

THE  
**METHUEN**  
**SIGN GUIDE**

Sign Regulations for the  
Searles, Tenney, Nevins Historic District

PREPARED BY  
THE METHUEN HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

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# **INTRODUCTION**

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Signs are one of the most prominent visual elements of a street. If well designed, they add interest and variety to building facades and attract customers. However, signs more than any other single feature can detract from even the most attractive building if designed and erected without care.

This booklet was prepared to assist property owners to understand and work with the sign regulations of the newly formed Historic District. It is hoped that the information presented here will enable you to design and put up the best possible sign for your building with the least amount of trouble and delay. If needed, Commission members may be able to provide design assistance to help you get started. If you have any questions or need further assistance, please contact the Historic District Commission through the Methuen Community Development Office at City Hall.

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# SIGN REVIEW PROCESS

The first step in securing sign review is to obtain a Sign Permit Application from the Methuen Building Department. If your property is within the Historic District you will be sent to the Community Development Office to fill out an Application for Certificates of Appropriateness, Non-Applicability, or Hardship. The Community Development office is open from Monday through Thursday from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and Friday 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. (Telephone #978-983-8560).

The second step is to prepare the required materials (see Page 3) and bring or send them to the Community Development Office. All four pieces of information must be received prior to a Sign Review. Appropriate scales should be used; we suggest 1 inch equals 1 foot. Notations should be made on any special design features or construction details. Twelve copies should be submitted.

The Historic District Commission will review your sign proposal when it is complete. You should plan to attend the meeting and public hearing at which your application will be discussed. The Community Development Office will notify you of the meeting time and location. All proposed signs will be considered in relation to the architecture of the building on which they are to be located and should be compatible with it in terms of the appropriateness of the size, color, shape, material and design. Proposed signs that obscure architectural details shall not be approved.

If your application is approved, the Commission will return to you one copy of the material stamped and signed. This copy may be returned to the Building Department, and if all their requirements are met, then a sign permit will be issued. If your application is not approved, you will be given recommendations to assist you in resubmitting your application.

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# SIGN REVIEW

## MATERIAL REQUIRED

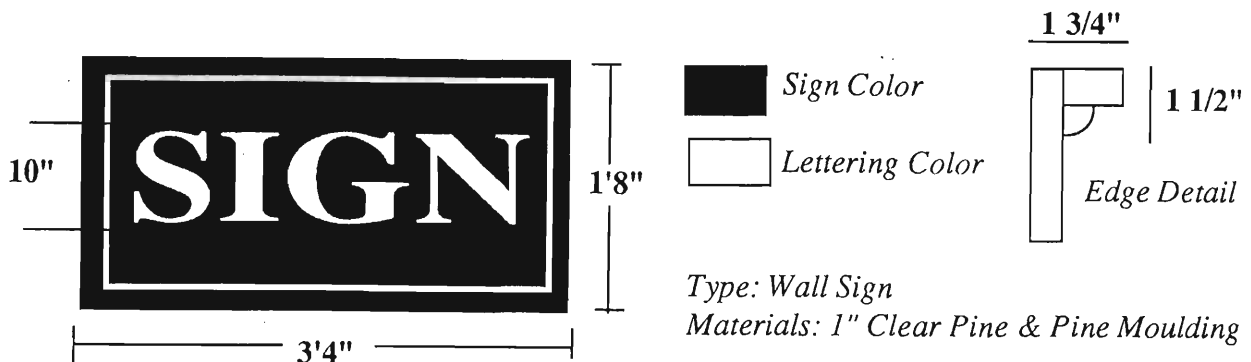
1. **A completed sign permit application.**
2. **A scale drawing of the proposed sign. The drawing must indicate:**
  - a. the type of proposed sign (refer to pages 4 – 6 for definitions)
  - b. dimensions of the proposed sign and any designs or lettering
  - c. colors – the drawing may be black and white but color must be attached for any colors other than black, pure white or gold leaf
  - d. materials – what the proposed sign is to be constructed of (i.e. pine, bronze, etc.)
  - e. edge detail – show a small cross section

3. **A scale drawing of the bracket, if any.**

This drawing should indicate dimensions, color, material and method of affixing bracket to the sign and the building.

