

# 4 PRESERVATION BRIEFS

## Roofing for Historic Buildings

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HABS

### Significance of the Roof

A weather-tight roof is basic in the preservation of a structure, regardless of its age, size, or design. In the system that allows a building to work as a shelter, the roof sheds the rain, shades from the sun, and buffers the weather.

During some periods in the history of architecture, the roof imparts much of the architectural character. It defines the style and contributes to the building's aesthetics. The hipped roofs of Georgian architecture, the turrets of Queen Anne, the Mansard roofs, and the graceful slopes of the Shingle Style and Bungalow designs are examples of the use of roofing as a major design feature.

But no matter how decorative the patterning or how compelling the form, the roof is a highly vulnerable element of a shelter that will inevitably fail. A poor roof will permit the accelerated deterioration of historic building materials—masonry, wood, plaster, paint—and will cause general disintegration of the basic structure. Furthermore, there is an urgency involved in repairing a leaky roof since such repair costs will quickly become prohibitive. Although such action is desirable as soon as a failure is discovered, temporary patching methods should be carefully chosen to prevent inadvertent damage to sound or historic roofing materials and related features. Before any repair work is performed, the historic value of the materials used on the roof should be understood. Then a complete internal and external inspection of the roof should be planned to determine all the causes of failure and to identify the alternatives for repair or replacement of the roofing.

### Historic Roofing Materials in America

**Clay Tile:** European settlers used clay tile for roofing as early as the mid-17th century; many pantiles (S-curved tiles), as well as flat roofing tiles, were used in Jamestown, Virginia. In some cities such as New York and Boston, clay was popularly used as a precaution against such fire as those that engulfed London in 1666 and scorched Boston in 1679.

Tiles roofs found in the mid-18th century Moravian settlements in Pennsylvania closely resembled those found in Germany. Typically, the tiles were 14–15" long, 6–7" wide with a curved butt. A lug on the back allowed the tiles to hang on the lathing without nails or pegs. The tile surface was usually scored with finger marks to promote drainage. In the Southwest, the tile roofs of the Spanish missionaries (mission tiles) were first manufactured (ca. 1780) at the Mission San Antonio de Padua in California. These semicircular tiles were



*Repairs on this pantile roof were made with new tiles held in place with metal hangers. (Main Building, Ellis Island, New York)*

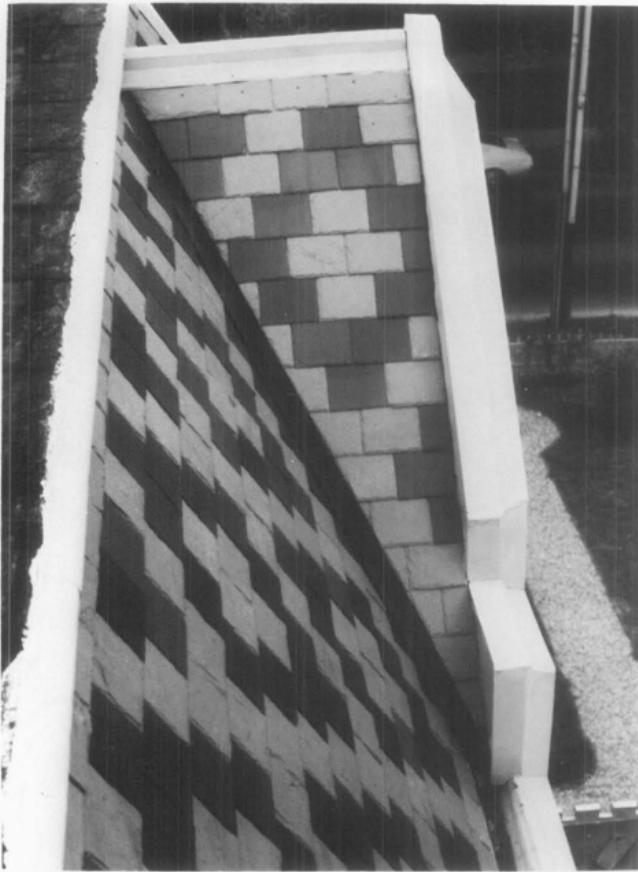
made by molding clay over sections of logs, and they were generally 22" long and tapered in width.

The plain or flat rectangular tiles most commonly used from the 17th through the beginning of the 19th century measured about 10" by 6" by 1/2", and had two holes at one end for a nail or peg fastener. Sometimes mortar was applied between the courses to secure the tiles in a heavy wind.

In the mid-19th century, tile roofs were often replaced by sheet-metal roofs, which were lighter and easier to install and maintain. However, by the turn of the century, the Romanesque Revival and Mission style buildings created a new demand and popularity for this picturesque roofing material.

