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MEMORANDUM

Historic Resource Commission Meeting of October 9, 2014

TO: Historic Resource Commission **Item F-2**

FROM: Susan Dorr Pansky, AICP
Planning Manager

DATE: October 2, 2014

SUBJECT: HRC-14-087 – Discussion regarding the appropriateness of LED or similar, changeable electronic signage in the Historic District

Staff was recently approached by the Presbyterian Church regarding the desire to have electronic signage that could be changeable with a computer to assist their operations. Staff has also had discussions in the past regarding changeable electronic and LED signage with other property owners with businesses in the Historic District, such as the Brewery Arts Center. The Historic Resources Commission's position in the past has been that LED and changeable electronic signage is not appropriate in the Historic District. However, potential future applicants have expressed interest in determining if there is a way to allow such signage in a way that would still be compatible with the Historic District.

As an example, staff has included a written concept that was provided by the Presbyterian Church on what they feel could be an acceptable solution. The concept is attached to this memo. Staff has also attached the current Historic District Zoning Code and Development Standards for review. Finally, staff has included the National Park's Service Preservation Brief 25: The Preservation of Historic Signs. This brief provides some general guidance from the National Parks Service on regulations for new signs and historic buildings.

The purpose of this item is to discuss whether the Historic Resources Commission feels that these signs, in some manner or form, may be acceptable for compatibility within the Historic District. If the Historic Resources Commission feels that these signs could be acceptable, it may direct staff on its interpretation of the current Historic District code, if appropriate, or modify the Historic District code to allow for them with specific regulations.

Attachments

Concept from Presbyterian Church
Carson City Municipal Code, Section 18.06.135 (Signs)
Carson City Development Standards, Section 5.23 (Guidelines for Signs)
Preservation Brief 25: The Preservation of Historic Signs

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF CARSON CITY APPLICATION TO HISTORIC RESOURCES COMMISSION FILE # HRC - _____	EXHIBIT 1
EXHIBIT 1 - BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF WORK TO BE PERFORMED	
GOAL IS TO HAVE A SIGN ON THE BUILDING ON DIVISION STREET THAT PRESERVES THE HISTORIC INTEGRITY OF THE DISTRICT	
ALLOWS FOR DISPLAY OF CHURCH SERVICES (DAYS AND TIMES)	
ALLOWS FOR DISPLAY OF SPECIAL EVENTS OF THE CHURCH: VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL CHURCH SOCIAL EVENTS-ICE CREAM SOCIAL -CHILI COOK OFF -YOUTH MEETINGS -VARIOUS BIBLE STUDY MEETINGS -PRAYER GROUP MEETINGS -SPECIAL EVENTS	
AT TIMES PERHAPS DISPLAY SHORT MESSAGES OF FAITH (SIMILAR TO THE BAPTIST CHURCH SIGN ON MOUNTAIN STREET)	
SIGN MIGHT BE ABOUT 6 FEET TALL AND 10 FEET WIDE	
SIGN WOULD APPEAR TO BE SAME AS A BACKLIGHT SIGN WITH HAND POSTED LETTERS BUT WOULD HAVE SPECIAL REDUCED LIGHT AFTER DAYLIGHT IT WOULD HAVE CURRENT TECHNOLOGY TO SHOW LETTERS & MESSAGES CHOSEN BY CHURCH THAT WOULD VARY AT TIMES. IT WOULD USE TECHNOLOGY THAT WOULD AVOID GETTING UP ON LADDERS TO CHANGE THE LETTERS- IT WOULD USE A COMPUTER IN CHURCH OFFICE TO CHANGE THE DISPLAYS	
SIGN WOULD BE DESIGNED TO LOOK "OLD" SO AS TO FIT IN WITH THE HISTORICAL DISTRICT	
SIGN LETTERS MAY BE BASICALLY BLACK, BUT IN CERTAIN TIMES MIGHT USE COLOR	
SIGN WOULD BE MOUNTED ON THE WEST WALL OF THE NEW SANCTUARY BUILDING ON DIVISION STREET, SOUTH OF MAIN ENTRANCE	
FINAL DESIGN AND FRAME, ETC. TO BE SUBMITTED TO THE HISTORICAL RESOURCES COMMISSION, BEFORE PROCEEDING WITH INSTALLATION. PLAN DETAILS TO BE PRESENTED FOR APPROVAL AT A LATER MEETING OF HRC.	
THE CHURCH RECOGNIZES THE PURPOSE OF CURRENTLY NOT SUPPORTING THE USE OF "DIGITAL" SIGNS, BUT ASKS FOR APPROVAL OF A SIGN THAT WILL FIT IN WITH THE HISTORICAL DISTRICT AND ALLOW FOR MESSAGES THAT HELP MEET THE CHURCH'S GOALS AND NEEDS.	
PLEASE SEE MAP THAT SHOWS THE PROPOSED LOCATION OF THE SIGN	

Chapter 18.06 Historic District

18.06.130 Ordinary Maintenance and Repair. Nothing in this Chapter shall be construed to prevent the ordinary maintenance and repair of any exterior architectural feature in or on any property covered by this Chapter that does not involve a change in design, material, or external appearance thereof, nor does this ordinance prevent the construction, reconstruction, alteration, restoration, demolition, or removal of any such architectural feature when Planning and Community Development certifies to the HRC that such action is required for public safety due to an unsafe or dangerous condition which cannot be rectified through the use of the Uniform Code for building conservation and when such feature can be replaced according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards.