4. **A scale drawing of the building showing where the proposed sign is to be located in relation to it.**

This drawing may be a simple one, but it must accurately indicate doors, windows, lineal frontage, height above grade and any other necessary dimensions or design features. A photograph may be submitted in addition to, or instead of, the building drawing, but it must show the information required on the drawing.



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# TYPES OF SIGNS

## **Animated sign**

Any sign, or any part of a sign, which mechanically moves, flashes or uses traveling lights. Animated signs are inappropriate in or near historic areas and are, therefore, not permitted.

## **Awning sign**

Awnings are subject to review of the Historic District Commission. Any sign attached to any awning is also subject to review. Approvals will be granted on an individual basis following review of the proposed awning in relation to the entire building facade and any other signs proposed or existing in the same location. Signs on awnings will be considered part of the allowable sign area.

## **Banner sign**

Any sign constructed of flexible material. Pennants and flags are considered banner signs. Banners may be used only as temporary signs and adhere to the same regulations. See definition of temporary signs for more information.

## **Directory sign**

Any sign that contains listings of two or more commercial establishments. Directory signs are for commercial establishments not on the street level who share a common entrance. They are allowed in pre-established locations.

## **Freestanding sign**

Any sign structurally separate from the building, being supported on itself or on a standard or legs.

## **Historic marker**

A permanent sign whose purpose is to indicate some significant fact about the building or its site. Historic markers are subject to review on an individual basis. The area of a historic marker will not be included in the total allowable sign area for a building.

## **Projecting sign**

Any sign supported by a building wall and not parallel to it which projects eight inches or more.

## **Roof sign**

Any sign which extends wholly or in part above exterior walls, which is located in front of or on any roof surface. Roof signs are not permitted.

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## Temporary sign

Any sign which is intended for a limited period of display. Temporary signs should be in place no more than 14 days before and no more than 2 days following an event or new service to a maximum of thirty days total per year. Temporary signs shall follow the guidelines established for permanent signs unless otherwise noted below.

1. Poster type sign:
  - a. shall be street level only
  - b. shall not occupy more than 20% of window area
  - c. shall be related to use conducted or goods available on premises
2. Construction sign:
  - a. identifies parties involved in construction on premises
  - b. no advertising permitted
  - c. shall not be larger than 16 square feet
  - c. shall only remain for duration of work – must be removed promptly by contractor at project completion
3. Real estate signs:
  - a. shall be related to sale, rental or lease of premises
  - b. shall not be larger than 3 square feet
  - c. shall be removed within 7 days after sale, rental or lease
4. Campaign signs:
  - a. shall not be larger than 3 square feet
  - b. shall not be displayed earlier than 60 days prior to an election
  - c. shall be removed within 7 days after an election
  - d. unsuccessful candidates for primary (preliminary) elections shall remove signs within 14 days after that election
5. Banners intended to advertise a business establishment prior to a permanent sign:
  - a. shall not be larger than 16 square feet total per business
  - b. shall be street level only
  - c. may contain message
6. Bunting:
  - a. fabric material only
  - b. shall be removed after 21 days
7. Signs are not permitted next to the Methuen Central Fire Station at Railroad Square (Five Corners).