**Slate:** Another practice settlers brought to the New World was slate roofing. Evidence of roofing slates have been found also among the ruins of mid-17th-century Jamestown. But because of the cost and the time required to obtain the material, which was mostly imported from Wales, the use of slate was initially limited. Even in Philadelphia (the second largest city in the English-speaking world at the time of the Revolution) slates were so rare that "The Slate Roof House" distinctly referred to William Penn's home built late in the 1600s. Sources of native slate were known to exist along the eastern seaboard from Maine to Virginia, but difficulties in inland transportation limited its availability to the cities, and contributed to its expense. Welsh slate continued to be imported until the development of canals and railroads in the mid-19th century made American slate more accessible and economical.

Slate was popular for its durability, fireproof qualities, and



*The Victorians loved to use different colored slates to create decorative patterns on their roofs, an effect which cannot be easily duplicated by substitute materials. Before any repair work on a roof such as this, the slate sizes, colors, and position of the patterning should be carefully recorded to assure proper replacement. (Ebenezer Maxwell Mansion, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, photo courtesy of William D. Hershey)*

aesthetic potential. Because slate was available in different colors (red, green, purple, and blue-gray), it was an effective material for decorative patterns on many 19th-century roofs (Gothic and Mansard styles). Slate continued to be used well into the 20th century, notably on many Tudor revival style buildings of the 1920s.

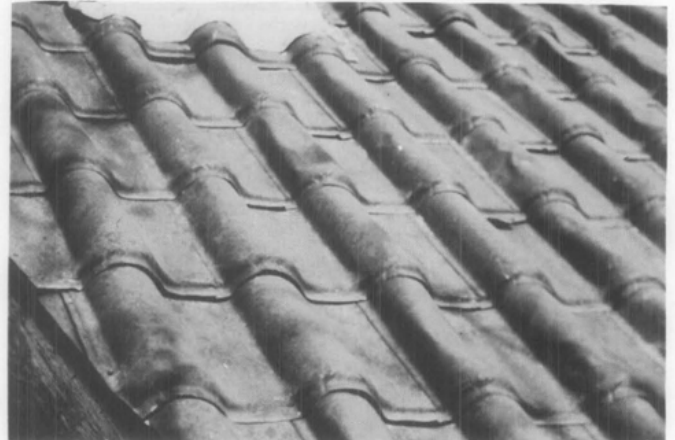
**Shingles:** Wood shingles were popular throughout the country in all periods of building history. The size and shape of the shingles as well as the detailing of the shingle roof differed according to regional craft practices. People within particular regions developed preferences for the local species of wood that most suited their purposes. In New England and the Delaware Valley, white pine was frequently used: in the South, cypress and oak; in the far west, red cedar or redwood. Sometimes a protective coating was applied to increase the durability of the shingle such as a mixture of brick dust and fish oil, or a paint made of red iron oxide and linseed oil.

Commonly in urban areas, wooden roofs were replaced with more fire resistant materials, but in rural areas this was not a major concern. On many Victorian country houses, the practice of wood shingling survived the technological advances of metal roofing in the 19th century, and near the turn of the century enjoyed a full revival in its namesake, the Shingle Style. Colonial revival and the Bungalow styles in the 20th century assured wood shingles a place as one of the most fashionable, domestic roofing materials.

**Metal:** Metal roofing in America is principally a 19th-century phenomenon. Before then the only metals commonly



*Replacement of particular historic details is important to the individual historic character of a roof, such as the treatment at the eaves of this rounded butt wood shingle roof. Also note that the surface of the dormer was carefully sloped to drain water away from the side of the dormer. In the restoration, this function was augmented with the addition of carefully concealed modern metal flashing. (Mount Vernon, Virginia)*



*Galvanized sheet-metal shingles imitating the appearance of pantiles remained popular from the second half of the 19th century into the 20th century. (Episcopal Church, now the Jerome Historical Society Building, Jerome, Arizona, 1927)*

used were lead and copper. For example, a lead roof covered "Rosewell," one of the grandest mansions in 18th-century Virginia. But more often, lead was used for protective flashing. Lead, as well as copper, covered roof surfaces where wood, tile, or slate shingles were inappropriate because of the roof's pitch or shape.

Copper with standing seams covered some of the more notable early American roofs including that of Christ Church (1727-1744) in Philadelphia. Flat-seamed copper was used on many domes and cupolas. The copper sheets were imported from England until the end of the 18th century when facilities for rolling sheet metal were developed in America.

Sheet iron was first known to have been manufactured here by the Revolutionary War financier, Robert Morris, who had a rolling mill near Trenton, New Jersey. At his mill Morris produced the roof of his own Philadelphia mansion, which he started in 1794. The architect Benjamin H. Latrobe used sheet iron to replace the roof on Princeton's "Nassau Hall," which had been gutted by fire in 1802.

The method for corrugating iron was originally patented in England in 1829. Corrugating stiffened the sheets, and allowed greater span over a lighter framework, as well as reduced installation time and labor. In 1834 the American architect William Strickland proposed corrugated iron to cover his design for the market place in Philadelphia.

