



**ITS**  
NUMBER 9

**Interpreting  
The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation**

**Subject: Inappropriate Porch Alterations**

- Applicable Standards:**
2. Retention of Historic Character
  5. Preservation of Distinctive Features, Finishes and Craftsmanship
  6. Repair/Replacement of Deteriorated or Missing Features Based on Evidence

**Issue:** A porch with its balustrade serves as both a decorative and practical feature that can be very important in defining the character of a historic building. However, it is sometimes necessary to alter or replace balustrades during rehabilitation. In some cases a lack of maintenance may have led to irreparable deterioration of this historic feature. In others, railings may be altered or replaced to meet building code requirements. During rehabilitation deteriorated or balustrades that do not meet code requirements, are frequently replaced with new features that completely alter the historic character of the building, and may sometimes also impact the district in which the structure is located.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation clearly address this type of alteration. First, Standard 2 requires that the historic character of the property be preserved, specifically prohibiting the alteration of features that distinguish a property. Standard 5 reiterates this point by requiring that distinctive features and finishes be retained and preserved. Finally, Standard 6 specifically addresses deteriorated features stating that these features should be repaired rather than replaced; however, "Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence."

**Application 1** (*Incompatible treatment*): A late-19th century boarding house was rehabilitated for use as a bed and breakfast. Prior to rehabilitation the structure had a very simple porch balustrade with rectangular vertical posts, or balusters. Historic photographs provided documentary evidence that the balustrade had always had this appearance. During rehabilitation the balustrade was replaced with one completely different in design - sawn balusters with ornate cutout shapes. The replacement gives a historically inappropriate look to the building, and an appearance it never had. To meet the Standards the owner replaced the new balustrade with one that matched the simple historic design.



*Before rehabilitation - simple historical balustrade.*



*After rehabilitation - inappropriate replacement balustrade.*

**Application 2** (*Incompatible treatment*): A Colonial Revival-style apartment building, circa 1920, was rehabilitated for continued multifamily use. The front of the building was distinguished by two porches on the second story with low balustrades consisting of decorative, heavy turned balusters. As part of the rehabilitation, these balustrades, along with a non-original metal railing on the third floor level, were removed because their height did not comply with local building code requirements. They were replaced with taller balustrades with straight, narrow, rectangular balusters that did not replicate the visual qualities of the decorative historic balustrade and, therefore, resulted in dramatically altering the character of the building. These new, inappropriate balustrades were also added to the first floor porch.

The replacement balustrades are not only incompatible with the historic building itself, but they are also not in keeping with the historic district in which the building is located. Many similar apartment buildings in the district feature such porches which, with their rhythm, harmonious scale, size, and proportion, add a distinctive element to the district. Incompatible changes such as these new balustrades can cumulatively and negatively impact the overall character of a historic district.



*Before rehabilitation.*



*After rehabilitation.*

A more appropriate solution for meeting the safety requirements might have been to raise the existing second story balustrade, and modify the bottom of the railing to reduce the size of the opening. Another approach might have been to add a simple and inconspicuous pipe rail above the historic balustrade to meet the height requirements. From a distance this would not have been visible, and would have preserved the historic character.

There was no documentary evidence that there had ever been balustrades at the first and third floor levels. To satisfy both the Standards and code requirements it would have been preferable had the owner retained the modern metal railing that already existed on the third floor, and added a similarly simple railing on the first floor that was compatible with the building's historic character.

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These bulletins are issued to explain preservation project decisions made by the U.S. Department of the Interior. The resulting determinations, based on the [Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation](#), are not necessarily applicable beyond the unique facts and circumstances of each particular case.