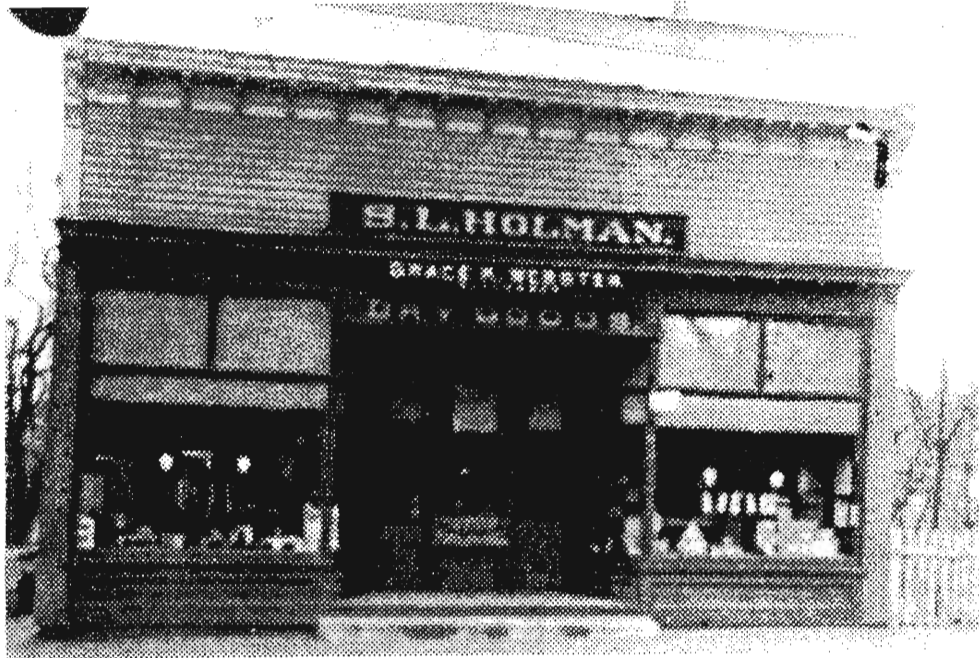
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## Wall sign

Any sign painted on, incorporated in or affixed to a building wall. Wall signs are of two types:

**directly applied wall sign** – painted, incised or three-dimensional letters applied directly to a building surface

**independent wall sign** – painted, incised or three-dimensional letters affixed to a signboard that is then attached to a building surface



*This photograph, taken circa 1890, of a business located in the Historic District is a good example of a well designed independent wall sign. Note the proportion of the sign to the building and its location above the entrance.*

## Window sign

Any sign which is permanently affixed to the surface of the glass of any part of an establishment. Signs affixed to glass are included as part of the total allowable sign area for the frontage and shall not occupy more than 10% of the glass area. Proposals for window signs shall be submitted for review at the same time as any other proposed signs for an establishment. Signs visible through a window on a permanent basis are considered window signs even though they may not be affixed directly to the glass.



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# REGULATIONS

## LOCATION AND SIZE

Sign location and size are important aspects of good sign design. When selecting a design, remember that bigger is not always better. Although a sign must be visible to be effective, it should never dominate the building facade or obscure its architectural details.

The first step in determining an appropriate size and location for a sign is to study your storefront. Signs located on establishment's lintel are appropriate for most 19th century storefronts which dominate Gaunt Square. Projecting signs, window signs, and signs on awnings are just a few of the possible locations for signs.

## LOCATION

Regardless of the sign location you choose, it is important to keep the following design guidelines in mind:

***Avoid overly large signs.*** Unlike the highway strip development of Route 28 in Salem, New Hampshire, Methuen's Central Business District was built on a human scale, oriented to pedestrians, not automobiles.

***Do not obscure architectural details.*** Decorative brickwork, pilasters, and intricate cornices are just a few of the features found on many of Methuen's historic structures that reflect a high quality of workmanship which is difficult to duplicate today. This detail greatly enhances Methuen's business district, setting it uniquely apart from the mini-mall development of today.

***Coordinate the placement of signs on adjacent storefronts, especially those placed on the same building.*** Placing a sign higher or lower than adjacent signs will not increase readability but instead create visual confusion. However, if the adjoining signs are out of scale or badly positioned, the only solution is to do what is best for your storefront and wait for the neighboring merchants to follow your example.