Galvanizing with zinc to protect the base metal from rust was developed in France in 1837. By the 1850s the material was used on post offices and customhouses, as well as on train sheds and factories. In 1857 one of the first metal roofs in the



Repeated repair with asphalt, which cracks as it hardens, has created a blistered surface on this sheet-metal roof and built-in gutter, which will retain water. Repairs could be made by carefully heating and scraping the surface clean, repairing the holes in the metal with a flexible mastic compound or a metal patch, and coating the surface with a fibre paint. (Roane County Courthouse, Kingston, Tennessee, photo courtesy of Building Conservation Technology, Inc.)

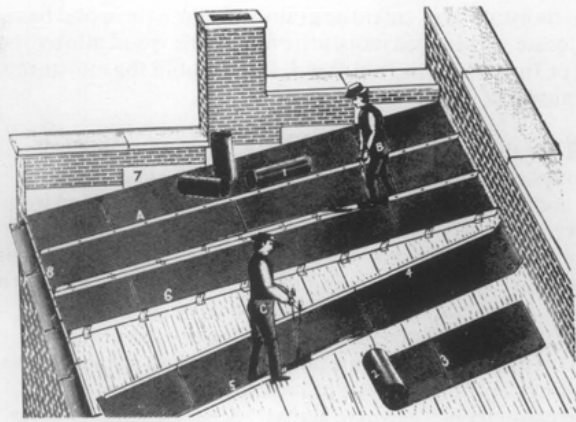
South was installed on the U.S. Mint in New Orleans. The Mint was thereby "fireproofed" with a 20-gauge galvanized, corrugated iron roof on iron trusses.

Tin-plate iron, commonly called "tin roofing," was used extensively in Canada in the 18th century, but it was not as common in the United States until later. Thomas Jefferson was an early advocate of tin roofing, and he installed a standing-seam tin roof on "Monticello" (ca. 1770-1802). The Arch Street Meetinghouse (1804) in Philadelphia had tin shingles laid in a herringbone pattern on a "piazza" roof.

However, once rolling mills were established in this country, the low cost, light weight, and low maintenance of tin plate made it the most common roofing material. Embossed tin shingles, whose surfaces created interesting patterns, were popular throughout the country in the late 19th century. Tin roofs were kept well-painted, usually red; or, as the architect A. J. Davis suggested, in a color to imitate the green patina of copper.

Terne plate differed from tin plate in that the iron was dipped in an alloy of lead and tin, giving it a duller finish. Historic, as well as modern, documentation often confuses the two, so much that it is difficult to determine how often actual "terne" was used.

Zinc came into use in the 1820s, at the same time tin plate was becoming popular. Although a less expensive substitute for lead, its advantages were controversial, and it was never widely used in this country.



A Chicago firm's catalog dated 1896 illustrates a method of unrolling, turning the edges, and finishing the standing seam on a metal roof.



Tin shingles, commonly embossed to imitate wood or tile, or with a decorative design, were popular as an inexpensive, textured roofing material. These shingles  $8\frac{3}{8}$  inch by  $12\frac{1}{2}$  inch on the exposed surface) were designed with interlocking edges, but they have been repaired by surface nailing, which may cause future leakage. (Ballard House, Yorktown, Virginia, photo by Gordie Whittington, National Park Service)

**Other Materials:** Asphalt shingles and roll roofing were used in the 1890s. Many roofs of asbestos, aluminum, stainless steel, galvanized steel, and lead-coated copper may soon have historic values as well. Awareness of these and other traditions of roofing materials and their detailing will contribute to more sensitive preservation treatments.

### Locating the Problem

#### Failures of Surface Materials

When trouble occurs, it is important to contact a professional, either an architect, a reputable roofing contractor, or a craftsman familiar with the inherent characteristics of the particular historic roofing system involved. These professionals may be able to advise on immediate patching procedures and help plan more permanent repairs. A thorough examination of the roof should start with an appraisal of the existing condition and quality of the roofing material itself. Particular attention should be given to any southern slope because year-round exposure to direct sun may cause it to break down first.

**Wood:** Some historic roofing materials have limited life expectancies because of normal organic decay and "wear." For example, the flat surfaces of wood shingles erode from exposure to rain and ultraviolet rays. Some species are more hardy than others, and heartwood, for example, is stronger and more durable than sapwood.

Ideally, shingles are split with the grain perpendicular to



the surface. This is because if shingles are sawn across the grain, moisture may enter the grain and cause the wood to deteriorate. Prolonged moisture on or in the wood allows moss or fungi to grow, which will further hold the moisture and cause rot.

