Chocolate, butter cream and rose on these hallowed walls, cornices, columns and quoins are not accidental. Now, digging deeper for school colors shows what the old black-and-white photos couldn't.
TRUE-TO-YOUR-SCHOOL COLORS

"... But sometimes when ... the sifted moonlight falls — they'll think of this night here And of those old brown walls ... They'll think again of Chapel Hill and — Thinking — come back home."

Thomas Wolfe, senior poem, 1920

"That prevailing [sic] tan of the old buildings in the vicinity of the Old Well is part of every freshman's first impression of the campus."

John V. Allcott, longtime art professor and campus architecture expert, in The Daily Tar Heel, 1965

"The one thing we used to say is everybody wanted the campus to be like it was when they were there. Two problems with that — they aren't all here at the same time, and it was never the way they perceive it anyway."

Gordon Rutherford, former director of facilities planning, UNC, 2006

by David E. Brown '75

One day not long ago, Paul Kapp was called out of a meeting. Associate Vice Chancellor Bruce Runberg was standing in the hall holding a cell phone. The chancellor was on the other end of it.

New West is wrong, James Moeser said. Kapp is the campus historic preservation architect, and the previous day had been maybe his worst one in Chapel Hill, so he was talking straight when he told Moeser, "I'm on it." He'd gone to bed knowing that New West and New East, the Italianate twins built at the dawn of the Civil War to flank Old West and Old East, were different colors. The contractor had messed up and missed the real color by a couple of tones. And, after many decades of flirting with every cute blob on the painter's palette, Carolina apparently is done messing up colors (the court of public opinion notwithstanding).

Be ready for New East and West to shine a little brighter than Old. If your mind's eye sees a "Carolina look," try to lose it. Think of Hershey bar brown as a kind of alternate school color. The sky is light blue — don't bet on anything else.

Wolfe's old brown walls were the natural brick color of the oldest buildings on the campus. It was just a phase. Before, and again after, his time, mineral washes gave most of them a somewhat uniform, tannish look, which probably reflects the memories of most living alumni.

Now a historically correct rainbow is emerging, and it's not guesswork based on faded black-and-whites from the early years of photography. An architectural conservator using a micro-scaled stereo microscope has analyzed the buildings down to their bones, producing coat-over-coat histories that look like a scoop of that vanilla-chocolate-strawberry ice cream with three more colors thrown in. Colors are revealed along with history, replete with what are seen now as mistakes. The Campus Y now is a striking rose-tan color trimmed in cream, and research shows that to be the original. But a Tar Heel picture taken in 1907, the year it opened, shows it to be a very light color with dark trim. Somebody apparently didn't like the darker color and wasted no time getting it changed.

Old East and Old West had been mineral washed but never painted before they were spruced up for the 1993 Bicentennial celebration. According to Gordon Rutherford, then head of campus facilities, an architect frightened the trustees with renderings that included green trim; the color that won out deviates noticeably from the original. On top of that, Kapp says, the paint probably is damaging the buildings by sealing moisture against soft brick.

The old Playmakers, arguably UNC's most significant structure architecturally, got to be its current weird yellow-orange hue in a hilarious saga of good intentions gone bad. Being on the National Register of Historic Places, the University had state

Clockwise from top right: Do not adjust your set — Old East (1793) today appears in two distinct tones, the one on the right probably much closer to historically accurate. On the south end of Old West (1823), history emerges where the 1990s paint has worn at the bottom. The north end of Old East shows a prominent swatch of the campus' signature chocolate hue. And New East (1861) wears its new old colors in the background of its more famous neighbor. (The "1993" cornerstone, like its paint job, is a Bicentennial commemoration.)
archivists research the color in the 1980s. Rutherford recalled that the new paint didn’t come in cans from the store but was a “field mix” — as the archivist stood by, the paint was mixed on the site every time it ran out, making it nearly impossible to match from one section to another. The body paint was water-based and the brown trim a “chalking” paint, Rutherford said, making them vulnerable to the weather.

“That wasn’t a very successful thing,” he laughed. “It looked great for the first month or two.”

Rutherford said there was a time, just after World War II, when one of his predecessors, Giles Horsey, just took whatever paint he had available and mixed it all together whenever a building needed painting.

Now, for the older buildings, UNC calls the pedigree conservator first, and he produces a building history in the minutest detail.

Playmakers is getting fixed as you read. It’s going back to a cream, 10YR 9.25/0.5 on the Munsel Universal Color System, with Hershey trim (2.5YR 3/4).

“There’s a hundred different blacks,” Kapp said. “There is a lot of science in color!”