18.06.135 Signs.

1. All signs on historic places or in Historic Districts must conform with Division 4 of the Development Standards, and additionally, must have an appearance, color, size, position, method of attachment, texture of materials and design in keeping with the character of the place or district.
2. Signing shall be further limited as follows:
 - a. No off-site signs are permitted.
 - b. Business signs shall be limited to a single sign for each street frontage.
 - c. No sign may extend above the top of the nearest facade, eaves or firewall of building or structure.
 - d. No sign which flashes, blinks, revolves, or is otherwise in motion or which is connected to audio equipment, shall be permitted; and no visible bulbs, neon tubing, luminous paints or backlight shall be permitted as part of any sign.
 - e. Buildings and sign may be illuminated by remote light sources, provided that these light sources are shielded to protect adjacent properties.

18.06.140 Lighting. The addition of exterior light fixtures and exterior illumination patterns to historic properties and to properties within the Historic District shall be undertaken with sensitivity to the property and its neighbors. Exterior illumination for historic buildings and new construction within the Historic District shall conform to the standards set forth in Division 5 Development Standards.

18.06.145 Fences. HRC approval of fences is required for properties within the Historic District and for fences on historic properties. Fences must conform to the standards set forth in Division 1 of the Development Standards.

HISTORIC DISTRICT

The design of exterior lighting involves two elements: the fixture and the illumination pattern produced by the fixture. Both elements need to be considered carefully in the review of any application. The illumination pattern should be functional, but not intrusive on neighbors. New fixtures which provide outdoor flood lighting shall be placed so that they are hidden from view during daylight hours.

5.22.1 Guidelines for Historic Buildings

The addition of light fixtures and illuminating patterns to historic properties shall be undertaken with sensitivity to the property and its neighbors. Original lighting fixtures and illuminating patterns shall be retained when at all possible. (Standard Number: 2, 3, 5, 6)

5.22.2 Guidelines for New Construction

Exterior lighting in new construction needs to be sensitively designed. Lighting fixtures should reflect the style and design of the new building. The illumination pattern of the lighting should not intrude, but should compliment the building and its environs. (Standard Number: 9, 10)

5.23 Guidelines for Signs

Signs in the Historic District are governed by both this Division and Division 4 of the Development Standards. Signage in the Historic District is generally concerned with the conversion of original residential buildings to light office use or with new buildings which have been constructed as commercial buildings in a style compatible with the basic residential nature of the district.

All signs must have an appearance, color, size, texture and design which conforms to the sign codes and to the historic character of the district. Signs should also closely match stylistically with the architectural style of the building. Additionally, the location and/or method of attachment of the sign will be considered. The HRC will review all sign applications within the context of the building and the location in the district.

NOTE: Any sign placed in the district must meet the standards of Division 4 and be approved by the HRC.

5.24 Guidelines for Fences

Fences serve a variety of purposes for a property owner. They can define property lines, provide security and protection from trespass, furnish safety for children and pets, provide visual screens for privacy and serve as protection from the elements. The design of a fence is a critical element in the overall visual quality of a property and how it relates to its neighbors. It can also be important from a public safety standpoint, particularly on corner lots. Typically front yards in the district were delineated by low profile, wood picket style fences. A few metal and/or masonry fences can be found as well.

A fence design needs to be considered in context. Scale, rhythm, material and style are the critical design elements of a fence. The fence design needs to be compatible to the building as well as

Technical Preservation Services

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



[Home](#) > [How to Preserve](#) > [Preservation Briefs](#) > 25 Signage

Some of the web versions of the Preservation Briefs differ somewhat from the printed versions. Many illustrations are new and in color; Captions are simplified and some complex charts are omitted. To order hard copies of the Briefs, see [Printed Publications](#).

PRESERVATION BRIEFS

25

The Preservation of Historic Signs

Michael J. Auer

[Historic Sign Types and Practices](#)

[Sign Regulation](#)

[Preserving Historic Signs](#)

[New Signs and Historic Buildings](#)

[Summary and References](#)

[Reading List](#)

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Terra cotta wheel with Studebaker banner, 1926, Lakewood, Ohio. Photo: Frank Wrenick.

"Signs" refers to a great number of verbal, symbolic or figural markers. Posters, billboards, graffiti and traffic signals, corporate logos, flags, decals and bumper stickers, insignia on baseball caps and tee shirts: all of these are "signs." Buildings themselves can be signs, as structures shaped like hot dogs, coffee pots or Chippendale highboys attest. The signs encountered each day are seemingly countless, for language itself is largely symbolic. This Brief, however, will limit its discussion of "signs" to lettered or symbolic messages affixed to historic buildings or associated with them.

