



CITY OF PORTSMOUTH

Historic District Commission

Guidelines for Signs & Awnings



Signs can be very playful, decorative objects that can enhance a building façade as well as provide a strong visual identity to attract patrons to a business.

These *Guidelines* were developed in conjunction with the City of Portsmouth's Historic District Commission (HDC) and the Planning Department. Please review this information during the early stages of planning a project. Familiarity with this material can assist in moving a project quickly through the approval process, saving applicants both time and money.

In its review, the HDC considers a property's classification, recommending the greatest historic authenticity at focal buildings, with more flexibility at contributing structures, and the most at non-contributing properties. The HDC Staff in the Planning Department is available to provide informal informational meetings with potential applicants who are considering improvements to their properties.

Additional *Guidelines* addressing other historic building topics are available at City Hall and on the Commission's website at www.planportsmouth.com/historicdistrictcommission. For more information, to clarify whether a proposed project requires HDC review, or to obtain permit applications, please call the Planning Department at (603) 610-7216.

SIGNS & AWNINGS

A well designed and placed sign or awning can attract potential customers and contribute to a streetscape. By contrast, a confused, poorly designed or placed sign or awning can overwhelm a building, detract from the streetscape and/or damage the historic building materials or finishes. A well designed sign or awning can:

- Identify the unique qualities of a business
- Provide variety and vitality to the streetscape
- Create a visual connection between the building and the surrounding Historic District

The majority of signs in Downtown Portsmouth are attached to building walls or hung from projecting brackets. Most awnings are retractable and located at commercial storefronts, protecting pedestrians from the weather and display windows from the sun's rays. New signs and/or awnings can use features similar to historic ones, both enhancing a building's character and conveying desired information to potential customers.



Consistent signs and awnings along this row of shops provides a visual separation between the storefronts and offices above.

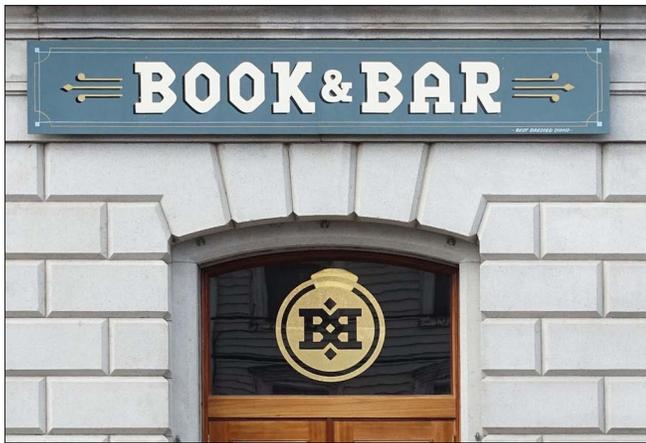
INFORMATION FOR NEW BUSINESSES

If considering opening a new business in Portsmouth, City representatives are available to discuss zoning, construction and/or other requirements applicable to a specific project. Please contact the HDC at (603) 610-7216 for more information.

TYPES OF SIGNS IN THE PORTSMOUTH

Because most commercial buildings in the Portsmouth Historic District are constructed on or near the property line, the overwhelming majority of signs are either wall mounted or suspended from a bracket. The choice of sign type is based largely upon a building's architectural features and level of visibility. In rare locations where a building is set back from the sidewalk, a freestanding sign can be installed if permitted by the City of Portsmouth Zoning Ordinance.

The following illustrations are intended to provide general examples of sign types that can be found within the context of the Portsmouth Historic District, but do not represent all sign types permitted under the Zoning Code. The HDC encourages the use of a well designed, innovative sign that is fabricated from materials that promote the business and are sensitive to the historic context of Portsmouth. Furthermore, the HDC encourages the use of three-dimensional or projecting elements at new signs.



This business has a wall sign as well as a its logo in a gold leaf sign in the transom window.