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# SIZE

The total area of signs of all types associated with a building cannot exceed 15% of the building's street facade area. On corner buildings the sign area allowed on each street facade is calculated separately. The total allowable sign area may be split between several signs. The area of each sign is calculated by multiplying the maximum width by the maximum height of the largest rectangle or other geometric shape necessary to surround all lettering and accompanying designs, symbols, and background signboard. If there is no signboard, enclose all letters and symbols in a rectangle and compute its area.

The following size restrictions pertain to individual sign types:

<b>Banner sign</b>	no larger than 16 square feet
<b>Directory sign</b>	no larger than 4 square feet
<b>Door sign</b>	no larger than 1 square foot
<b>Free standing sign</b>	no larger than 16 square feet; no taller than 10 feet
<b>Projecting sign</b>	no larger than 10 square feet projection: not more than 4 feet 8 inches from a building or 2/3 the width of a sidewalk, whichever is less. clearance: Not less than 10 feet clear space between the bottom of the sign and the ground or sidewalk. The height restriction may be waived if it is apparent that a reduced height is appropriate.
<b>Historic marker</b>	permanently affixed to building -no larger than 1.5 square feet freestanding -no larger than 4 square feet
<b>Temporary sign</b>	See section 3 (Types of Signs) for size restrictions
<b>Wall sign</b>	no larger than 15% of street facade area
<b>Window sign</b>	no larger than 10% of glass area

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# MATERIALS

Traditional materials such as wood, brass, bronze or other metals are the most appropriate on historical buildings or in historical areas, and will be acceptable. Plastic signs are not allowed. Wooden signs should be constructed of dense clear wood that will accept paint readily. Ordinary plywood will not withstand exposure -therefore if plywood is considered exterior or marine plywood must be chosen, although its use is not encouraged. (Note: the edges of plywood require special treatment). The use of rustic materials, such as barn board, is not generally appropriate.

# ILLUMINATION

Illuminated signs are permitted with restrictions. The use of internally lit (backlit plastic) is not permitted. Interior illumination of awnings is not allowed. Exterior illumination must be provided by a continuous light source that is installed to prevent direct light from shining on to street, adjacent properties or pedestrians. Flashing, moving, or neon lights are not permitted.

The light source that you select may be incandescent or fluorescent but should emit white light. Spot, track, overhang or wall lamps are all acceptable light sources. Avoid high intensity light sources, as they often produce excessive glare.

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# LETTERING

Lettering is a very important factor in successful sign design. Well-chosen, properly spaced lettering can enhance the readability of your sign's message. As a general rule, it is best to avoid overly ornate lettering, especially on lintel signs. Simple, relatively plain styles are easier to read and appear less cluttered. It is also recommended to limit the number of lettering styles used on anyone sign to two or three at most.

Historic photos of turn-of-the-century Methuen businesses (shown on page 12) and typographical history manuals are extremely helpful in determining which letter styles are appropriate for signs on 19th and early 20th century commercial buildings. Typical of early lettering styles are sans serif, upper case, and block letters. Egyptian Block Octagon, illustrated below, is an example of early lettering styles.



Late 19th century painted signs used more graceful serif lettering styles. The Boston Straight Roman and Boston Round Full Block styles closely resemble lettering styles used in Methuen at that time.

Lettering was also arranged in graceful curves and combined with painted borders. Fancier stores at the time used raised wooden letters in similar serif styles. These raised letters, painted gold or more often gold leafed, were attached directly to the lintel area or to a painted or smalted signboard.

For smaller interior signs that are not regulated by the Historic District Committee, it is recommended that you choose from the enormous variety of ornamental lettering styles available. By choosing historically sensitive type styles, the business of the district will achieve a visually unified, uncluttered and attractive appearance to prospective customers.



This technique gives depth to the lettering.



This is an example of an outlined letter with depth added.



This example shows an outlined letter with depth and shadow.

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# COLOR

Color selection is one of the most crucial aspects of successful sign design for it is the contrast in color between lettering and background which makes the sign easy to read. Because a sign should complement rather than clash with its surroundings, sign colors must also be compatible with the building facade and adjacent signs.

