

Historic Guidelines at a Glance: Lighting

-Lori S. Roper

Policy: Minimize the visual impacts of site lighting.

“Traditionally, lighting within a site was subdued. An occasional garden light was seen, but porch lights were usually the only exterior illumination.” But what about safety, security, and visual appeal? Porch lights remain the ideal for lighting porch steps, identifying visitors at the door, and providing a sense of welcome. Fortunately, today we have a range of light fixtures, sources, and controls to help us maintain the historic "lighting look" of our neighborhood, keeping in mind that less is often better than more.

Decorative light fixtures should be in character and scale of the structure: There are many fixtures available now. It is best if you can keep the light bulbs shielded with frosted glass, frosted bulbs, or low wattage so they are not a glare source. Also according to our guidelines, gas lights and multi-globe posts are not appropriate for the neighborhood. Adding a motion sensor to a porch light provides several benefits, such as saving energy and serving as a "visual doorbell." Additionally, during summer months, fewer moths and other insects gather around porch lights and slip inside when the door is opened.

Lighting should be dim and shielded: The best light sources are shielded and hidden from the normal line of sight. A "glare bomb" shining in your face is not welcoming to anyone, and provides poor security because it blinds those facing it, including a returning home owner who can't see who is in their driveway. Over lit areas cause the human iris to constrict, creating deep shadows in areas such as back yards and alleyways. As such, brighter is rarely better. Aim directional lights at night, mindful of potential glare effects within your neighbors' and your own bedrooms. Subtle landscape lighting, or soft dim flood lighting on a motion sensor, may add just enough light for safety and security.