A **Wall Sign** is a single-sided sign mounted parallel and fastened to a building wall. A wall sign can be made from a variety of materials to suit the unique character of both the business and the building onto which it is applied. A wall sign can be made from a variety of materials, and project up to 12-inches from the wall surface. Signs that extend more than 12-inches are known as projecting signs. (Refer to *Projecting Signs*, page 11-3.)



When installing pin-mounted signs in masonry, fasteners should be installed in mortar joints rather than in the face of brick or stone units whenever possible.

A **Pin Mounted Sign** is composed of individual letters or a logo mounted flat against or slightly protruding from a building wall. Care should be taken to minimize damage to the wall surface during installation, particularly at a stone or brick surface.



Small-scale signs are typically appropriate for offices. In buildings with multiple professionals, a directory sign, with small, matching nameplates, allows for individual identity with a cohesive visual presence.

A **Directory Sign** can be either freestanding or attached to a building and is often used for a multi-tenant building. A directory includes information about several businesses on a single larger sign, with an identifying building address and/or building name. For a unified appearance, individual nameplates on the sign should match each other in size, materials, colors, letter size, case and style.



This freestanding directory sign serves two different law firms. Even though the specific design characteristics vary, both signs have similar shapes, text, colors and hanging brackets, allowing a visually cohesive result.

A **Freestanding Sign** is not attached to a building. It can include information on one or both sides and often is located in a landscaped planting bed. The height and location of a freestanding sign is regulated by the City of Portsmouth Zoning Ordinance.

A **Projecting Sign** is generally two-sided and suspended from an iron or metal bracket, mounted perpendicular to the face of the building wall.



Projecting signs can be fabricated in a variety of shapes. The curved bracket in this example visually reinforces the round sign form. The dimensional gold colored logo and lettering catch the light, providing a good contrast with the black background.

A **Sandwich Board Sign** is a temporary, movable sign of A-Frame construction that is placed on the sidewalk immediately in front of the advertised business.



A sandwich board sign can be used to alert potential customers to special events, such as a sale or changing entertainment, as well as announce daily restaurant specials. This example has a wood frame and chalkboard, which is more appropriate to the historic context of Portsmouth than a plastic sign.



Menu boxes have operable glass doors that facilitate the changing of messages. They are typically used for the display of restaurant menus, daily specials and to announce changing entertainment. The light above in this example allows the sign to be read after sunset.

A **Menu Box** is generally made of wood or metal, with a clear glass, operable door to facilitate replacement of a menu or announce changing entertainment.



The entrance door includes a gold leaf sign with the restaurant name. The frosted applique shields direct view of diners while the majority of the glass remains clear.

A **Window Sign** is applied to the interior of window or door glazing. A sign that is attached to the glazing is generally painted, vinyl appliqué or etched glass. A related option is stained glass. **A window sign that is attached to the exterior or interior of the glazing is subject to HDC review.** To allow potential customers and patrons to see the merchandise being offered for sale by a merchant, the City Code also establishes the maximum allowable area of the glass that can be covered by a window sign. (Refer to *Non-Retail Storefronts, Guidelines for Commercial Development & Storefronts*, page 12-12)



The business name is included on the awning valance with the street number centered over the entrance door.

An **Awning Sign** is a sign printed on an awning, most appropriately along the valance or skirt.

HISTORIC SIGNS

Historic signs are often an architectural feature that reflects the original owner and/or a prior use of a building. Although an abandoned sign from a recent tenant should be promptly removed, the HDC encourages retention of historic signs. Retaining historic signs does not reduce the amount of sign area or quantity allowable for a current occupant.





The wave sign and fish are both sculptural motifs that relate to the seafood restaurant.

