ROOFS, GUTTERS, AND DOWNSPOUTS

Old Orland Historic District

The roof, gutters, and downspouts are an integral system designed to collect and remove water from a building as quickly as possible. In addition to this practical purpose, these elements are highly visible and thus are important components of a building's visual character.

Old Orland roof materials vary, but asphalt shingle roofs are most common. Asphalt shingles, an those of similar materials, usually are a modern replacement of an earlier material, except on more recent buildings, where they may be original. Wood shingle roofs were a common early type of roof, but because of fairly rapid deterioration most were replaced long ago.

Most buildings have gutters to catch water as it flows off the edge of the roof. Gutters typically appear in two designs: half-round, where the gutter forms a semi-circular trough suspended on straps or wires that run under roofing material; or "ogee" gutters with a flat back and an "S"-curve front profile, usually attached by long nails to a vertical fascia board below the edge of the roof. Gutters usually are made of either painted galvanized metal or aluminum with a factory-applied paint finish.

Downspouts are usually round or rectangular in cross-section and drain directly out of the bottoms of the gutters. They usually are attached to the wall of the building, and at ground level they drain either into underground drain lines or onto splash-blocks which direct the water away from the building.

Dormers and skylights are common building elements that create interruptions in the roof surface. When properly built and maintained, these elements are usually problem-free. They can, however, catch leaves and branches and create a debris pile that retains moisture, and they require flashing to provide a moisture seal where they penetrate the roof. Flashing, which usually is made of sheet metal, is part of the roof at dormers and skylights and also at chimneys. It extends from the vertical wall of the projecting element down to and under the roofing material to provide a waterproof seal. Valleys, where different roof angles meet, usually are lined with flashing under the roofing material.

All parts of this water removal system must be in good condition or they cannot do their job. Get in the habit of inspecting the various parts on a regular basis. It is not necessary to climb a ladder—a look at them from the ground or the attic, especially when it is actually raining, can provide some quick clues about possible problems. Water should drain quickly from the roof; there should be no open joints or loose pieces in any flashing; all the water should be collected by the gutters; and the water should drain out of the gutters through the downspouts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Watch for possible roof problems. Are there any bulges or dips in the roof? Older roofs often have some of these simply from age, but such areas can cause open joints in metal roofing or can lift shingles to the extent that water gets in; they bear special watching. Interior stains around chimneys, dormers, and skylights usually indicate a flashing problem.

2. Repair and retain existing traditional roofs.

3. In re-roofing a building that currently has asphalt shingles, keeping it simple is usually the best choice. Avoid staggered-butt or other shingle patterns that try to create an older look. A medium gray color generally is appropriate for asphalt shingles on an older building. For newer buildings originally roofed with asphalt shingles, use medium gray replacements unless the original color is known.

4. Keep an eye on the gutters. Are they catching water pouring off the roof, or is the water overshooting the gutters or dipping down behind them? Are the gutters overflowing at any point? This could be caused by accumulated plant debris or by a sag or low spot where the gutter supports have failed. Have gutters twisted or bent due to a heavy load of snow or ice?

5. Watch for signs of peeling paint, stains, or moss growth near downspouts. This could indicate an obstructed downspout where water leaks through a joint, or one with an open seam due to freezing of accumulated debris inside.

6. If the downspouts do not drain into underground lines or onto a splash-block, be sure there is an extra "elbow" at the outlet, directed away from the building's foundation. This will help prevent moisture from soaking down into the foundation or up into exterior wall materials.

7. When replacing gutters or downspouts, duplicate the existing as closely as possible. If a building does not have gutters and downspouts and is to have them installed, choose a design and color compatible with the design and color of the building.