Signs are everywhere. And everywhere they play an important role in human activity. They identify. They direct and decorate. They promote, inform, and advertise. Signs are essentially social. They name a human activity, and often identify who is doing it. Signs allow the owner to communicate with the reader, and the people inside a building to communicate with those outside of it.

Signs speak of the people who run the businesses, shops, and firms. Signs are signatures. They reflect the owner's tastes and personality. They often reflect the ethnic makeup of a neighborhood and its character, as well as the social and business activities carried out there. By giving concrete details about daily life in a former era, historic signs allow the past to speak to the present in ways that buildings by themselves do not. And multiple surviving historic signs on the same building can indicate several periods in its history or use. In this respect, signs are like archeological layers that reveal different periods of human occupancy and use.

Historic signs give continuity to public spaces, becoming part of the community memory. They sometimes become landmarks in themselves, almost without regard for the building to which they are attached, or the property on which they stand. Furthermore, in an age of uniform franchise signs and generic plastic "box" signs, historic signs often attract by



Neon first appeared in signs in the 1920s, and reached its height of

their individuality: by a clever detail, a daring use of color and motion, or a reference to particular people, shops, or events.

popularity in the 1940s. Photo: Peter Phillips.

Yet historic signs pose problems for those who would save them. Buildings change uses. Businesses undergo change in ownership. New ownership or use normally brings change in signs. Signs are typically part of a business owner's sales strategy, and may be changed to reflect evolving business practices or to project a new image.

Signs also change to reflect trends in architecture and technology: witness the Art Deco and Depression Modern lettering popular in the 1920s and 1930s, and the use of neon in the 1940s and 1950s.

The cultural significance of signs combined with their often transitory nature makes the preservation of historic signs fraught with questions, problems, and paradoxes. If the common practice in every period has been to change signs with regularity, when and how should historic signs be kept? If the business is changing hands, how can historic signs be reused? The subject is an important one, and offers opportunities to save elements that convey the texture of daily life from the past.

This Brief will attempt to answer some of the preservation questions raised by historic signs. It will discuss historic sign practices, and show examples of how historic signs have been preserved even when the business has changed hands or the building itself has been converted to a new use.

Historic Sign Types and Practices

Pre-Nineteenth Century

American sign practices originated largely in Europe. The earliest commercial signs included symbols of the merchant's goods or tradesman's craft. Emblems were mounted on poles, suspended from buildings, or painted on hanging wooden boards. Such symbolic signs were necessary in a society where few could read, although verbal signs were not entirely unknown. A sheep signified a tailor, a tankard a tavern.

The red and white striped pole signifying the barbershop, and the three gold balls outside the pawnshop are two such emblems that can occasionally be seen today. (The barber's sign survives from an era when barbers were also surgeons; the emblem suggests bloody bandages associated with the craft. The pawnbroker's sign is a sign of a sign: it derives from the coat of arms of the Medici banking family.)

Flat signs with lettering mounted flush against the building gradually replaced hanging, symbolic signs. The suspended signs posed safety hazards, and creaked when they swayed in the wind: "The creaking signs not only kept the citizens awake at night, but they knocked them off their horses, and occasionally fell on them too." The result, in England, was a law in 1762 banning large projecting signs. In 1797 all projecting signs were forbidden, although some establishments, notably "public houses," retained the hanging sign tradition.¹¹

By the end of the eighteenth century, the hanging sign had declined in popularity. Flat or flush-mounted signs, on the other hand, had become standard. Like symbolic signs, however, the tradition of projecting signs has survived into the present.



Once commonplace, the three balls symbolizing the pawnbroker are now rare. Photo: NPS files.

Nineteenth Century Signs and Sign Practices

Surviving nineteenth-century photographs depict a great variety of signs. The list of signs discussed here is by no means exhaustive.

Fascia signs, placed on the fascia or horizontal band between the storefront and the second floor, were among the most common. The fascia is often called the "signboard," and as the word implies, provided a perfect place for a sign—then as now. The narrowness of the fascia imposed strict limits on the sign maker, however, and such signs usually gave little more than the name of the business and perhaps a street number.

Similar to fascia signs were signs between the levels of windows across the upper facade. Such signs were mounted on horizontal boards or painted on the building. Signs of this type tended to use several "lines" of text, the name of business and short description, for example. The message, reading from top to bottom, sometimes covered several stories of the building. Other **painted signs** presented figures, products, or scenes. Such signs were typically more vertical than horizontal in emphasis. Whether such painted signs featured text or images, they became major features of the building, as their makers intended them to be. The building itself often became a backdrop for the sign.

Signs in the form of **plaques, shields, and ovals** were used on many nineteenth-century buildings. Such signs had the advantage of being easily replaced as tenants came and went. They also easily incorporated images as well as lettering.