SIGN SIZE & SHAPE

Much of Portsmouth's commercial activity is located in the center of the City, enjoyed and frequented by residents and visitors who are generally walking along sidewalks, or possibly travelling by bicycle or slow-moving vehicles. The City of Portsmouth Zoning Code establishes sign regulations including the maximum sign size and the number of allowable signs; however, the HDC encourages business owners to consider the appropriateness of a sign's size and placement relative to business type and a building's design and character. In general, the HDC recommends the following guidelines when considering the appropriateness and size of a proposed sign:

- A sign should be compatible to the scale of the building, adjacent buildings, the streetscape and adjacent signs
- A small-scale sign is appropriate to a smaller scale building or a professional office, while a larger scaled sign is more appropriate for a wider vehicular street
- Small-scale signs are appropriate to a building requiring several signs and they can often can be grouped in a single directory sign for a unified appearance
- A well-designed small sign can have more of an impact than a larger sign, particularly along a commercial street with high pedestrian traffic

Some of the most innovative and attention-getting signs in Portsmouth have an unusual shape or a three dimensional element. This can be as simple as a routed wood sign, or an element that is three dimensional and sculptural in quality.

SIGN MATERIAL

Historically, signs were made of wood, either attached directly to a building or suspended from metal brackets under a balcony, gallery or roof overhang. As technology advanced and building styles changed, a wider range of materials was used. These included bronze, cast iron, stainless steel, etched or painted glass, leaded glass, gold leaf, tile and terrazzo. Each of these materials was popular during a particular time period and might not be appropriate at all building locations.

Some materials may no longer be practical for sign installation due to limited availability or expense. When using modern materials, care should be taken to select those that offer improved performance, while replicating the appearance of traditional materials. Some modern materials such as plywood, urethane board and medium density overlay (MDO) board may replicate the appearance of a traditional wood sign but warp or split over time.

In addition to materials that appear historic, innovative designs and alternate sign materials that are appropriate to a building's style and sign location are welcome. However, the use of neon, plastic, Plexiglas or glossy coatings are not recommended, and are generally not appropriate in the Historic District.



The use of metal for the fabrication allows the possibility of very sculptural signs. In this example, the pair of figures welcome potential customers from both directions, while the routed sign board provides the business name and highlights items offered for sale.



The restaurant reused the frame from the former bank, saving an important architectural feature. Indirect lighting is provided by a gooseneck light at each side.

SIGN LOCATION

In addition to considering a building's type, style and design when locating a sign, in general:

- A sign should not be installed in a location that can damage, conceal or obstruct an important architectural feature or detail
- A sign for a 1st floor business should be located below the 2nd floor window sills
- No sign or sign support should be located on a parapet or roof, or extend above or over a roof cornice

SIGN ILLUMINATION

In many instances, available ambient street or storefront display window lighting can satisfactorily illuminate a sign; this is preferred to the installation of additional lighting. In a case where additional illumination is needed, lighting should be sensitively selected. If the light is to be visible, it should be selected and installed to be in keeping with the character of the storefront and building as a whole. It is possible to install very small, discrete lighting such that the fixture is not a significant design feature.

Whichever type of lighting is selected, it should be located to provide the desired effect, minimize glare for pedestrians and on the sign surface, and make the sign easy to read. In selecting lighting for signs and awnings, the following should be considered:

- Sign lighting should be white and steady – Colored, pulsing or vibrating lights are not appropriate
- External sign lights should be close to the sign and focused on the sign surface and the light source shielded from direct view by a louver, baffle or cowl to minimize spillover, glare or up-lighting into the night sky
- Glossy, highly reflective and bright sign surfaces can increase glare
- The appearance of the light fixture should be minimized if it is not a design element
- Lighting that is a design element and meant to be seen should be selected and installed in a manner that is in keeping with the building's character
- All exposed wiring, conduit and/or junction boxes should be concealed or painted to match the attachment surface

Refer to the City of Portsmouth Zoning Code for additional lighting requirements, including hours of illumination.