**Metal:** Of the inorganic roofing materials used on historic buildings, the most common are perhaps the sheet metals: lead, copper, zinc, tin plate, terne plate, and galvanized iron. In varying degrees each of these sheet metals are likely to deteriorate from chemical action by pitting or streaking. This can be caused by airborne pollutants; acid rainwater; acids from lichen or moss; alkalis found in lime mortars or portland cement, which might be on adjoining features and washes down on the roof surface; or tannic acids from adjacent wood sheathings or shingles made of red cedar or oak.

Corrosion from "galvanic action" occurs when dissimilar metals, such as copper and iron, are used in direct contact. Corrosion may also occur even though the metals are physically separated; one of the metals will react chemically against the other in the presence of an electrolyte such as rainwater. In roofing, this situation might occur when either a copper roof is decorated with iron cresting, or when steel nails are used in copper sheets. In some instances the corrosion can be prevented by inserting a plastic insulator between the dissimilar materials. Ideally, the fasteners should be a metal sympathetic to those involved.

Iron rusts unless it is well-painted or plated. Historically this problem was avoided by use of tin plating or galvanizing. But this method is durable only as long as the coating remains intact. Once the plating is worn or damaged, the exposed iron will rust. Therefore, any iron-based roofing material needs to be undercoated, and its surface needs to be kept well-painted to prevent corrosion.

One cause of sheet metal deterioration is fatigue. Depending upon the size and the gauge of the metal sheets, wear and metal failure can occur at the joints or at any protrusions in the sheathing as a result from the metal's alternating movement to thermal changes. Lead will tear because of "creep," or the gravitational stress that causes the material to move down the roof slope.

**Slate:** Perhaps the most durable roofing materials are slate and tile. Seemingly indestructible, both vary in quality. Some slates are hard and tough without being brittle. Soft slates are more subject to erosion and to attack by airborne and rain-

water chemicals, which cause the slates to wear at nail holes, to delaminate, or to break. In winter, slate is very susceptible to breakage by ice, or ice dams.

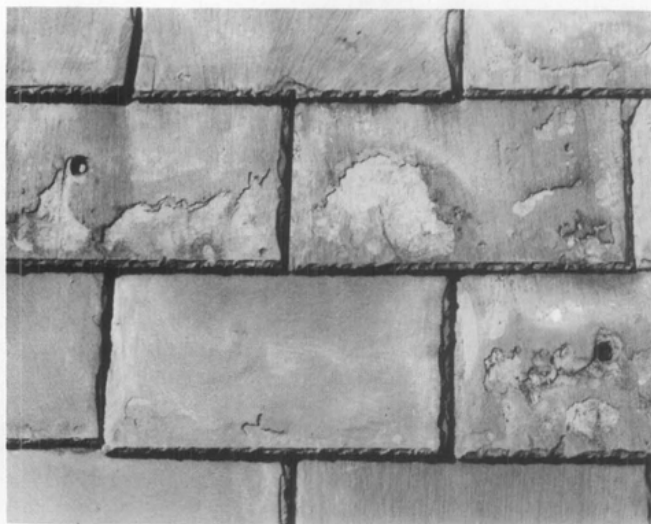
**Tile:** Tiles will weather well, but tend to crack or break if hit, as by tree branches, or if they are walked on improperly. Like slates, tiles cannot support much weight. Low quality tiles that have been insufficiently fired during manufacture, will craze and spall under the effects of freeze and thaw cycles on their porous surfaces.

#### Failures of Support Systems

Once the condition of the roofing material has been determined, the related features and support systems should be examined on the exterior and on the interior of the roof. The gutters and downspouts need periodic cleaning and maintenance since a variety of debris fill them, causing water to back up and seep under roofing units. Water will eventually cause fasteners, sheathing, and roofing structure to deteriorate. During winter, the daily freeze-thaw cycles can cause ice floes to develop under the roof surface. The pressure from these ice floes will dislodge the roofing material, especially slates, shingles, or tiles. Moreover, the buildup of ice dams above the gutters can trap enough moisture to rot the sheathing or the structural members.

Many large public buildings have built-in gutters set within the perimeter of the roof. The downspouts for these gutters may run within the walls of the building, or drainage may be through the roof surface or through a parapet to exterior downspouts. These systems can be effective if properly maintained; however, if the roof slope is inadequate for good runoff, or if the traps are allowed to clog, rainwater will form pools on the roof surface. Interior downspouts can collect debris and thus back up, perhaps leaking water into the surrounding walls. Exterior downspouts may fill with water, which in cold weather may freeze and crack the pipes. Conduits from the built-in gutter to the exterior downspout may also leak water into the surrounding roof structure or walls.