Hanging or projecting signs, both lettered and symbolic, were also common in the nineteenth century, although less so than previously. Projecting signs were often paired with another at a 45-degree angle for increased visibility. Occasionally a sign would stretch out from the building across the sidewalk, supported by a post at the street.

Goldleaf signs, and signs painted or etched on glass in windows, doors and transoms were quite common.

Porcelain enamel signs were also very popular in the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the mid-twentieth century. Signs carved from stone or wood also appeared frequently, especially on institutional buildings. Painted shutters and even window shades provided additional advertising space.

Posters found their way into display windows when they weren't pasted onto the building. Sidewalk signs or "sandwich boards" offered another chance to catch the eye of any passerby not watching the graphics overhead.

Nineteenth-century tenants looking for additional advertising space found it in unexpected places. They used the entrance steps to mount signs in a variety of ways: Handrails, risers, skirts, and balusters sported signs that gave businesses on upper levels a chance to attract notice.

Awnings offered other opportunities for keeping a name before the public. The fringe or skirt of the awning, as well as the panel at the side were the usual places for a name or street number. Flags, particularly hung from the upper floors, and banners, sometimes stretching across the sidewalk, also appeared on buildings.

Rooftop signs appeared with greater frequency in the second half of the nineteenth century than previously. Earlier rooftop signs tended to be relatively simple—often merely larger versions of the horizontal signs typically found on lower levels. Late in the century the signs became more ornate as well as more numerous. These later rooftop signs were typically found on hotels, theaters, banks and other large buildings.

The sign types described here were not used in isolation. Window and awning signs attracted sidewalk pedestrians and people in the street. Upper level signs reached viewers at greater distances. If signs were numerous, however, they were nonetheless usually small in scale.

As the century wore on, signs increased in size and scale. Wall signs several stories high were not uncommon in the second half of the century. This development reflects changes in urban life as the century headed to its close. Cities were experiencing rapid population growth. Buildings became bigger and taller. Elevated trains and electric trolleys increased the pace of city life. And when it comes to signs, speed alters scale. The faster people travel, the bigger a sign has to be before they can see it.

Twentieth Century Signs and Sign Practices

The advent of the twentieth century approximately coincided with the coming of electricity, which gave signs light and, later, movement. Illuminated signs were not unknown before electricity. An advertisement printed about 1700 mentioned a night time sign lit by candles, and in 1840 the legendary showman P.T. Barnum built a huge sign illuminated by gas.³ But electricity was safer and cheaper than candles, kerosene and gas. Its widespread use gave signs a prominence they retain today: illuminated signs dominate the streets at night.

Electricity permitted signs to be illuminated by light shining onto them, but the real revolution occurred when lightbulbs were used to form the images and words on signs. Lightbulbs flashing on and off made new demands on the attention of passersby. Lightbulbs blinking in sequence could also simulate movement. Add this property to the mix, and a dramatic transformation of American streets resulted.

Moving signs were not unknown prior to the advent of electricity, for wind-driven signs had made their appearance in the nineteenth century. But electricity gave signs an unparalleled range of motion. This movement added yet another element to the life of the street.

Neon is another great twentieth-century contribution to the signmaker's art. "Neon," coined from the Greek word for "new," is a "new gas." It has the useful property of glowing when an electric charge passes through it. (Argon, krypton, xenon and helium share this property. Only neon and argon, however, are typically used in commercial signs.) Encased in



Objects associated with a business continue to be used as signs. Photo: NPS files.



In the 1930s and 1940s, signs built into storefronts became popular. This example is from Guthrie, Oklahoma. Photo: NPS files.

century signs. In particular, Art Deco and Streamlined Moderne affected not just buildings, but their signs as well.

Architects working in these styles often integrated signs and buildings into a unified design. This was particularly true of storefronts built using pigmented structural glass, commonly known as "Carrara glass," and porcelain enamel on steel panels. These materials allowed words and images to be etched into the glass or enamel, or to be constructed in different colors and patterns as part of an overall design for the building. Such storefronts were popular from the 1920s into the 1940s.

As the century advanced, new styles took hold. The late 1950s brought signs with fins, star bursts, and other images reflecting a new fascination with outer space.

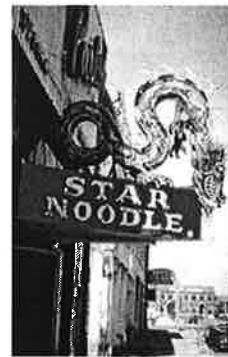


In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the country turned its attention to outer space, as in this example in Long Beach, California. Photo: Peter Phillips.

glass tubes shaped into letters or symbols, neon offered signmakers an opportunity to mold light into an infinite variety of shapes, colors, and images. Combined with an electric timer, the neon tubing could present images moving in succession.

Neon first appeared in signs in the 1920s, and reached its height of popularity in the 1940s. The first documented neon commercial sign in the United States was at a Packard Motor Car dealership in Los Angeles in 1923.³ After a period of decline, it underwent a renaissance, beginning in the 1970s. Artists experimented with neon as a conscious art-form, and several notable architects further helped in its revival.⁴ Renewed interest in this colorful medium also sparked interest in preserving historic neon signs.

