

Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board

Haint Blue and Fever Yellow: An Anecdotal Account of Blue Porch Ceilings

By
Cindy Kistler

Porch ceilings painted blue: they were once exclusively a southern tradition that can now be found in all parts of the country. Whether the blue color was used to keep spirits away, to discourage insects or just to have that nice open sky feeling all year round, a porch ceiling painted blue is a nice touch.

Victorian homes were often painted in earth tones, colors that reflected those found in the natural environment of the area. Hues, including browns, olives, terra cotta, reds, and yellows were common. Sky blue porch ceilings were very much in line with such schemes. It gave the illusion of blue sky even on dark, grey days.

Blue porch ceilings can be found in the Northeast along the coastline where Victorian and Craftsmen homes are popular and in the Midwest on farm homes, but the practice is thought to have started in South Carolina and Georgia.

In the South, porch ceilings have been painted blue since the 1800s. Some southerners believed that painting the ceiling blue (a color that came to be known as "haint

blue") kept the spirits, or haunts, away. The word haint (according to *MSN Encarta*) refers to a ghost or other phenomenon believed to be supernatural. *Philly.com* (Aug. 22, 2008) says the word can be attributed to

the Gullah/Geechee culture, a mix of African tribes that made up a large part of the slave population once found in the Carolina Low Country from Georgetown, S.C. through the Georgia Sea Islands. Commenting on a piece in *Velociworld* (July 16, 2007), J. Savannah writes, "Haint blue is a BIG part of the Savannah history. It came to Savannah via voodoo beliefs. Many of the slaves painted with haint blue in that time

believing it to resemble water which evil spirits would not pass. The reality of it is that in 1820 in Savannah there was a Yellow Fever epidemic. People did not know how to cure [the disease] or protect themselves and this haint blue was in a way able to protect people living inside. It had one crucial ingredient in its mix: lime. The lime repelled the disease-carrying mosquitoes." Evidently, haint blue played as big a part in Savannah



1820-23: Yellow fever starts on Schuylkill River, PA and spreads
<http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=5330>

history as did the Yellow Fever epidemic...

Haint blue was used not only on porch ceilings, but could be found on window frames and in doorways where its spirit-discouraging effects would be most effective. Haint blue is not one particular color; it is a range of blue hues from true blue, periwinkle and cobalt to aqua and turquoise. The variation was due to the available local pigments and binders of milk, white lead and lime that were used to produce the paint. (The Historic Charleston Foundation has two licensed paint collections through Duron Paints featuring a color that represents their interpretation of haint blue, a deep shade of turquoise called "Gullah Blue").

There is no scientific proof that the color blue has any repellent properties; however, the lime content in the paint mixture is a known insect repellent, which might explain why insects might stay away. Because milk-based paints had a tendency to fade rather quickly, most ceilings were repainted frequently. This resulted in a fresh new coat of insect repellent with every paint job. Still, some people believed that the color itself would fool bugs into thinking it was the sky, which was obviously not a viable option for nest building.

We may never know whether haint blue porches and window frames really limited supernatural travel or kept disease-ridden mosquitoes away. The blue ceilings certainly look fine, no matter their other qualities. It would be interesting, though, to see the Yellow Fever statistics from 1820 Savannah, or perhaps a bar graph entitled: "Haint versus Non-Haint: a Feverish Contrast." Or something like that.

Foward Ho!

By Neil Poulsen

The proposed Painter's Woods district has passed all hurdles: local, State and Federal. On May 28, 2009 the Painter's Woods Historic District was approved and formally listed by the National Parks Service.

Consider the scene: the proposed Painter's Woods Historic District was being presented to the State Advisory Committee for Historic Preservation (SACHP) for the first time. But, the Committee had a few questions. How was the new proposed Painter's Woods District different from the existing Clark Historic District? Why was the shape of Painter's Woods a little irregular? In particular, shouldn't a few of the Clark District properties have been included instead

in Painter's Woods? Decision: best to adjourn and consider these questions in detail.