The storefront of these shops is visually separated from the upper portion of the building by a storefront cornice. Projecting signs for each of the businesses are suspended from brackets located below the second floor windowsills. A series of gooseneck lights extend above all of the storefronts to provide sidewalk illumination.



Awnings are used as a principal form of signage for these businesses on Market Square.

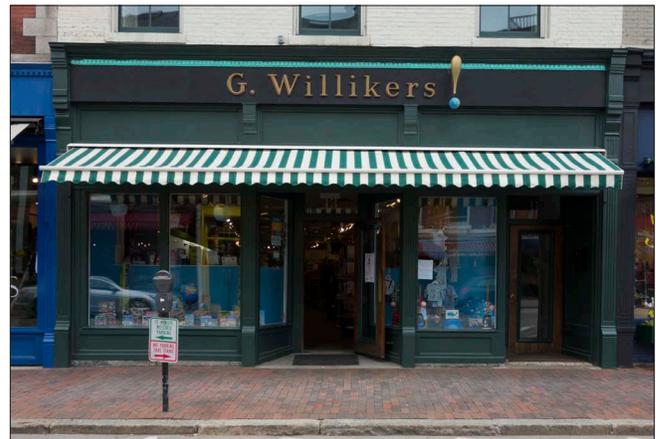
AWNINGS

Awnings are a historically popular means of sheltering pedestrians, advertising a business and protecting window merchandise from sun damage. Multiple awnings along a streetscape can provide a sense of scale and separation of the storefront from upper building stories. If considering installing an awning, the HDC recommends that awnings:

- Slope, projecting a minimum of 5- to 6-feet at a continuous angle away from the face of the building
- Terminate at a skirt or valance that is 6- to 8-inches in height with a straight or scalloped edge
- Fit over individual window or door bays, without spanning over masonry piers
- Retract rather than be fixed on a rigid frame
- Are open on the sides rather than closed
- Are fabricated of a material that has a cloth-like appearance rather than a glossy or reflective material – Material can be a solid color or patterned
- Are high enough to provide safe passage by pedestrians below
- Are free of signs or graphics, and if signs or graphics are included, they are located only on the valance

TENT ENCLOSURES

The use of temporary tent enclosures is typically associated with extending the outdoor dining season at restaurants. These tent enclosures are typically largely plastic. Their installation typically obscures a portion of a building and tend to be visually incompatible with the streetscape. As an alternative, the use of sun umbrellas and movable heaters can be considered. If enclosures are installed, the installation process should minimize damage to building surfaces and must comply with all zoning requirements.



The green and white striped awning complements the green color of the storefront.

CANOPY

A canopy is a protective roof structure that covers a door opening, and is more permanent than an awning. Canopies are not appropriate at all building types or styles.





The contrasting background colors for this sign highlight the business name, while the secondary information on the red background recedes into the background.

SIGN & AWNING COLOR & LEGIBILITY

Contrast in color and reflectivity between a logo or lettering and a background color can greatly increase the overall legibility of a sign. In many instances, limiting the number of colors to those necessary to convey the information increases legibility and effectiveness.

Similar to selecting a color, when considering letter style for a sign or awning, a business owner must balance the need to make it legible, convey the business identity or logo, and complement the historic character of the building and streetscape. An excessive amount of text, highly stylized type styles, or text that is too small, can overwhelm a viewer and render the business' message ineffective or illegible. Business owners are encouraged to utilize projecting or three dimensional lettering, logos and colors that complement their particular property and business identity, to provide a clear message to attract potential customers.



There is good contrast between the sign background and the gold text and logo. In addition, the gold color is highly reflective, increasing its visibility.



Numerous holes have been drilled into the face of the granite and several fasteners still remain. Existing holes should be reused for future signs, and abandoned holes should be filled and the stone surface cleaned. (Refer to *Guidelines for Masonry & Stucco*.)