Along with such developments as the coming of electricity and then neon, stylistic movements influenced twentieth-



This Ogden, Utah, sign is a superb example of neon. Photo: NPS files.

century signs. In particular, Art Deco and Streamlined Moderne affected not just buildings, but their signs as well.

In the decades after World War II signs were also transformed by a group of materials now known generically as "plastic." Plastic had several advantages over wood, metal and other traditional sign materials. As the name indicates, "plastic" can take almost any shape. It can also take almost any color. Plastic is translucent. Lit from behind, it appears to glow. It is relatively durable. Above all, it is inexpensive, and can be mass produced. Plastic quickly became the dominant sign material.

Another profound influence on signs in this period stemmed from business trends rather than from technological breakthroughs or design movements: the rise of chain stores and franchises. National firms replaced many local businesses. Standard corporate signs went up; local trademarks came down. The rise of mass culture, of which the national chain is but one expression, has meant the rise of standardization, and the elimination of regional differences and local character.

The decline of gold-leafing and other traditional sign techniques contributed to these trends. Mass-produced signs have replaced local signs that differed from owner to owner and from signmaker to signmaker. The result is not just sameness, but impersonality as well: It is becoming rarer, for example, to find owners' names on signs. Whether the trend toward sameness can successfully be resisted is yet to be seen. (Some crafts, such as gold-leafing and porcelain enameling, for example, have experienced a revival of sorts.) But the preservation of historic signs is one way to ensure that at least some of these expressions of local history continue to enliven our streets.

Sign Regulation

Historic commercial areas have customarily been a riot of signs. Yet if clutter has ample precedent, so do efforts to control it. Early attempts to regulate signs in this country include those of professional associations of advertisers, such as the International Bill Posters Organization of North America, founded in St. Louis in 1872.⁵

However, early efforts by municipalities to enact sign regulations met with disfavor in the courts, which traditionally opposed any regulatory effort based on aesthetic concerns. Early successes in the legal arena, such as the 1911 case, *St. Louis Gunning Advertising Company v. City of St. Louis*, were realized when proponents of sign controls argued that signs and billboards endangered public health and safety.

Yet gradually courts found merit in the regulation of private property for aesthetic reasons. In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the landmark decision, *Berman v. Parker*, in which the court declared: "It is within the power of the

legislature to determine that the community should be beautiful as well as healthy, spacious as well as clean, well balanced as well as carefully patrolled."¹

With the blessing of the courts, communities across the nation have enacted sign controls to reduce "urban blight." And where historic buildings are concerned, the growth of local review commissions has added to the momentum for controls in historic districts.

Typically, sign controls regulate the number, size and type of signs. In some cases, moving or projecting signs are prohibited. Often such ordinances also regulate sign placement—owners are told to line up their signs with others on the block, for example. Materials, likewise, are prescribed: wood is encouraged, plastic discouraged or forbidden altogether. Sign controls often specify lighting sources: indirect illumination (light shining onto the sign) is often required instead of neon tubing, bare lightbulbs, or "backlighting," used in most plastic signs. Some ordinances forbid lighting completely. (Neon, especially, is still held in disfavor in some areas.) Finally, ordinances sometimes require signs to be "compatible" in color and other design qualities with the facade of the building and the overall appearance of the street.

Existing signs frequently do not meet requirements set forth in sign controls. They are too big, for example, or project too far from the building. Typically, sign ordinances permit such "nonconforming" existing signs to remain, but only for a specified period, after which they must be removed. If they need repair before then, or if the business changes owners, they must likewise be removed.

Sign controls offer communities the chance to reduce visual blight. They can also assist in producing both a new visibility and a new viability for historic commercial districts. Yet sign ordinances are not without problems. Sign controls satisfy contemporary ideas of "good taste." But "bad taste" has ample historic precedent. And in any case, tastes change. What is tasteful today may be dated tomorrow. Sign controls can impose a uniformity that falsifies history. Most historic districts contain buildings constructed over a long period of time, by different owners for different purposes; the buildings reflect different architectural styles and personal tastes. By requiring a standard sign "image" in such matters as size, material, typeface and other qualities, sign controls can mute the diversity of historic districts. Such controls can also sacrifice signs of some age and distinction that have not yet come back into fashion.² Neon serves as an instructive example in this regard: once "in," then "out," then "in" again. Unfortunately, a great number of notable signs were lost because sign controls were drafted in many communities when neon was "out." Increasingly, however, communities are enacting ordinances that recognize older and historic signs and permit them to be kept. The National Park Service encourages this trend.

Sign as Icon

Signs often become so important to a community that they are valued long after their role as commercial markers has ceased. They become landmarks, loved because they have been visible at certain street corners—or from many vantage points across the city—for a long time. Such signs are valued for their familiarity, their beauty, their humor, their size, or even their grotesqueness. In these cases, signs transcend their conventional role as vehicles of information, as identifiers of something else. When signs reach this stage, they accumulate rich layers of meaning. They no longer merely advertise, but are valued in and of themselves. They become icons.