The end of vanilla
Before you plan a night raid with a truckload of turpentine, what’s going on is not exactly in the realm of radical. What paint there was in the day of South Building, Person and Gerrard halls, Playmakers, and Old East and Old West, was limited in variety and soft in hue.

The campus did not fall, as some did, to the Victorian fancy for multiple brighter colors. And on many early 20th-century structures — Byrnum, Carr, Caldwell, Howell, Hill, Alumni — sashes, cornices and other trim are the only issues because their natural brick colors always have been left alone.

What’s most noticeable is an absence of uniformity in returning these buildings to their original colors. Black sashes on Byrnum, battleship gray cornices on the adjacent Carr, the chocolate on Caldwell next door. Howell has an odd mix of brown sashes and green window frames. All of these have been researched and returned to their original colors.

Most passersby are unfazed. But engage one in a conversation about history versus current aesthetic and they’re liable to say, “Why did they do that?”

“I often hear people say, they want to return to that Carolina look,” said Jim Lefald, ’77, associate professor of history and an authority on the University’s past. “I don’t see one look.”

Carolyn Elland ’69, the associate vice chancellor who oversees buildings and grounds and who helped start the movement toward authentic colors, said, “Cameron Avenue says ‘Carolina’ because all those buildings are so different. That’s why it’s so important to restore them.”

Rutherford added: “The interesting thing about the campus it’s perceived to be a red brick campus, homogeneous in design. The campus isn’t homogeneous at all. But it hangs together in a very delightful way. It gives these old buildings a kind of prominence they deserve.”

As you approach venerable Old East and Old West from Franklin Street today, you might well find your eyes jerked off to one side or the other. New East and New West are a buttery cream trimmed prominently in brown against their older neighbors’ ochre (which is bolder than the khaki hue to which they probably will return).

Although historically accurate, the newer buildings had been a soft pinkish color, as Rutherford said, “plain vanilla background buildings.”

When the buildings were up for painting in the 1980s, the trustees balked at a proposal to change to the historic yellow.

“Stay the course,” they said.

Dave Godschalk, former chair of the city and regional planning department and a past chair of the campus building and grounds committee, has a corner office in New East. He said the resident jury is about 50-50 on the new paint. Some think it’s too bold. He likes it.

“Every time they repaint New East it’s kind of a surprise to me,” Godschalk said. “I was surprised the last time; they painted it a purply, pinkish color. I’m getting used to it. It really like it. It’s a lot fresher. I like the contrasting darker trim.”

To the so-called “original buildings” —

True-to-your-school Colors

Carolinas are delightful. It hangs together in a very surprising way. It creates a building history in the minutest detail. And on many early 20th-century structures — Playmakers, Person and Gerrard halls, Playmakers, and Old East and Old West, was limited in variety and soft in hue.

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Carolina Alumni Review
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TRUE-TO-YOUR-SCHOOL COLORS

Old East, Person, South, Old West, Gerrard — there is a distinct pattern, described by the art professor and chronicler of UNC’s early architecture John V. Allcott. "Through the late 18th and early 19th century the buildings stood as red brick," he wrote in The Daily Tar Heel in 1965. "The change from red to brown caused in the 1840s as part of an early Victorian fashion which swept through American architecture of the times.

The new fashion was anti-colonial, tied to the newly-disbelieved colonial buildings with their sparkling red brick and white mortar walls." The campus up to that point had been rather crudely landscaped, if at all, and the trees in 1825 ordered the trees thinned and new ones planted, and they let go a substantial $3,000 for building and ground repairs. The buildings were given mineral washes in light brown tones; turn-of-the-century photos show how the washes made the brown-painted cornices and sashes more prominent.

"That chocolate brown is a prevalent historic color on this campus," Kapp said. "It is the color of a Hershey bar."

The washes now on South Building and Gerrard, as well as the later Memorial Hall, are today essentially as they were back then, when they were seen not only as fashionable but as a protective coat for the soft brick of which they were built. Only Person has been returned to its bare brick. The aforementioned painting of Old East and Old West at the Bicentennial is seen as a big mistake.

Kapp wants the paint removed and a wash restored, and he expects that will happen.

Playmakers, New East and New West and the Campus Y have been more susceptible to whatever’s in the paint shop because they are stucco, which more easily accommodates paint.

The stucco on Playmakers has worn different colors since it became a theater in 1925; its window frames, eight colors since 1847; the capitals atop its four columns, 11, some of which disappeared and later reappeared.