MOUNTING SIGNS & AWNINGS

Care should be taken to minimize the damage to historic materials in mounting a wall sign or awning. This includes reusing hardware or brackets from a previous sign or awning, and/or attaching required hardware and/or brackets at previous attachment locations. If not reusing existing hardware, all abandoned hardware should be removed, particularly fasteners that can rust and damage building materials. In addition, all holes should be patched to match the adjacent surface. (Refer to *Guidelines for Masonry & Stucco* and *Guidelines for Exterior Woodwork*.) When installing a new sign or awning, select a mounting location that can be patched easily if the sign or awning is relocated or removed. Preferably, all anchors and fasteners should be located in mortar joints rather than mounted directly into a brick or stone face.

When installing signs, such as a wall-mounted sign, a business owner is encouraged to recess fasteners and patch the fastener opening to match the sign for a more finished appearance, unless the fasteners are part of the overall design. It is further recommended that brackets, chains and mounting hardware used in hanging a projecting sign be painted black to minimize their visibility, and allow the focus to be on the sign itself.



A sign's design can be a reflection of the business and convey a positive image to potential customers or patrons.

HDC CRITERIA FOR SIGN & AWNING REVIEW

The type, size and number of signs permitted at a property in the City of Portsmouth is regulated by the Zoning Ordinance. The appropriateness of a particular sign for a business will vary depending on whether the property is located in a primarily residential or non-residential area, its amount of street frontage and if it fronts on one or more streets. Most properties are limited to a single sign, unless it is a corner property at which two signs may be permitted.

HDC review of signs and awnings is limited to signs at properties within the bounds of the Historic District that do not meet the requirements of the Zoning Code. To assist business owners in the design of proposed signs and awnings, the HDC has developed the following recommendations:

The HDC encourages:

- Maintaining and repairing a historic sign with materials to match the original whenever possible
- Creating an innovative sign that identifies the business, complements the style of the building and is appropriately scaled for its location with dimensional or projecting elements
- Using sign materials that are consistent with the character of the building, including wood, bronze, brass, gold leaf, etched glass, paint, aluminum, stainless steel, enameled metal, leaded glass, appliques, tile or terrazzo
- An awning to be canvas-like, in a color, style and location that is compatible with the building's historic character
- An awning that has a shape that corresponds with the opening it protects, be it a door, window or storefront bay
- Designing an awning to project a minimum of 5- to 6-feet deep
- Designing an awning with a loose 6- to 8-inch straight or scalloped valance
- Limiting lettering and/or a logo to the valance on a sloped awning – Lettering and graphics must meet allowable sign area

- Using existing ambient street light and/or storefront lighting in lieu of sign lighting whenever possible
- Using light styles for signs consistent with the character of the building, including location, orientation and brightness
- Concealing or minimizing the visibility and appearance of exposed wiring, conduit and junction boxes
- Painting mounting hardware to match the attachment surface or sign surface and painting black chains suspending a sign

The HDC discourages:

- Removing, damaging, altering, encasing or obscuring any historic architectural building feature for the installation of a sign or awning
- Using a fastener or hanger for a sign or awning installation that destroys important building fabric
- Adhering a paper sign to glazing or a wall surface
- Painting a mural or any type of sign or logo on a building or wall surface
- Placing a sign, applique or graphic film to significantly obstruct the view into a store through a window or glazing (Refer to *Non-Retail Storefronts, Guidelines for Commercial Development & Storefronts*, page 12-12)
- Installing an internally-illuminated wall sign or a hanging box sign with a plastic face
- Having a moving components, flashing lights or changing messages, including LED scrolling on a sign
- Exposing raceways for channel letters or sign lighting
- Displaying a temporary sign, banner, flag, pennant or banner for longer than the time allowed by a City permit
- Using a contemporary or glossy awning material such as vinyl, plastic or leatherette
- Installing an internally illuminated awning
- Installing an awning with closed sides, or a solid or closed underside
- Using an awning material in a wall sign
- Supporting an awning canopy with a pole that extends to the sidewalk or ground

