Chapter 4

Signs, Awnings, and Lighting

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Design Guidelines for the
Great Falls National Historic Landmark District

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Chapter 4

Signs, Awnings, and Lighting

Introduction

Signs, awnings, and lighting are design elements that are applied to the exterior of new and historic buildings. They are usually considered less-than-permanent fixtures when installed, but tend to accrete on a given building so that signs, light fixtures, and awnings from several improvement campaigns may be on a building at the same time.

Signs, awnings, and some light fixtures are elements that are intended to draw attention to the buildings to which they are affixed. As they compete for the attention of passersby, their aggregate effect upon a streetscape can be overwhelming. Their design, selection, and installation should be carefully considered so that the restrained buildings of the Great Falls Historic District (GFH District) are not overwhelmed by the cumulative effect of their presence. Unlike other elements that have been discussed thus far, the design of signs, awnings, and lighting must take into consideration their effect in both day and night lighting conditions.

Design guidelines for signage, awnings, and light fixtures apply to projects involving rehabilitation, restoration, and new construction and additions.

Signs

Signage has a critical effect, positive or negative, on the character of historic districts and their commercial streetscapes. Inappropriately designed and located signs overwhelm buildings, obscure historic fabric, and detract from the character of the street. Conversely, well designed, appropriately located signs can preserve and highlight historic fabric and unify a commercial street while serving to identify and promote effectively the businesses housed within individual shops.

Signs are first and foremost a means of advertising, of attracting patronage. They are intended to capture the attention of the passerby, and in consequence rely on the innovation and creativity of the designer. The potential variety, vitality, and quality that can be achieved from freedom of design can be more valuable than unduly heavy restrictions that dictate conformity. The most successful signage guidelines will be those that permit the greatest design flexibility while prohibiting those elements which are indisputable detriments to the character of the streetscape and the district.

Design Guidelines for the
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The most important principle in establishing and reinforcing the character of the commercial streetscape is to consider the entire facade of a building as the "sign." For commercial shop owners, the entire elevation of the storefront was conceived to attract shoppers—signage, windows displaying merchandise, and architectural character. Consequently, the sign is an integral part of the building facade in both design and function, and the entire building facade should be considered when designing signage, and not just the sign itself. New signage should always be designed to complement and be subsidiary to the character of the building facade. Buildings whose facades are carefully considered and well maintained do not require the tremendously over-scaled signs that plague many modern streets today. A range of architectural storefronts within the GFH District can be a principal form of advertising for the small businesses located there.

Existing historic signs are important resources within the GFH District. Several signs, now "ghost signs," were painted directly on the masonry to advertise the products or location of historic businesses. Plaques were attached to the walls of some buildings, with the names of the original founders of the companies that built the building. Such historic signs and plaques should be left in place and considered in new designs. Work that takes place around historic signs and plaques should be performed in a manner that protects them. Restoration should be carried out by a qualified restoration artisan and should be directed towards the preservation of the historic character of these signs, stressing preservation of historic fabric over renewal of the sign.

Article IX, Sign Regulations of the Zoning and Land Development Ordinance of the City of Paterson, prohibits some historic sign types that would otherwise be considered appropriate within the GFH district, most notably neon signs and signs painted directly on the surface or facing material of buildings. Further, the Ordinance limits sign area to 10% of the area of the building facade, and allows only one sign per business per street frontage. Further, the gross area of window signs may not exceed 30% of the gross window area of the facade or 10% of the entire facade, whichever is less. The following guidelines regarding signage are written to conform with the existing zoning code. While other types and sizes of signs may, in fact, be appropriate for the GFH District, guidelines for these cannot be included until such time as the zoning code is revised.

*Historic precedents exist for several types of signs within the GFH District.*
Approved

✓ A sign must be consistent and compatible in terms of its style, scale, absolute size, material, texture, color, type face, location, and mounting material, and should be integrated into the architectural design of the building on which it is located.

✓ One over-scaled sign on a commercial street will reduce the visual quality of the streetscape and may foster competition elsewhere. Large-scale signs may be appropriate to the character and scale of the building on which they are to be located or there may be historic precedent and documentation sufficient to determine the appropriateness of a large sign for a par-

Not Approved

✗ Signs that obscure significant architectural features of any historic building are not approved.

✗ Signs that are of an earlier style than the building on which they appear are not approved.

✗ Back-lit fluorescent signs are not approved. Internally-lit plastic signs are not approved for buildings in the district. Section 901.2 of the City of Paterson Zoning Ordinance lists further materials and types of signage which are not permitted within the district.

✗ Signs should not be suspended from balconies or gables.

✗ Murals on primary facades are not approved.

An appropriately-scaled sign on the secondary facade of the Franklin Mill.
particular facade. Both absolute size and size relative to the size of the building to which it is mounted are critical considerations in designing a sign. Generally, within the GFH District, the area of individual signs should be kept below 5% of a building’s facade area, or below 120 square feet, whichever is less.

✓ Signs within the GFH District must be designed to complement the overall appearance of a building, drawing attention to the businesses inside, but not away from the building itself.

"Approved" sign locations and types
1. Small flush sign
2. Sign within arch over door
3. Cornice sign
4. Simple awning lettering
5. Large flush sign
6. Small, permanent, painted lettering on glass.