BETTER THAN WE FOUND IT"

On a campus that so values its history, it may come as a surprise that several of the oldest structures have a history of being underloved. Some members of the buildings and grounds fraternity think that more celebrated preservation projects — sometimes called the Willamsons, or "Disneyland," mentality — may blind people to the reality that a state university doesn’t always have the money or the sense of priority to keep the neighborhood authentic and pristine.

"The big bucket of leftovers" practice, and in some cases plain old neglect, was apparent to Moeser when he arrived in 2000. A self-described amateur architect, he said, "The first thing I noticed was peeling paint. Lots of it." He realized not everything could be transformed overnight, but he saw no excuse for visions to see the 1901 Mary Ann Smith Building on the historic campus looking like Carolina’s version of an abandoned tobacco barn, or for Howell to be unrecognizable from old pictures because of its vanilla paint job.

On the eve of the largest new building campaigns in campus history, Moeser said his focus on the physical appearance of the old was immediate. "If all this building was going to take place, it was a tremendous responsibility of stewardship — that we leave it better than we found it."

He found a knifed spirit in Efland, who had spent 14 years lovingly restoring her own pre-Civil War house as Pittsboro. It was her call to bring in the conservator, and she brought in an expert to teach campus macons how to restore mortar between the old bricks. Then, to a campus touched by prestigious designers such as Alexander Jackson Davis, Arthur Nash, William Nichols and the firms of McKim, Mead and White, Moeser brought a full-time historic preservation architect. Paul Kapp understands pride of place, having spent four years working at the University of Virginia, where the collective obsession with Thomas Jefferson’s vision of the physical campus is legendary.

A walk around the campus some years ago with Moeser and Kapp left a clear impression that they think alike on preservation. They both grasp big pictures and notice small details, and the contrasts between recent restorations and earlier ones is unmistakable. Although he still goes through the committees and the trustees, Kapp seems to have everyone’s eye on exterior color.

BACK TO ORIGINAL, MOSTLY

There are three primary influences on Kapp’s choices. Two are “it’s the original” and the slightly more subjective “it’s a historically significant period.” The third could be known as “because we can.”
by N.C. Highway 74, which led to the intersection with peach trees, 1895. From 1900 to 1908, there was a three-story red-brick building.

The Carolina Inn was completed in 1924 and is located on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill. It was designed by architect John Sprunt Hill and is known for its classic Georgian Revival style. The building features white columns and a portico, and it is surrounded by landscaping.

The conservator dug down to the foundation of the original building, which was found to be in poor condition. The renovation included the installation of new windows and doors, as well as the replacement of the existing roof.

The renovation was completed in 2005, and the Carolina Inn is now a popular destination for visitors and events. The building has been restored to its original appearance and is a testament to the enduring beauty of classical architecture.
TRUE-TO-YOUR-SCHOOL COLORS

interior of Gerrard. The vivid rose walls — some would say hot pink — are a part of the 1830 building’s historic palette but not the original. The rose was plucked out of Gerrard’s historic rainbow in the hope it would be a big hit when the building was spruced up prior to one of the kickoffs of the Carolina First capital campaign. It was, and in the building’s ongoing full restoration, it’s staying that way.

Micro-scalpel research and the limits of the 18th- and early 19th-century palette aside, as Moeser said, “aesthetics and taste does come into play.” That could be a high administrator’s edict or the influence of a narrow majority of one of the University’s two building and grounds committees or its trustees.

Does it matter? In his study of the early influences on campus development, The Campus at Chapel Hill, John Allcott scarcely mentions color while parsing the tiniest details of the architecture and the reasoning behind building placement. But this campus traditionally has had a high OMGWT factor (alumnae return and ask, “Oh my God what’s that”). More and more of them live in neighborhoods in which the blue of their shutters must pass a committee’s review.

What is “original” anyway? “Let’s not kid ourselves,” said John Sanders ’50, a former building and grounds chair who’s seldom without a strong opinion on campus development. “All those buildings were gutted in the 1920s.”

And don’t despair something too bright, Dave Godschalk said — the weather takes care of everything.

DAVID E. BROWN ’75 is senior associate editor of the Review.

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Clockwise from top right: Trustees, building committees and South Building have listened closely to what Paul Kapp has to say about New East and other historic buildings. The original washes on Gerrard (1837) and South (1798), in background, generally have been left alone, though Gerrard soon will have its dark brown trim back. Gerrard’s interior went to very pink for a fundraiser, and the color was a hit — though not really the original, it will stay in the building’s ongoing restoration. A microscopic analysis of a Gerrard window frame shows where it’s been.

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