

# Saving Old Wooden Windows

by Katharine Carveaux

Most historic and period-style houses throughout the United States have common double-hung windows; an architectural feature originally designed in London and brought to colonial

America. Once upon a time, sliding sash windows, as they are also called, functioned as a typical, inviting attribute of most 18th century homes, right up until the 1950s. In early American times, materials were imported from Europe, and the windows were constructed on site. They were made from solid, old, untreated woods that could be expected to endure for at least as long as the houses stood.

Over time, those grand old original windows have become lost under mounds of paint and caulk, and have lost their appeal. Restoring the original windows is often seen as an expensive inconvenience to major home improvement. This lack of knowledge drives British-born joiner/craftsman Martin Sullivan absolutely “bonkers.” Having specialized in window restoration for more than 20 years, he knows that essentially every unique part of a properly constructed window can be restored or replaced.

Sullivan preaches preservation with fervor. He says: “It is so sad. The original uncomplicated windows were created to bring daylight and the sun’s warmth indoors and/or cool breezes into living space. Opened correctly, they created natural circulation throughout homes, and when closed, they were a good, tight fit, free from rattles and drafts. Properly designed and built windows clearly played a significant part in adding elegance and value, when they functioned as intended.”

Sullivan, who settled in Charleston in 2004, categorically states, “Outright condemnation of an entire frame or replacement of historic glass is usually unnecessary. It is far cheaper to restore than to commission a custom-built

window to match. You can wait weeks for fabrication and delivery, followed by the exorbitant installation costs. Never mind that only then will you be at the point where you can try to match your home’s original aesthetic.”



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Finding someone who is actually passionate about this arcane craft is a bit odd, but it has proved to be a blessing to those in the South who have engaged Sullivan. Windows became a natural extension of Sullivan’s woodworking skills and the precision learned as a wheelwright for horse-drawn carriages in the United Kingdom. Master of his own workshop for a number of years in the West Country, eventually that work dwindled and his craft skills took a new direction. He has trained numerous apprentices and can occasionally be coaxed into giving a series of mini-classes to pass his window-restoration skills on to others.

Sullivan has come upon misaligned frames, backward-installed sills, frayed standard cords ready to snap, missing pulleys and weights, and so on – all done by alleged skilled carpenters. A current job

in Charleston saw the customer literally bilked of more than \$60,000 in work and materials. Still, the windows do not work. Wind blasts through them, some of them leak, and they do not even approximate the original historic integrity.

This is the point where Sullivan asks for a cup of tea, sits the apprehensive client down and launches into an educational lesson assuring the homeowner that the wrongs can be corrected, and amazingly, for a reasonable price. References on his rustic website show happy customers from all over the United Kingdom, Charleston to Beaufort, and New Orleans to Asheville, and points in between, and with reason.

Regarding the viability of windows, Sullivan laughingly says, “It took years of learning from my mistakes, and a few

smashed thumbs, to arrive at this level of skill, a high quality of work that is standard in England." As a genuine craftsman, he often asks clients to email photos of their severely debilitated traditional windows. Simply looking at pictures, he can usually determine the practicality and cost to either repair or regretfully agree with the local "rip and replace" salesman that all truly is lost.

As Sullivan continues to branch out, he is usually willing to travel to jobs that require at least three full days' work. These engagements are frequently in traditional family homes; not necessarily great mansions, but jewel boxes found all over the Deep South that are being reclaimed to their former traditional standards of elegance.

Sullivan is clear when he says, "A skilled repair and restoration will outlast most 'look good, but rot fast' cheap, shiny replacements. Even the most modestly priced new windows can run into hundreds of dollars, each." Experience has shown that replacement windows typically last only 10 to 15 years. "The windows you might already have were built to last indefinitely, and with proper service, they could go on for hundreds of years." He even has a special self-taught method for replicating traditional sills in little more than a day, something virtually unheard of in the historic restoration trade.

Sullivan laughs at what he euphemistically calls the typical DIY Television-taught "wreck your house school of restoration," saying that "obviously, a lot of carpenters think that buying a few tools and a basic state license can make them credible and worthy of the name 'woodworker/joinery specialist.' A bona fide craftsman can save you thousands,

and the job will be done correctly. Your windows will work properly, typically within a matter of days, not weeks.

"You're being kind to the environment by creating less waste by repairing and reusing your original windows; and with proper draft proofing, shutters and drapes, will function well, energy efficiently as they were possibly a century before." A historic home deserves no less.

As a final caveat, Sullivan suggests that even if you have already hired a restoration manager, there is no reason you can't insist on the best craftsman.

You are the boss and your wishes should be accommodated.

He suggests you do your research, speak to restoration architects, and most importantly, talk to your neighbors who have had good quality work done. Sullivan will give you his best opinion and is also willing to talk with your contractor. His answers will provide you with enough information to go forward, or at the very least, make sure you can supervise closely and have a contract in place before you start.

*For more info, contact Martin Sullivan, former wheelwright and carriage repairer, London Guild of Craftsmen, at (803) 625-2517 or (803) 842-3050, or visit [SashWindowService.com](http://SashWindowService.com).*



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