"Not Approved" sign locations and types
1. Projecting sign that obstructs views or sidewalks
2. Sign covering architectural features
3. Free-standing sidewalk sign
4. Temporary signs cluttering storefront
5. Rooftop sign
6. Banner sign
The sign on the left fits within the infill panel above the door. The sign on the right covers the wood doors, a significant architectural feature.

● Signs must be fastened to buildings in a manner that does not harm the historic fabric of the building. The Historic Preservation Commission will review the methods used to fasten signs to historic buildings within the GFH District.
Historic signs and advertising painted on the sides of buildings must be retained.

Wood, metal, and fiberglass signs are recommended.

Any appropriate period sign that reflects historical authenticity of design, materials, and placement for the architectural style it serves is recommended, regardless of limitations imposed upon contemporary signage.

This sign is appropriate to the scale and character of this 20th-century building. Although affixed to the roof and projecting, it is directed towards pedestrians and immediate vehicular traffic, and does not obstruct views or the sidewalk.
Approved cont'd...

☐ Signs must not project from the building to the extent that they are a visual obstruction or physical hazard to pedestrian or vehicular traffic. Similarly, new signs must not interfere with a neighboring store by obscuring its signs or architectural features.

☐ Signs at the storefront level should be oriented primarily to pedestrians and should thus be sized and designed for pedestrian vision. For projecting signs at pedestrian level, a maximum projection of 4'-0", or half the width of the sidewalk, from the building is recommended, whichever is less. 8'-0" minimum clearance from the sidewalk is required.

☐ There is a degree of flexibility with regard to the graphic design of signs. Generally, no more than four colors and three different type faces should be employed in the design of any one sign, including any logos. Lettering may be either vertical or horizontal but not both.

☐ Concealed incandescent lighting for signage is recommended in the GFH District.

☐ Signs should be proportional either to the size of the space that they occupy, or to the size of the facade on which they are suspended. That is, a sign on a pilaster should be primarily vertical; a sign on a fascia should be horizontal.

☐ The design and construction of signs, especially more permanent signs, should be

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*Historic signs painted on masonry, should be left intact, but will fade & wear off eventually.*
Approved cont'd...

executed by a professional.

☑ The colors used on a sign should relate to the colors of the building on which it is mounted.

☑ The size of individual signs, the total area of signs, and the font size of lettering on a sign should all be proportional to the size of a building's facade.

☑ Signs should be indirectly lit with an invisible light source. Sign lighting should not cause glare.

☑ Signs should be mounted in such a way that the method of installation is concealed and their position on the building will not interfere with, or obscure, window and door openings or architectural features.

☑ Information on signs may include the name of the store or business, the address, the name of the proprietor, the goods or services available, and possibly illustrations of merchandise.

![Image of building facade]

*Signs should not be placed randomly on building facades.*
Awnings

Awnings are effective devices for reducing the cooling load in summer months, and reducing glare year round. Awnings can also be part of an overall signage scheme for a commercial building.

Approved

✓ Awnings must be proportional to the size of the window and the facade that they occupy.

✓ The placement of awnings on facades must leave revealed and undamaged the architectural elements of historic buildings, including where the awning and frame are fastened to the building. On masonry buildings, fasteners should be installed in masonry joints, and not into masonry. Where masonry joints are too thin to accommodate fasteners, they should be installed in the center of individual bricks, to allow the hole to be patched if the awning is removed later.

✓ The top of an awning must conform to the top of the opening and be contained within it.

✓ The bottom of first-floor awning valances should be no lower than 7 feet above the sidewalk.

✓ Awnings must be sloped, and as simple as possible in design so as not to detract from the architectural features of the building.

✓ Awnings must be solid or striped, and opaque.

Not Approved

✗ Umbrella, “bubble,” and waterfall awnings are not approved within the GFH District.

“Waterfall” awnings are not approved in the GFH District.

✗ Metal window awnings are not approved within the GFH District. (There are precedents within the district for metal awning-type roofs, but only on certain 20th-century buildings and at loading docks on secondary facades.)
Approved cont'd...

☑ The color chosen for an awning should relate to the colors of the building on which it is mounted.

☑ Awnings may be illuminated from within or without, but should not emit a translucent glow.

☑ Awnings should be opaque vinyl or fabric.

☑ Awnings will last longer if they are properly maintained. Keeping them clean will contribute to their durability as well as repairing tears and holes immediately.

Not Approved cont'd...

☒ Awnings must not be placed in such a way that they obscure any architectural features of a structure, such as doors, windows, trim, cornices, belt courses, and roof lines.

☒ New awnings must not interfere with existing signs on a building.

☒ Translucent awnings that glow when illuminated are not approved.

Not Recommended

☒ Awnings must not be built in the panel between the two piers. Note also the residential scale and style of the two light fixtures, not recommended for historic mill buildings.
Lighting

✓ Light fixtures should be appropriate to the style of the building to which they are attached. Small-scale residential buildings should have residential scale and style light fixtures. Historic mill buildings should have larger and more industrial-type fixtures. Given the utilitarian nature of the buildings and the district, understated fixtures are preferable to overly elaborate fixtures.

✓ The use of reproduction light fixtures must be very carefully considered. While reproduction fixtures need not replicate the actual historic fixture that was once on a building, they should be similar in scale, material, elaboration, and general character to the fixture that is documented as having once been on the building.

✓ Simple, modern light fixtures are appropriate within the GFH District.

Security lighting fixtures should not be mounted to buildings.