Failure of the flashing system is usually a major cause of roof deterioration. Flashing should be carefully inspected for failure caused by either poor workmanship, thermal stress, or metal deterioration (both of flashing material itself and of the fasteners). With many roofing materials, the replacement of flashing on an existing roof is a major operation, which may require taking up large sections of the roof surface. Therefore, the installation of top quality flashing material on



*This detail shows slate delamination caused by a combination of weathering and pollution. In addition, the slates have eroded around the repair nails, incorrectly placed in the exposed surface of the slates. (Lower Pontalba Building, New Orleans, photo courtesy of Building Conservation Technology, Inc.)*



*Temporary stabilization or "mothballing" with materials such as plywood and building paper can protect the roof of a project until it can be properly repaired or replaced. (Narbonne House, Salem, Massachusetts)*





*These two views of the same house demonstrate how the use of a substitute material can drastically affect the overall character of a structure. The textural interest of the original tile roof was lost with the use of asphalt shingles. Recent preservation efforts are replacing the tile roof. (Frank House, Kearney, Nebraska, photo courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska)*

a new or replaced roof should be a primary consideration. Remember, some roofing and flashing materials are not compatible.

Roof fasteners and clips should also be made of a material compatible with all other materials used, or coated to prevent rust. For example, the tannic acid in oak will corrode iron nails. Some roofs such as slate and sheet metals may fail if nailed too rigidly.

If the roof structure appears sound and nothing indicates recent movement, the area to be examined most closely is the roof substrate—the sheathing or the battens. The danger spots would be near the roof plates, under any exterior patches, at the intersections of the roof planes, or at vertical surfaces such as dormers. Water penetration, indicating a breach in the roofing surface or flashing, should be readily apparent, usually as a damp spot or stain. Probing with a small pen knife may reveal any rot which may indicate previously undetected damage to the roofing membrane. Insect infestation evident by small exit holes and frass (a sawdust-like debris) should also be noted. Condensation on the underside of the roofing is undesirable and indicates improper ventilation. Moisture will have an adverse effect on any roofing material; a good roof stays dry inside and out.

### Repair or Replace

Understanding potential weaknesses of roofing material also requires knowledge of repair difficulties. Individual slates can be replaced normally without major disruption to the rest of the roof, but replacing flashing on a slate roof can require substantial removal of surrounding slates. If it is the substrate or a support material that has deteriorated, many surface materials such as slate or tile can be reused if handled carefully during the repair. Such problems should be evaluated at the outset of any project to determine if the roof can be effectively patched, or if it should be completely replaced.

Will the repairs be effective? Maintenance costs tend to multiply once trouble starts. As the cost of labor escalates, repeated repairs could soon equal the cost of a new roof.

The more durable the surface is initially, the easier it will be to maintain. Some roofing materials such as slate are expensive to install, but if top quality slate and flashing are used, it will last 40–60 years with minimal maintenance. Although the installation cost of the roof will be high, low maintenance needs will make the lifetime cost of the roof less expensive.

### Historical Research

In a restoration project, research of documents and physical investigation of the building usually will establish the roof's history. Documentary research should include any original plans or building specifications, early insurance surveys, newspaper descriptions, or the personal papers and files of people who owned or were involved in the history of the building. Old photographs of the building might provide evidence of missing details.

Along with a thorough understanding of any written history of the building, a physical investigation of the roofing and its structure may reveal information about the roof's construction history. Starting with an overall impression of the structure, are there any changes in the roof slope, its configuration, or roofing materials? Perhaps there are obvious patches or changes in patterning of exterior brickwork where a gable roof was changed to a gambrel, or where a whole upper story was added. Perhaps there are obvious stylistic changes in the roof line, dormers, or ornamentation. These observations could help one understand any important alteration, and could help establish the direction of further investigation.

Because most roofs are physically out of the range of careful scrutiny, the "principle of least effort" has probably limited the extent and quality of previous patching or replacing, and usually considerable evidence of an earlier roof surface remains. Sometimes the older roof will be found as an underlayment of the current exposed roof. Original roofing may still be intact in awkward places under later features on a roof. Often if there is any unfinished attic space, remnants of roofing may have been dropped and left when the roof was being built or repaired. If the configuration of the roof has been changed, some of the original material might still be in place under the existing roof. Sometimes whole sections of the roof and roof framing will have been left intact under the higher roof. The profile and/or flashing of the earlier roof may be apparent on the interior of the walls at the level of the alteration. If the sheathing or lathing appears to have survived changes in the roofing surface, they may contain evidence of the roofing systems. These may appear either as dirt marks, which provide "shadows" of a roofing material, or as nails broken or driven down into the wood, rather than pulled out during previous alterations or repairs. Wooden headers in the roof framing may indicate that earlier chimneys or skylights have been removed. Any metal ornamentation that might have existed may be indicated by anchors or unusual markings along the ridge or at other edges of the roof. This primary

evidence is essential for a full understanding of the roof's history.

Caution should be taken in dating early "fabric" on the evidence of a single item, as recycling of materials is not a mid-20th-century innovation. Carpenters have been reusing materials, sheathing, and framing members in the interest of economy for centuries. Therefore, any analysis of the materials found, such as nails or sawmarks on the wood, requires an accurate knowledge of the history of local building practices before any final conclusion can be accurately reached. It is helpful to establish a sequence of construction history for the roof and roofing materials; any historic fabric or pertinent evidence in the roof should be photographed, measured, and recorded for future reference.

