

Fence Guidelines for Albany's Residential Historic Properties

Fences and gates are an extension of the architecture of the house. The right fence design can pay big dividends in an attractive feature that unites the building and landscape while enhancing privacy, establishing property boundaries, and protecting children and pets. Fences on Albany's historic properties do not have to be historical re-creations, but they look best when their scale, design, and materials harmonize with the size, style, and period of the house. According to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, additions such as fences **"should be compatible with the size, scale, material and character of the property, neighborhood or environment."**

FENCE STANDARDS IN THE ALBANY DEVELOPMENT CODE, SECTION 3.410:

- (1) Fences may be no taller than 6 feet in interior yards, and 4 feet in front yards if it meets the clear vision area standards in Section 12.180. Exceptions to Height:
 - (a) A single-family use or zone that shares an interior property line with a multiple-family use or zone may have a fence up to 8 feet tall along the property line.
 - (b) Properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places may have front yard fences taller than 4 feet if the fence is ***appropriate to the building style and scale, and is approved by the Landmarks Advisory Commission.***

The following information about architectural styles is provided to help homeowners design a fence that harmonizes with the style and period of their historic home.

FENCES FOR DIFFERENT ARCHITECTURAL STYLES

Understanding how fences evolved from logs to pickets and then changed with the ebb and flow of architectural styles can help you choose a successful design.

As the dangers of the wilderness receded, fences became shorter and more refined and were mostly erected to contain livestock and establish property lines. In towns, the fence gave the residential streets a spatial definition with the fence. Fences were a semi-public extension of the dwelling.



Fencing for a **Gothic Revival** house (1850-1880) can reflect medieval influences with pointed-arch pickets and posts, or with palings and rails carved to resemble open tracery. For a more elaborate touch, finials might be carved like spires, and the gate could mimic a pointed arch with quatrefoil and trefoil patterns carved into its posts. Finishing with a dark-color paint or stain would also be appropriate.

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The **Italianate** style (1850-1895) was aligned with the picturesque landscape movement that considered fences a necessary evil, so ideally they were as inconspicuous as possible. Italianate fences may borrow details from the corbels, cornices, or brackets on the house and should be painted a neutral earth color, not the bright white that the style's biggest proponent Andrew Jackson Downing, detested. However, in Oregon and Albany, fences were often painted white.

Builders during the **Victorian** era (1870-1905) ornamented their houses and porches with carved brackets, corbels, fretwork, and turned wood, but often wood fences were sedate and understated. Period photos often show smoothly carved, pointed, stone, or wood posts holding panels of square pickets painted in a neutral tone, so as not to upstage the house and grounds. A common form of picket fence design to enclose yards was three horizontal rails equally spaced, with short, pointed pickets that rise just above the middle rail, alternating with longer pickets that rise above the top rail.



Figure 2. Picket fence of irregular spindles. Henry Failing house. Completed 1875. Fence 1876. Portland, Multnomah County. Architect for both, Henry Cleaveland.



Figure 4. Gate centered on house with two entrances. Thomas Krewson house built about 1880, in North Drain, Douglas County, Oregon.

With less need to fence out the neighbor's livestock and more interest in integrating house and site, picket fences fell out of favor in the early 20th century with the interest in naturalistic landscaping that accompanied the **Craftsman** movements (1905-1930). Yards flowed together down the block and fences were used only in the backyards for utility.



The **Colonial Revival** and various **English-influenced styles** that became popular following World War I brought the picket fence back into popularity. These gave way in the 1940s to low, three to four foot tall chain link fence, which were affordable and took vines well, offering privacy.

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FENCE GUIDELINES

1. Although height is customarily 3 to 3½ feet, the fence should be proportional to the structure it accompanies and the area it encloses. While a small cottage might look best with a fence only 2½ feet tall, a large house could warrant a 4-foot-tall fence. Fences taller than 4 feet *may* be appropriate for ornate and larger scale homes, but require approval by the Landmarks Advisory Commission.
2. New or reclaimed iron fencing may be appropriate for grander pre-1900 houses. Iron fencing is generally not appropriate for later houses.
3. Traditionally, fencing and retaining walls in front yards and principal side yards was installed along the sidewalk or property line or to the sides of the building at or behind its front plane.
4. For corner properties, fences on the secondary street frontage may be up to six feet tall. Please note that fencing must also comply with any other applicable city building or zoning codes.
5. Privacy fences are appropriate only around rear yards and can be up to six feet tall.
6. Chain link or plastic slat fences are not appropriate for front or visible side yards.

