

# FastFacts

## About Maintaining Wood Floors

by Mariangela Pfister

**If you have a wood floor in your historic building, congratulations! Beyond being beautiful, wood floors can be cleaned more effectively than carpeting, which can trap dust and pollen. This article focuses on general care of wood floors. If you have a badly damaged floor or if you are unsure of what finish was last used on your floor, it is best to hire a flooring professional with experience in the care of older wood floors.**

Maple and oak floors were the most popular hardwood flooring materials in older buildings, however, ash, beech, birch, cherry, hickory and walnut woods were also used. Sometimes, a combination of hardwoods was used in the same floor! Hardwood flooring is usually found in planks that are under three inches in width. As the name implies, softwood flooring is made of softer woods, such as pine and fir, and is usually in planks wider than three inches. Before you can treat your floor, you must examine it carefully and determine whether it is made of hard or soft woods. Also determine what type of finish it has. The most common finish is polyurethane. Varnish was also used, and painted floors were not uncommon. All of these finishes are surface coatings. A less common finish is penetrating oil. It is used primarily on softwood floors. Floors may also have a coating of wax, which is applied then buffed to the desired sheen.

We recommend against trying to use a floor sander yourself, especially a belt sander. If not done by an experienced professional, your floor can be damaged. Also, every time a floor is sanded, you're taking away material. Wood floors are between 3/4 and 1.5 inches thick and there is a limit to how many times you can sand. A professional will be able to tell you if you've reached that limit. For purposes of this article, we'll assume that your hard or soft wood flooring is sound overall and doesn't need major repair or replacement of boards, which are both jobs best left to professionals.

First, if your floor is just dusty, it is recommended that you dust with one of the dry dust cloths that attract and trap dust and dirt. If your floor has a surface coating like polyurethane or paint that is still in good shape, but is just dirty, mop with a damp sponge mop that has been dipped in hot water and white vinegar. Dry the floor with lint-free towels to avoid damage (water sitting for a long time on wood is never good) and water spots.

If your floor has multiple layers of wax and looks dingy, the best remedy is to remove the old wax with an appropriate solvent and then re wax and buff. If you have a surface coating that has worn away, exposing the wood, consult a professional.

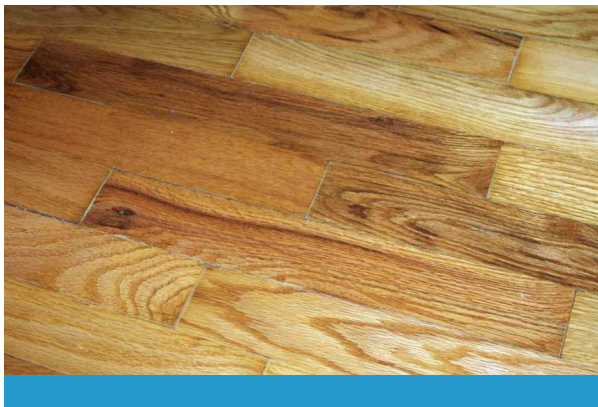
Whenever possible you should just have the floor lightly sanded or "screened" rather than fully sanded. The goal is to recoat the floor before it really needs it. That way you'll have to sand much less, which extends the life of your floor.

For candle wax, crayon, gum, clay, etc. that has hardened on your wood floor, take a plastic bag filled with ice and freeze the material until it's brittle enough to easily scrape away with a plastic scraper, taking care not to scrape your finish.

Let's turn now to the more complex cleaning problems that your wood floor may have. Water, animal and dark stains may be possible to remove regardless of your floor's finish coat. First try gently rubbing with very fine steel wool (#00 or #000). If this doesn't work, try lightly sanding with a fine sandpaper (150-220 grit) and then refinishing the small area you worked on. If it's a dark, stubborn spot that's not responding to the steel wool or sandpaper, carefully dab a little bit of white vinegar or bleach on the spot, then dab dry (being very cautious not to spread the undiluted vinegar or bleach across unaffected floor areas). Then refinish as needed.



Before



After

For oil and grease stains, use hydrogen peroxide dabbed on the stain with a cotton swab. Then dab the stain with ammonia, repeating the process until the stain disappears, taking care not to allow these products to migrate to unaffected flooring. Allow to dry, then hand buff.

For minor scratches, you can use a little floor wax to mask the scratch or commercial products designed to minimize the appearance of slight scratches. If scratches are deep, floor putties colored to match your floor can be used, but these must be redone every couple of years. Deeper scratches may require professional help.

For all of these repair/cleaning methods, be sure to work from the outside edge of the problem area to the inside so you don't impact unaffected areas. Also, if recoating is necessary, be careful to use what's on the rest of the floor and take care not to coat over an unaffected area or you'll have an uneven appearance. An exception to this rule is penetrating oil. If you oil your floor, you can re-oil it whenever you wish, following the manufacturer's instructions, of course. With oil, even if you get some on a portion of flooring that didn't need it, it won't alter the appearance of the floor. Just rub it in, being careful not to use too much oil!

Use caution when wearing shoes on your wood floor as some shoes can leave dents. Never slide furniture across your wood floor. Place furniture on pads designed to protect the floor. Don't use pads that are sticky on one side as this may leave a residue on the floor.

Following these basic steps will help extend the life of your wood floor and keep it looking beautiful for years to come.

**For more information about maintaining wood floors, contact the Ohio History Connection's State Historic Preservation Office.**

*Mariangela Pfister is Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer for Technical Preservation Services for the Ohio History Connection's State Historic Preservation Office. She holds a master's degree in history from The Ohio State University.*

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**OHIO HISTORY CONNECTION**  
800 E. 17th Ave.  
Columbus, OH 43211-2474  
614.298.2000  
ohiohistory.org/shpo

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