During the repair work, useful evidence might unexpectedly appear. It is essential that records be kept of any type of work on a historic building, before, during, and after the project. Photographs are generally the easiest and fastest method, and should include overall views and details at the gutters, flashing, dormers, chimneys, valleys, ridges, and eaves. All photographs should be immediately labeled to insure accurate identification at a later date. Any patterning or design on the roofing deserves particular attention. For example, slate roofs are often decorative and have subtle changes in size, color, and texture, such as a gradually decreasing coursing length from the eave to the peak. If not carefully noted before a project begins, there may be problems in replacing the surface. The standard reference for this phase of the work is *Recording Historic Buildings*, compiled by Harley J. McKee for the Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service, Washington, D.C., 1970.

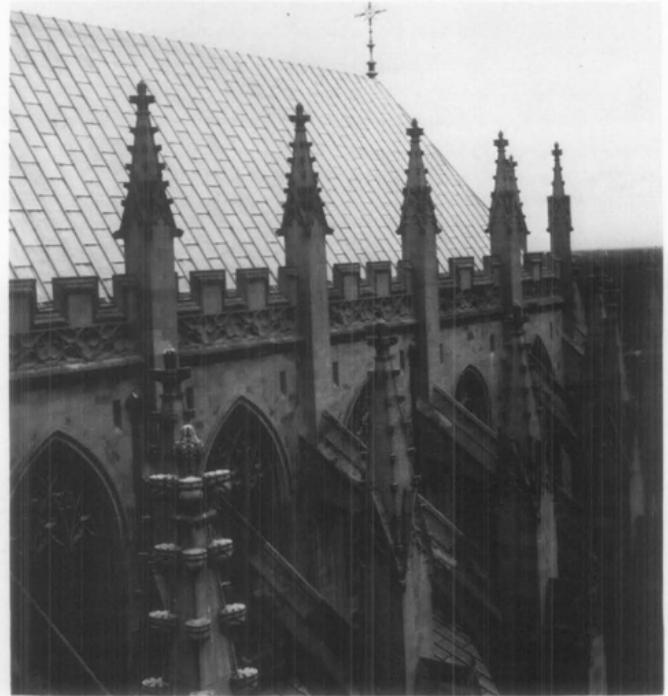
#### Replacing the Historic Roofing Material

Professional advice will be needed to assess the various aspects of replacing a historic roof. With some exceptions, most historic roofing materials are available today. If not, an architect or preservation group who has previously worked with the same type material may be able to recommend suppliers. Special roofing materials, such as tile or embossed metal shingles, can be produced by manufacturers of related products that are commonly used elsewhere, either on the exterior or interior of a structure. With some creative thinking and research, the historic materials usually can be found.



*Because of the roof's visibility, the slate detailing around the dormers is important to the character of this structure. Note how the slates swirl from a horizontal pattern on the main roof to a diamond pattern on the dormer roofs and side walls. (18th and Que Streets, NW, Washington, D.C.)*

**Craft Practices:** Determining the craft practices used in the installation of a historic roof is another major concern in roof restoration. Early builders took great pride in their work, and experience has shown that the "rustic" or irregular designs commercially labeled "Early American" are a 20th-century invention. For example, historically, wood shingles underwent several distinct operations in their manufacture including splitting by hand, and smoothing the surface with a draw knife. In modern nomenclature, the same item would be a "tapersplit" shingle which has been dressed. Unfortunately, the rustic appearance of today's commercially available "handsplit" and re-sawn shingle bears no resemblance to the hand-made roofing materials used on early American buildings.



*Good design and quality materials for the roof surface, fastenings, and flashing minimize roofing failures. This is essential on roofs such as on the National Cathedral where a thorough maintenance inspection and minor repairs cannot be done easily without special scaffolding. However, the success of the roof on any structure depends on frequent cleaning and repair of the gutter system. (Washington, D.C., photo courtesy of John Burns, A.I.A.)*

Early craftsmen worked with a great deal of common sense; they understood their materials. For example they knew that wood shingles should be relatively narrow; shingles much wider than about 6" would split when walked on, or they may curl or crack from varying temperature and moisture. It is important to understand these aspects of craftsmanship, remembering that people wanted their roofs to be weather-tight and to last a long time. The recent use of "mother-goose" shingles on historic structures is a gross underestimation of the early craftsman's skills.

**Supervision:** Finding a modern craftsman to reproduce historic details may take some effort. It may even involve some special instruction to raise his understanding of certain historic craft practices. At the same time, it may be pointless (and expensive) to follow historic craft practices in any construction that will not be visible on the finished product. But if the roofing details are readily visible, their appearance should be based on architectural evidence or on historic prototypes. For instance, the spacing of the seams on a standing-seam metal roof will affect the building's overall scale and should therefore match the original dimensions of the seams.