Preserving Historic Signs

Historic signs can contribute to the character of buildings and districts. They can also be valued in themselves, quite apart from the buildings to which they may be attached. However, any program to preserve historic signs must recognize the challenges they present. These challenges are not for the most part technical. Sign preservation is more likely to involve aesthetic concerns and to generate community debate. Added to these concerns are several community goals that often appear to conflict: retaining diverse elements from the past, encouraging artistic expression in new signs, zoning for aesthetic concerns, and reconciling business requirements with preservation.

Preserving historic signs is not always easy. But the intrinsic merit of many signs, as well as their contribution to the overall character of a place, make the effort worthwhile. Observing the guidelines given below can help preserve both business and history.



This fading sign was painted in Baltimore in 1931 or 1932. It survives from the campaign to enact the 21st amendment to the United States Constitution, which repealed prohibition. Photo: NPS files.



Signs for Bull Durham Tobacco once covered walls all over the country. Photo: Jack E. Boucher, HABS, NPS.

Retaining Historic Signs

Retain historic signs whenever possible, particularly when they are:

- associated with historic figures, events or places.
- significant as evidence of the history of the product, business or service advertised.
- significant as reflecting the history of the building or the development of the historic district. A sign may be the only indicator of a building's historic use.
- characteristic of a specific historic period, such as gold leaf on glass, neon, or stainless steel lettering.
- integral to the building's design or physical fabric, as when a sign is part of a storefront made of Carrara glass or enamel panels, or when the name of the historic firm or the date are rendered in stone, metal or tile. In such cases, removal can harm the integrity of a historic property's design, or cause significant damage to its materials.
- outstanding examples of the signmaker's art, whether because of their excellent craftsmanship, use of materials, or design.
- local landmarks, that is, signs recognized as popular focal points in a community.
- elements important in defining the character of a district, such as marquees in a theater district.

Maintaining and Repairing Historic Signs

Maintenance of historic signs is essential for their long-term preservation. Sign maintenance involves periodic inspections for evidence of damage and deterioration. Lightbulbs may need replacement. Screws and bolts may be weakened, or missing altogether. Dirt and other debris may be accumulating, introduced by birds or insects, and should be cleaned out. Water may be collecting in or on sign cabinets, threatening electrical connections. The source of water penetration should be identified and sealed. Most of these minor repairs are routine maintenance measures, and do not call for special expertise. All repairs, however, require caution. For example, electricity should be turned off when working around electric signs.

More extensive repairs should be undertaken by professionals. The sign industry is a large and active one. Sign designers, fabricators and skilled craftsmen are located throughout the country. Once in danger of being lost altogether, gold leaf on glass and porcelain enamel are undergoing revivals, and the art of bending neon tubes is now widely practiced. Finding help from qualified sources should not be difficult. Before contracting for work on historic signs, however, owners should check references, and view other projects completed by the same company.

Major repairs may require removal of the sign to a workshop. Since signs are sometimes damaged while the building is undergoing repair, work on the building should be scheduled while the sign is in the shop. (If the sign remains in place while work on the building is in progress, the sign should be protected.)

Repair techniques for specific sign materials are discussed below (see "Repairing Historic Sign Materials"). The overall goal in repairs such as supplying missing letters, replacing broken neon tubing, or splicing in new members for deteriorated sections is to restore a sign that is otherwise whole. Recognize, however, that the apparent age of historic signs is one of their major features; do not "over restore" signs so that all evidence of their age is lost, even though the appearance and form may be recaptured.

Reusing Historic Signs

If a building or business has changed hands, historic signs associated with former enterprises in the building should be reused if possible by:

- keeping the historic sign—unaltered. This is often possible even when the new business is of a different nature from the old. Preferably, the old sign can be left in its historic location; sometimes, however, it may be necessary to move the sign elsewhere on the building to accommodate a new one. Conversely, it may be necessary to relocate new signs to avoid hiding or overwhelming historic ones, or to redesign proposed new signs so that the old ones may remain. (The legitimate advertising needs of current tenants, however, must be recognized.) Keeping the old sign is often a good marketing strategy. It can exploit the recognition value of the old name and play upon the public's fondness for the old sign. The advertising value of an old sign can be immense. This is especially true when the sign is a community landmark.
- relocating the sign to the interior, such as in the lobby or above the bar in a restaurant. This option is less preferable than keeping the sign outside the building, but it does preserve the sign, and leaves open the possibility of putting it back in its historic location.
- modifying the sign for use with the new business. This may not be possible without destroying essential features, but in some cases it can be done by changing details only. In other respects, the sign may be perfectly serviceable as is.

If none of these options is possible, the sign could be donated to a local museum, preservation organization or other group.

