

Preservation Points
Alameda Architectural Preservation Society (AAPS)
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Repairing Wood Floors

Before attempting to repair wood floors, understanding the make-up of the floor is an important part of the process.

Beneath the finish floor is the sub floor. The sub floor provides a rough base for the finish floor. The oldest type of sub floor consists of wood planks nailed perpendicular to the floor joists. In the 1920's the planks were laid diagonally to the floor joists. Today, plywood is the most common form of sub floor. The sub floor rarely needs repairing. However, the joists may sag and the sub floor planks may shrink with age. This may result in loose planks causing the floor to squeak underfoot. The other problem may be dry rot of the sub floor and joists in bathrooms and kitchens. Depending on the severity of the damage only the sub floor may need to be replaced. Major dry rot may require the joist to be replaced.

When replacing sections of the sub floor, make sure the thickness of the replacement wood is the same as the existing. Plywood is the most common material used for replacement sub floor. Gaining access to the sub floor requires careful removal of the finish floor.

Preservation Point: Hardwood floors should be repaired as soon as possible.

The finish floor is an integral part of the room, so the originally flooring was intentionally selected to match the interior of the space. Hardwood was typically used in the living and dining rooms and soft woods used in bedrooms and upper stories. Many Victorians do not have finished floors because wall-to-wall carpeting was laid directly over the finished floor. The 1890's introduced standardized strips, odd-lot planks and checkerboard parquet.

The most typical hardwood floor is the oak strip. Although dimensions may vary considerably, 2" wide x 5/16" thick is the most common. The way the sides of the strips are milled will determine how they are attached to the sub floor. Strips with a square edge butt up to one another and are secured to the sub floor with either face nails or screws. Face nails are recessed using a nail punch. Screws are recessed and covered with a wood plug. Another form of attachment is the tongue and groove. Tongue and groove strips are inserted one into the next and blind nailed through the tongue into the sub floor.

Preservation point: Match, as close as possible, replacement flooring to the existing.

Though extremely durable, hardwood floors are susceptible to everyday wear and tear. The following problems can be easily repaired:

- Loose boards can be blocked, nailed or screwed back into place if the boards are not too badly warped. Squeaks in the floor will locate the problem spot.
- Water stains darken hardwood. The usual problem occurs at leaking radiators or potted plants. Water stains can be bleached with a mixture of warm water and oxalic acid. Ask your neighborhood hardware store or drug store.
- Protruding nails can be reset with a nail punch.
- Cracks between wood strips can be filled with wood putty.
- Replacing badly warped, scratched, stained or missing pieces of flooring can be done by removing flooring from closets, or purchasing from local salvage yards, home improvement, or lumberyards. Remember to match new product as close as possible to the existing.

The Alameda Architectural Preservation Society is dedicated to the preservation of Alameda's historic structures and neighborhoods. For further information on AAPS, phone 510-986-9232; write P.O. Box 1677, Alameda Ca. 94501 or visit www.alameda-preservation.org.