During Painter's Woods' second presentation to the SACHP, we were ready! You bet the two districts were different. In fact, there were cultural, economic, transportation, historic, and architectural differences. Together, Historic Preservation Consultant Kim



F.J. Miller House in the new Painter's Woods District

Fitzgerald and Forest Grove historian Mary Jo Morelli were able to successfully make the case. Ms. Fitzgerald had expanded the already impressive research she had compiled in preparing the proposed Painter's Woods detailed application. Ms. Morelli, a Painter's Woods district resident, impressed the Committee with her knowledge and addressed specific questions about the area. As icing on the cake, we showed the SACHP a life-sized photograph of a flag carried by Mr. Painter himself. Decision: Proposed Painter's Woods Historic District Approved!

The next step was to forward the application on to the National Parks Service. Because of all the time and hard work put into this application, the chance that the district would be approved seemed pretty high. And, on May 28, 2009 the Painter's Woods Historic District was approved and formally listed by the National Parks Service.

But, we're not done yet! Forest Grove's colorful heritage enables to us to prepare yet a third

application. The proposed Walker-Naylor's National Historic District includes properties that are north and west of the downtown area. How is this newest district progressing? Quite well, considering that an initial review indicates the number of contributing properties in the area easily exceeds the 50% minimum. Onward and forward!



Stewart History Collection to Finally See the Light

By Claude Romig

A new Adult Services Librarian with the unusual, but enchanting, name of Ismoon Maria Hunter-Morton has been hired to process and catalog the Eric Stewart History Collection for the Forest Grove City Library. Ms. Hunter-Morton, a native Oregonian, has worked as a professional librarian for 2½ years. She graduated Portland State University in 2001 and since then has earned two master's degrees, one in Library & Information Science and another in History.

Ismoon has been in the collection processing business for a long time. At the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee she processed collections ranging from airplane blueprints to governor's committee documents. As a Special Collections library intern, she worked to highlight underserved collections such as the women's history and lesbian/gay history compilations through website creation and in-house instruction to classroom groups.

Processing the Eric G. Stewart archives and making them available to public researchers in the Stewart History Room has turned out to be a huge undertaking. The collection consists of twenty or so boxes containing photographs, historical maps, slides, and paper documents. The collection comes to us mainly unorganized and unsorted.

Ismoon may be able to archivally process the slides to preserve them over time, due to the deterioration and discoloration of film over time. She was trained

to do this at the PCC slide library, where slides are removed from their plastic covers, pressed between archival glass, taped around the edges with metallic preservation tape, and inserted into special casing. This will take many hours of processing time, so it is a long-term goal, which may require the help of the volunteer team.

Some of the items that Ismoon wishes she could have to help her with the project are two new, internet ready computers; a desktop scanner/copier/printer combo for scanning historical materials, a desk for the history room volunteer (who will provide reference and reading room security), and a large light box and drawers for the numerous slide collection.

Says Ismoon, "Eventually, the Stewart History Room will contain Eric's archives, our collection of rare and historical books and maps, our collection of microfilmed Forest Grove News Times from 1897-present, and the microfilm reader (with a printer that works consistently)." The Stewart History Room will serve as the institutional archives for the library. The Library will consider donations of Forest Grove historical materials, including rural surrounding areas, Banks, and Cornelius, working in conjunction with other local history organizations to find the best fit for the materials.

It has been a long time coming. We all wish Ismoon the best of luck!

The Historic Landmarks Board is Looking for a Few Good Members

Is your volunteer spirit alive and well? Would you like to play a part (and have a say) in your city's government? Check us out on the web at:

<http://www.forestgrove-or.gov/city-government/historic-landmarks-board.html>

Then, contact James Reitz at 503-992-3233, or jreitz@forestgrove-or.gov. Thanks for your help!

The Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board Grant Program

Is your house on our local register? If it is, did you know that your house is eligible for restoration / rehabilitation grant funding? The Historic Landmarks Board has funds to help you with your projects. If you are planning any exterior restoration work such as restoring architectural features or if you have structural work to do such a foundation repair, we'd love to help. We fund projects up to 50% of the cost of the job per grant. Come see us! We can also help you find historically appropriate solutions to any problems you may have.

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Preserving Forest Grove is a quarterly newsletter published by the Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board to help fulfill its duty of public education regarding the preservation of cultural resources. If you would like to be on the mailing list, please call James Reitz at 503-992-3233, or jreitz@forestgrove-or.gov.

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Stewart History Collection Begins to See the Light

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The activity that is the subject of this publication has been financed in part with federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, as provided through the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office. However, the contents and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior, nor does the mention of any trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the U.S. Department of the Interior.