Many older roofing practices are no longer performed because of modern improvements. Research and review of specific detailing in the roof with the contractor before beginning the project is highly recommended. For example, one early craft practice was to finish the ridge of a wood shingle roof with a roof "comb"—that is, the top course of one slope of the roof was extended uniformly beyond the peak to shield the ridge, and to provide some weather protection for the raw horizontal edges of the shingles on the other slope. If the "comb" is known to have been the correct detail, it should be used. Though this method leaves the top course vulnerable to the weather, a disguised strip of flashing will strengthen this weak point.

Detail drawings or a sample mock-up will help ensure that the contractor or craftsman understands the scope and special requirements of the project. It should never be assumed that the modern carpenter, slater, sheet metal worker, or roofer will know all the historic details. Supervision is as important as any other stage of the process.



*Special problems inherent in the design of an elaborate historic roof can be controlled through the use of good materials and regular maintenance. The shape and detailing are essential elements of the building's historic character, and should not be modified, despite the use of alternative surface materials. (Gamwell House, Bellingham, Washington)*

#### **Alternative Materials**

The use of the historic roofing material on a structure may be restricted by building codes or by the availability of the materials, in which case an appropriate alternative will have to be found.

Some municipal building codes allow variances for roofing materials in historic districts. In other instances, individual variances may be obtained. Most modern heating and cooking is fueled by gas, electricity, or oil—none of which emit the hot embers that historically have been the cause of roof fires. Where wood burning fireplaces or stoves are used, spark arrestor screens at the top of the chimneys help to prevent flaming material from escaping, thus reducing the number of fires that start at the roof. In most states, insurance rates have been equalized to reflect revised considerations for the risks involved with various roofing materials.

In a rehabilitation project, there may be valid reasons for replacing the roof with a material other than the original. The historic roofing may no longer be available, or the cost of obtaining specially fabricated materials may be prohibitive. But

the decision to use an alternative material should be weighed carefully against the primary concern to keep the historic character of the building. If the roof is flat and is not visible from any elevation of the building, and if there are advantages to substituting a modern built-up composition roof for what might have been a flat metal roof, then it may make better economic and construction sense to use a modern roofing method. But if the roof is readily visible, the alternative material should match as closely as possible the scale, texture, and coloration of the historic roofing material.

Asphalt shingles or ceramic tiles are common substitute materials intended to duplicate the appearance of wood shingles, slates, or tiles. Fire-retardant, treated wood shingles are currently available. The treated wood tends, however, to be brittle, and may require extra care (and expense) to install. In some instances, shingles laid with an interlay of fire-retardant building paper may be an acceptable alternative.

Lead-coated copper, terne-coated steel, and aluminum/zinc-coated steel can successfully replace tin, terne plate, zinc, or lead. Copper-coated steel is a less expensive (and less durable) substitute for sheet copper.

The search for alternative roofing materials is not new. As early as the 18th century, fear of fire cause many wood shingle or board roofs to be replaced by sheet metal or clay tile. Some historic roofs were failures from the start, based on over-ambitious and naive use of materials as they were first developed. Research on a structure may reveal that an inadequately designed or a highly combustible roof was replaced early in its history, and therefore restoration of a later roof material would have a valid precedent. In some cities, the substitution of sheet metal on early row houses occurred as soon as the rolled material became available.

Cost and ease of maintenance may dictate the substitution of a material wholly different in appearance from the original. The practical problems (wind, weather, and roof pitch) should be weighed against the historical consideration of scale, texture, and color. Sometimes the effect of the alternative material will be minimal. But on roofs with a high degree of visibility and patterning or texture, the substitution may seriously alter the architectural character of the building.

#### **Temporary Stabilization**

It may be necessary to carry out an immediate and temporary stabilization to prevent further deterioration until research can determine how the roof should be restored or rehabilitated, or until funding can be provided to do a proper job. A simple covering of exterior plywood or roll roofing might provide adequate protection, but any temporary covering should be applied with caution. One should be careful not to overload the roof structure, or to damage or destroy historic evidence or fabric that might be incorporated into a new roof at a later date. In this sense, repairs with caulking or bituminous patching compounds should be recognized as potentially harmful, since they are difficult to remove, and at their best, are very temporary.

#### **Precautions**

The architect or contractor should warn the owner of any precautions to be taken against the specific hazards in installing the roofing material. Soldering of sheet metals, for instance, can be a fire hazard, either from the open flame or from overheating and undected smoldering of the wooden substrate materials.

Thought should be given to the design and placement of any modern roof appurtenances such as plumbing stacks, air vents, or TV antennas. Consideration should begin with the placement of modern plumbing on the interior of the building, otherwise a series of vent stacks may pierce the roof membrane at various spots creating maintenance problems as well as aesthetic ones. Air handling units placed in the attic space will require vents which, in turn, require sensitive design. Incorporating these in unused chimneys has been very successful



in the past.