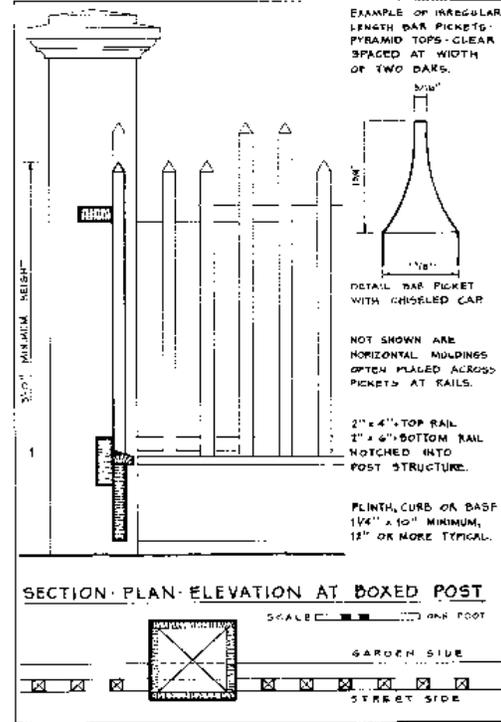
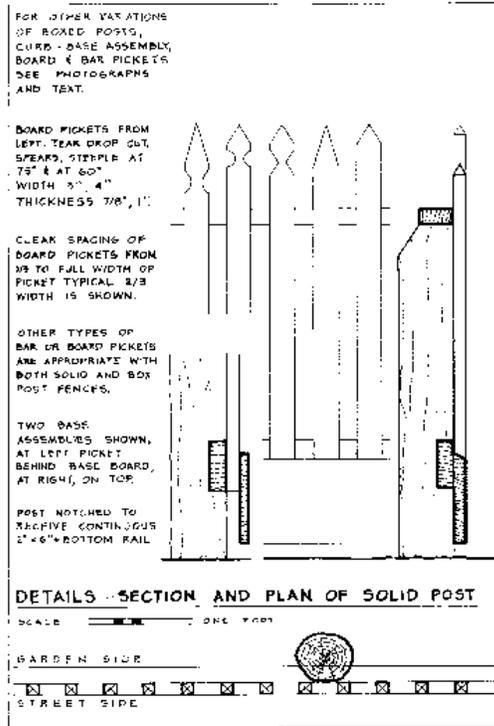
FENCE BASICS

Pickets. There are many ways to dress up a picket fence for a more ornamental or architectural effect. The simplest approach is to cut the picket tops into points (acute angles or arches), semicircles, or historical decorative designs such as diamonds or spears. Narrow pickets, about 2 square inches and spaced widely apart appear more elegant and are especially appropriate for late-Victorian homes. It is quite acceptable to use a more decorative (and expensive) fence for the front of the house and only utilitarian fencing for the sides and back.

Typical Picket Fence Construction, from Philip Dole's book *Picket Fences in Oregon*:

The body of the fence was four or five feet tall with the picket element of three or more feet. Below their tops and at their bases, the pickets were nailed to rails. These two horizontal pieces were of two or three-inch stock, by four to six-inches; the lower rail was set vertically, the upper usually flatwise. At the bottom of the fence just above the ground, a thick finished board, a base or curb, ran horizontally. On an early 1900s house, a 6-inch board was acceptable. On earlier structures the bottom board was usually at least 12 inches tall.

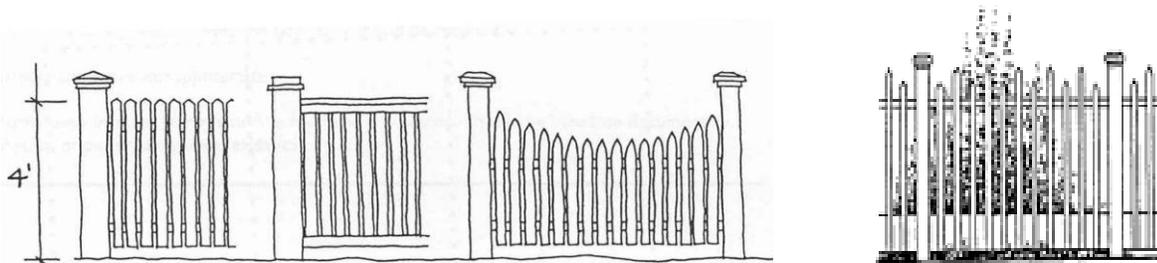
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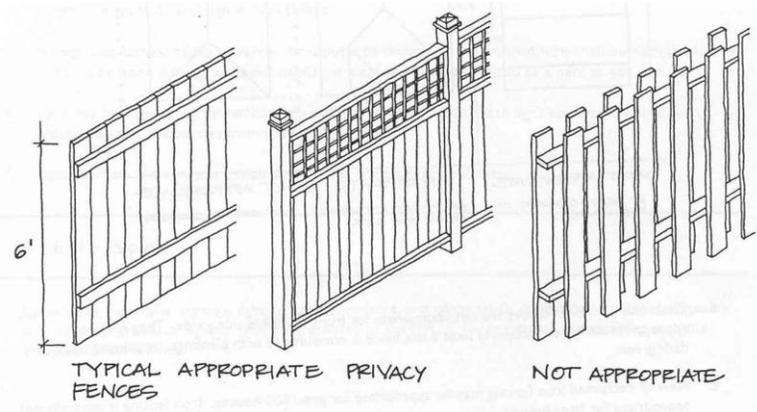
Posts. As well as being structurally essential, posts can mark gateways and contribute visual interest by making those entrances larger or by having distinctive finials. While stone is the ideal post material because of its beauty and permanence, 4 x 4 wood posts are more affordable and versatile. If the post tops extend above the bulk of the fence, they look best and last longest when finished with bevels, caps, or finials that also shed water.

Gates can either blend into the fence, or be a focal point. Choose latches and hinges that are appropriate to your property's style and period and make them rugged enough to keep the gate from sagging, but not oversized and out of scale.

TYPICAL PICKET FENCE DESIGNS



Fence Guidelines for Historic Residential Properties



Whenever possible, leave a space between picket bottoms and the ground so that you can mow grass without damaging the fence. Keeping the fence off the ground will add years to its useful life by reducing the conditions for wood rot.