Repairing Historic Sign Materials

Porcelain Enamel

Porcelain enamel is among the most durable of materials used in signs.⁶ Made of glass bonded onto metal (usually steel) at high temperatures, it keeps both its high gloss and its colors for decades. Since the surface of the sign is essentially glass, porcelain enamel is virtually maintenance free; dirt can be washed off with soap and water and other glass cleaners.

Porcelain enamel signs can be damaged by direct blows from stones and other sharp objects. If both the enamel surface and the undercoat are scratched, the metal surface can rust at the impact site. Because the bond between glass and metal is so strong, however, the rust does not "travel" behind the glass, and the rust is normally confined to localized areas. The sign edges can also rust if they were never enamelled. To treat the problem, clean the rust off carefully, and touchup the area with cold enamel (a type of epoxy used mostly in jewelry), or with enamel paints.

Dents in porcelain enamel signs should be left alone. Attempting to hammer them out risks further damage.

Goldleaf or Gilding

Goldleaf or gilding is both elegant and durable. These properties made it among the most popular sign materials in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Surface-gilded signs (for example, gilded raised letters or symbols found on the exterior) typically last about 40 years. Damage to these signs occurs from weather and abrasion. Damage to gilded signs on glass normally occurs when the protective coating applied over the gilding is removed by harsh cleaning chemicals or scratched by scrub brushes. The sign can then flake upon subsequent cleanings.

Historic gilded signs can be repaired, typically by regilding damaged areas. An oil size is painted on the surface. The gold leaf is applied when the surface has become sufficiently "tacky." Similarly, historic "reverse on glass" goldleaf signs can be repaired—by experts. A sample of the flaking sign is first taken to determine its composition. Reverse on glass signs use goldleaf ranging from 12 to 23 karats. The gold is alloyed with copper and silver in varying amounts for differences in color. (Surface gilding—on raised letters, picture frames and statehouse domes—uses 23 karat gold. Pure gold, 24 karat, is too soft to use in such applications.) The damaged portions of the sign are then regilded in the same manner as they were done historically: the inside surface of the glass is coated with a gelatin; gold leaves about three inches square are then spread over the area. The new letter or design is then drawn in reverse on the new leaf, and coated with a backing paint (normally a chrome yellow). With the new design thus sealed, the rest of the leaf is removed. The sign is then sealed with a clear, water-resistant varnish.

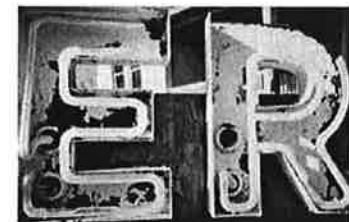
Gilded signs, both surface and reverse on glass, can be cleaned gently with soap and water, using a soft cloth. Additionally, for glass signs, the varnish backing should be replaced every seven years at the latest.

Neon

Neon signs can last 50 years, although 20-25 years is more typical. When a neon sign fails, it is not because the gas has "failed," but because the system surrounding it has broken down. The glass tubes have been broken, for example, thus letting the gas escape, or the electrodes or transformers have failed. If the tube is broken, a new one must be made by a highly skilled "glass bender." After the hot glass tube has been shaped, it must undergo "purification" before being refilled with gas.



Workers prepare the "metal cans" from a sign for re-mounting. Photo: Larry Kanter.



These tubes in this amusement park's sign were broken and the surrounding "metal cans" needed work also. See below. Photo: Stan Fowler.

The glass and the metal electrode at the end of the tube are heated in turns. As these elements become hot, surface impurities burn off into the tube. The resulting vapor is then removed through "evacuation"—the process of creating a vacuum. Only then is the "neon" gas (neon or mercury-argon) added. Neon gives red light, mercury-argon produces blue. Other colors are produced by using colored glass and any of dozens of phosphor coatings inside the tube. Green, for example, can be produced by using mercury-argon in yellow glass. Since color is so important in neon signs, it is vital to determine the original color or colors. A neon studio can accomplish this using a number of specialized techniques.

A failing transformer can cause the neon sign to flicker intensely, and may have to be replaced. Flickering neon can also indicate a problem with the gas pressure inside the tube. The gas may be at too high or too low a pressure. If so, the gas must be repumped.

Repairs to neon signs also include repairs to the surrounding components of the sign. The "metal cans" that often serve as backdrops to the tubing may need cleaning or, in case of rust, scraping and repainting.

As with gilded signs, repair of neon signs is not a matter for amateurs.

New Signs and Historic Buildings

Preserving old signs is one thing. Making new ones is another. Closely related to the preservation of historic signs on historic buildings is the subject of new signs for historic buildings. Determining what new signs are appropriate for historic buildings, however, involves a major paradox: Historic sign practices were not always "sympathetic" to buildings. They were often unsympathetic to the building, or frankly contemptuous of it. Repeating some historic practices, therefore, would definitely not be recommended.