Whenever gutters and downspouts are needed that were not on the building historically, the additions should be made as unobtrusively as possible, perhaps by painting them out with a color compatible with the nearby wall or trim.

### Maintenance

Although a new roof can be an object of beauty, it will not be protective for long without proper maintenance. At least twice a year, the roof should be inspected against a checklist. All changes should be recorded and reported. Guidelines should be established for any foot traffic that may be required for the maintenance of the roof. Many roofing materials should not be walked on at all. For some—slate, asbestos, and clay tile—a self-supporting ladder might be hung over the ridge of the roof, or planks might be spanned across the roof surface. Such items should be specifically designed and kept in a storage space accessible to the roof. If exterior work ever requires hanging scaffolding, use caution to insure that the anchors do not penetrate, break, or wear the roofing surface, gutters, or flashing.

Any roofing system should be recognized as a membrane that is designed to be self-sustaining, but that can be easily damaged by intrusions such as pedestrian traffic or fallen tree branches. Certain items should be checked at specific times. For example, gutters tend to accumulate leaves and debris during the spring and fall and after heavy rain. Hidden gutter screening both at downspouts and over the full length of the gutter could help keep them clean. The surface material would require checking after a storm as well. Periodic checking of the underside of the roof from the attic after a storm or winter freezing may give early warning of any leaks. Generally, damage from water or ice is less likely on a roof that has good flashing on the outside and is well ventilated and insulated on the inside. Specific instructions for the maintenance of the different roof materials should be available from the architect or contractor.

### Summary

The essential ingredients for replacing and maintaining a historic roof are:

- Understanding the historic character of the building and being sympathetic to it.
- Careful examination and recording of the existing roof and any evidence of earlier roofs.
- Consideration of the historic craftsmanship and detailing and implementing them in the renewal wherever visible.
- Supervision of the roofers or maintenance personnel to assure preservation of historic fabric and proper understanding of the scope and detailing of the project.
- Consideration of alternative materials where the original cannot be used.
- Cyclical maintenance program to assure that the staff understands how to take care of the roof and of the particular trouble spots to safeguard.

With these points in mind, it will be possible to preserve the architectural character and maintain the physical integrity of the roofing on a historic building.

This Preservation Brief was written by Sarah M. Sweetser, Architectural Historian, Technical Preservation Services Division. Much of the technical information was based upon an unpublished report prepared under contract for this office by John G. and Diana S. Waite. Some of the historical information was from Charles E. Peterson, FAIA, "American Notes," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*.

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Decorative features such as cupolas require extra maintenance. The flashing is carefully detailed to promote run-off, and the wooden ribbing must be kept well-painted. This roof surface, which was originally tin plate, has been replaced with lead-coated copper for maintenance purposes. (Lyndhurst, Tarrytown, New York, photo courtesy of the National Trust for Historic Preservation)

niques for preserving, improving, restoring and maintaining historic properties." The Brief has been developed under the technical editorship of Lee H. Nelson, AIA, Chief, Preservation Assistance Division, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240. Comments on the usefulness of this information are welcome and can be sent to Mr. Nelson at the above address. This publication is not copyrighted and can be reproduced without penalty. Normal procedures for credit to the author and the National Park Service are appreciated. February 1978.

Additional readings on the subject of roofing are listed below.

- Boaz, Joseph N., ed. *Architectural Graphic Standards*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1970. (Modern roofing types and detailing)
- Briggs, Martin S. *A Short History of the Building Crafts*. London: Oxford University Press, 1925. (Descriptions of historic roofing materials)
- Bulletin of the Association for Preservation Technology*. Vol. 2 (nos. 1-2) 1970. (Entirely on roofing)
- Holstrom, Ingmar; and Sandstrom, Christina. *Maintenance of Old Buildings: Preservation from the Technical and Antiquarian Standpoint*. Stockholm: National Swedish Building Research, 1972. (Contains a section on roof maintenance problems)
- Insall, Donald. *The Care of Old Buildings Today*. London: The Architectural Press, 1972. (Excellent guide to some problems and solutions for historic roofs)
- Labine, R.A. Clem. "Repairing Slate Roofs." *The Old House Journal* 3 (no. 12, Dec. 1975): 6-7.
- Lefler, Henry. "A Birds-eye View." *Progressive Architecture*. (Mar. 1977), pp. 88-92. (Article on contemporary sheet metal)
- National Slate Association. *Slate Roofs*. Reprint of 1926 edition, now available from the Vermont Structural Slate Co., Inc., Fairhaven, VT 05743. (An excellent reference for the many designs and details of slate roofs)
- Peterson, Charles E. "Iron in Early American Roofs." *The Smithsonian Journal of History* 3 (no. 3). Edited by Peter C. Welsh. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1968, pp. 41-76.
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