Generally speaking, no more than two or three colors (plus black, white or gold) should be used on any individual sign. Too many different colors that are too similar in tone make a sign difficult to read. Dark backgrounds with light letters are often the most successful and were the traditional practice in Methuen at the turn of the century.

Historically, the earliest signs had black backgrounds with white or light colored painted letters. Later, gold leaf often replaced the painted lettering and in addition to black backgrounds store owners selected painted or smalted backgrounds in deep tones of green, royal blue, maroon and purple. In addition to two color schemes used on less expensive signs, painters used gold leaf and contrasting areas of shade and shadow to create the illusion of letters projecting from flat signboards.

For painted lettering on windows, a historical color scheme which can still be very attractive includes gold leaf lettering, green or white outline and black depth or shadow.

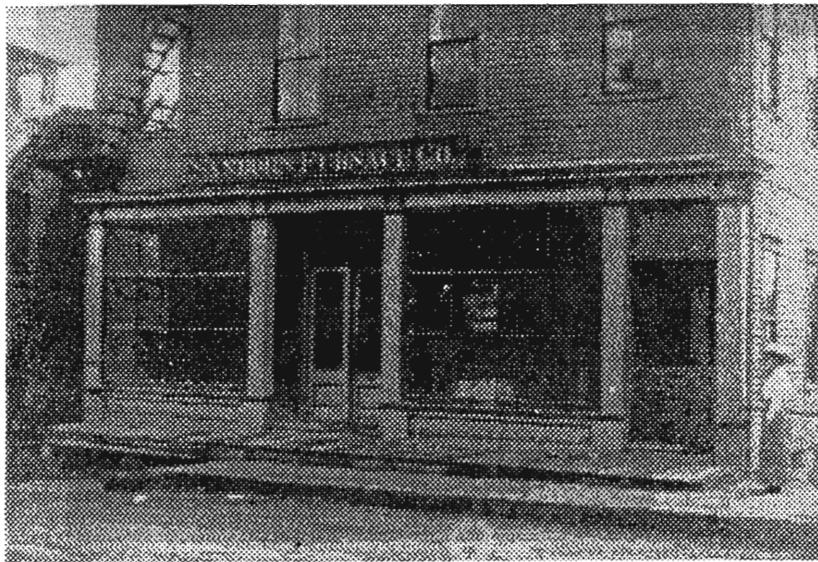
The color combinations listed here were adapted from several early sign maker's manuals. These manuals are filled with distinctive color schemes for painted letter signs. The following color combinations are strongly recommended for signs within the district.

<b>Background</b>	<b>Letters</b>	<b>Accent colors</b>
Black	Gold leaf, white, red, blue, green, cream, straw yellow	White, red, green, gold leaf, blue, dark yellow
Navy blue	White, red	Black, white, straw yellow, gold leaf
Gray	Navy blue, black	White, red
Emerald green	Gold leaf, white, red	White, gold leaf, black
Brown	Gold leaf, light blue	Red, white
Cream	Navy blue, red	Black
Red	Gold leaf, white, mustard yellow	Black
Mustard Yellow	Navy blue, red	Red, black

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# HISTORIC EXAMPLES

These photographs of turn-of-the-century Methuen businesses are provided as good examples of well designed and appropriately displayed signs. Additional photographs are available at the Methuen Historical Museum. It is the wish of the Historic District Commission that present day businesses will strive to replicate the ambience of this era. For examples of historically sensitive and attractive signs used by modern businesses, we recommend you tour successful historic districts in neighboring cities of Lowell, Newburyport, and Salem, Massachusetts.



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# VIOLATIONS & FINES

Should any property owner or tenant alter, replace, or erect a new sign without a Certificate of Appropriateness or Hardship or fail to meet any requirements as set forth above, he/she shall be notified of the violation by the Historic District Commission or another City agent. Upon notification, the property owner or tenant will have thirty days to make whatever changes are necessary to comply. After thirty days, the Historic District Commission may fine the owner one hundred dollars per day for each separate offense and may commence an appropriate court action.