the Town of Gaines on Route 104. This historic dwelling was built in 1824 by Gaines Chapter No. 82 Royal Arch Masons. The second floor served as the lodge room or temple. The demise of the lodge came after the scandalous publicity in 1826 surrounding the abduction of Wm. Morgan by Masons. It has always been alleged that Morgan was actually harbored over night in this lodge on his trek up Ridge Road from Canandaigua. We see in this photo, the east elevation which shows new cedar clapboards (that's wood) being applied. The LaCroix's, appreciating the historic nature of their home, wanted it done the right way. However, they had difficulty in getting any local contractor to do it their way. Every one of these people told them to put on vinyl. Consequently, the LaCroix's have done the work themselves and thus retained existing trim and decorative brackets under the eaves. As an amateur architect, a preservationist and an historian, I applaud this fine example of restoration. Oh, I know there are many who pooh-pooh this technique and approach. But let's stop for a moment and reconsider this kind of alternative when the maintenance of siding occurs.

From House Notes published by the Landmark Society of Western New York, here is what Ted Bartlett had to say about siding; "Maintenance free houses? Don't believe it! There is no such beast; never has been, never will be! No matter what the quality of construction, design or materials used, everything built by man needs care on a regular basis.

"So what are all these "maintenance free" products that you're seeing advertised? In most cases, they are products that have been formu-

lated to address a particular need or problem. But companies often try to expand the market for a product that has been used successfully in certain situations, and begin to advertise it to a broad audience as if it were appropriate in every case and for every situation (vinyl siding is a case in point). More often than not, the new technology or material involved may actually damage or hasten the deterioration of the building to which it is applied. In too many cases, the product is used to disguise or cover blemishes that are really indicative of more serious problems, and covering them up only makes them worse.

"Regular maintenance of homes went the way of many traditional routines, skills and products when post World War II technologies fostered the "throw-away" mentality of the 1950's and 1960's. Along with this way of thinking went the notion that "new is better than old." Consequently, the tradition of regular care and maintenance of one's home fell by the wayside in the face of new technologies, products and "cures." These, because they were new, were thought to surpass "old-fashioned" traditional methods and products. As a result, preservationists and homeowners today are dealing with a lot of deferred or faulty maintenance (or beyond that, "modernization"), that has taken place over the past forty years.

"Preservationists know that many old tried and true methods really are just that — because they work!"

It is a myth that vinyl and aluminum siding are maintenance free. They can't be, otherwise people wouldn't paint it or replace it. In fact, this kind of siding on an old house can mask rot, seal in moisture and cause further rotting. Insects such as beetles, wasps and carpenter ants can hide behind siding, doing untold damage before discovery. Aluminum siding can dent from hard blows or even ladders while vinyl siding can shatter upon impact. Vinyl is known to expand in hot weather and even pop off if not applied correctly. These same kinds of siding may fade and absorb stains. Contrary to some claims, neither vinyl or aluminum siding are effective insulating material. We have seen that heat from fires in close proximity can cause curling, melting and sagging. And finally, don't ever let anyone tell you that vinyl or aluminum siding will improve the value and beauty of your home. When it alters the original appearance and causes maintenance problems it's not a plus factor particularly if it covers interesting wooden details or decorative shingles on an historic structure. There are home buyers who are purists that won't consider a house where the original appearance has been destroyed. Sadly we know by example that right here in Orleans County property with vinyl siding was automatically ineligible for National Register Status.

Re-siding? If so, rethink the consequences of materials. My advice is to try to preserve as much of the original beauty of your home as possible. Painting is less expensive than siding and it preserves the distinctive features. What's more, the best energy conservation is often achieved with storm windows, caulking and insulation.