



Ask the Expert – “Doors”

Q: *My house was built around 1830 – 1850, and the previous owners replaced many of the interior doors with 20th century, hollow core doors. We’d like to replace them with something more appropriate. Is there a specific style or design of doors for this period?*

A: Let’s start with some givens: Doors should be wooden and solid wood. That said, the good news is that doors built between 1750 and 1940 are almost universally made with frame-and-panel construction producing the common and easily recognizable panel door. It gets its name from the vertical panels that seem to float between flat cross and side pieces (known as stiles and rails), that hold the panels in place. There are usually four to six panels per door. The panels can be flat, however, they more often are beveled on all sides to create what’s called raised paneling. This creates an illusion that the door is thicker than it actually is. Different styles treat the bevels (or molding profiles) slightly differently, and with different degrees of decoration.

In our area, a house (and its doors) could likely have belonged to any of four styles: late Federal; Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, or simple vernacular, employing different arrangements and proportions of the panels. Door panel and molding profiles would typically match those of a room’s woodwork; look first for a clue there, i.e., less elaborate woodwork would call for less elaborate molding treatment. The late Federal period has a smaller, more intricate molding around the panels. Greek Revival marked a gradual shift in style, often using one or two large vertical panels, and with more angular moldings. The two large panels could have smaller panels above and below, or none. In brief, not knowing your house’s specific style, a panel door having anywhere from two to six panels would feel right at home. Regardless of era or style, utility doors (basement, attic, storage closets) were often board and batten, with clinched nailing.

If building/buying a new door, choose eastern white pine or poplar. You also can also try salvage at “Significant Elements” in Ithaca or other online source.