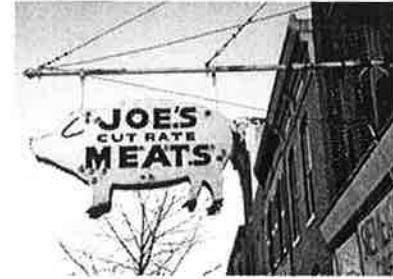
Yet many efforts to control signage lead to bland sameness. For this reason the National Park Service discourages the adoption of local guidelines that are too restrictive, and that effectively dictate uniform signs within commercial districts. Instead, it encourages communities to promote diversity in signs—their sizes, types, colors, lighting, lettering and other qualities. It also encourages business owners to choose signs that reflect their own tastes, values, and personalities. At the same time, tenant sign practices can be stricter than sign ordinances. The National Park Service therefore encourages businesses to fit their sign programs to the building.

The following points should be considered when designing and constructing new signs for historic buildings:

- signs should be viewed as part of an overall graphics system for the building. They do not have to do all the "work" by themselves. The building's form, name and outstanding features, both decorative and functional, also support the advertising function of a sign. Signs should work with the building, rather than against it.
- new signs should respect the size, scale and design of the historic building. Often features or details of the building will suggest a motif for new signs.
- sign placement is important: new signs should not obscure significant features of the historic building. (Signs above a storefront should fit within the historic signboard, for example.)
- new signs should also respect neighboring buildings. They should not shadow or overpower adjacent structures.
- sign materials should be compatible with those of the historic building. Materials characteristic of the building's period and style, used in contemporary designs, can form effective new signs.
- new signs should be attached to the building carefully, both to prevent damage to historic fabric, and to ensure the safety of pedestrians. Fittings should penetrate mortar joints rather than brick, for example, and signloads should be properly calculated and distributed.



Neon fabricators are installing the new tubing in the repaled and remounted cans. Photo: Larry Kanter.



This hanging pig is delightful, even without its neon. Holes show where tubing was attached. It has been a local landmark in Baltimore's Fells Point neighborhood for over 60 years. Photo: NPS files.

Summary and References

Historic signs once allowed buyers and sellers to communicate quickly, using images that were the medium of daily life. Surviving historic signs have not lost their ability to speak. But their message has changed. By communicating names, addresses, prices, products, images and other fragments of daily life, they also bring the past to life.

With halting steps I paced the streets, and passed the sign of "The Crossed Harpoons" —but it looked too expensive and jolly there. . . . Moving on, I at last came to a dim sort of light not far from the docks, and heard a forlorn creaking in the air; and looking up, saw a swinging sign over the door with a white painting upon it, faintly representing a tall straight jet of misty spray, and these words underneath — "The Spouter Inn: —Peter Coffin."

The creaking wooden sign in Moby Dick identifies public lodging. But it also does a great deal more than that. It projects an image. It sets a mood and defines a place. The ability to convey commercial and symbolic messages is a property of all signs, not just those in novels.

Every sign hanging outside a door, standing on a roof, extending over a storefront, or marching across a wall transmits messages from the sign maker to the sign reader. Mixed in with names, addresses, business hours and products are images, personalities, values and beliefs.

NOTES

1. Bill Evans and Andrew Lawson, *Shopfronts*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1981, p. 109, 114.
2. Charles L.H. Wagner, *The Story of Signs: An Outline History of the Sign Arts from Earliest Recorded Times to the Present "Atomic Age"*. Boston: Arthur MacGibbon, 1954, p. 37.
3. Rudi Stern, *Let There Be Neon*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1979, p. 19.
4. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*. Rev. ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977.
5. George H. Kramer, "Preserving Historic Signs in the Commercial Landscape: The Impact of Regulation." (Unpublished Masters Thesis: University of Oregon, 1989), p. 15. This section on sign regulation is heavily indebted to this work. See especially Chapter 2, History of Sign Regulation and Chapter 3, Mechanics of Sign Regulation, pp. 7-60.
6. *Berman v. Parker* involved the condemnation of an older building for an urban renewal project. The decision "ironically would prove to be a major spur to a new wave of local preservation laws...." Christopher J. Duerksen, ed. *A Handbook on Historic Preservation Law*. Washington, D.C.: The Conservation Foundation and The National Center for Preservation Law, 1983, p. 7.
7. A balanced approach to sign controls is offered by Peter H. Phillips, "Sign Controls for Historic Signs," PAS Memo, November 1988. (Published by American Planning Association, Washington, D.C.).
8. See John Tymoski, "Porcelain Enamel: The Sign Industry's Most Durable Material," *Signs of the Times*, December 1990, pp. 6671. For goldleaf, see October 1984 and November 1990 special issues of *Signs of the Times*. An excellent short "course" in neon evaluation is offered in *Neon: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, by Paul R. Davis, Identity, Spring 1991, pp. 5659.

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This publication has been prepared pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, which directs the Secretary of the Interior to develop and make available information concerning historic properties. Technical Preservation Services (TPS), Heritage Preservation Services Division, National Park Service prepares standards, guidelines, and other educational materials on responsible historic preservation treatments for a broad public.

October 1991

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