

TRADITIONAL LIME COATINGS FOR CONTEMPORARY USE

Environmentally friendly and traditional products such as lime mortars, natural varnishes and linseed-oil paints are gaining in popularity in the U.S. and in European countries. Limewash, also known as whitewash is a traditional finish that has been used on interior and exterior surfaces for centuries from ancient temples in Egypt to vernacular buildings in North Carolina. Lime coatings are produced from burning limestone or oyster shells and slaking (hydrating) with water.



Color (ochre) limewash at a 19th century Martin Co. Farmhouse

Limewashed wood ceiling and plaster walls at the 1730 Newbold-White House in Perquimans Co.

Limewash is an excellent interior coating for use on plaster and sheetrock walls and ceilings. Lime coatings are considered non-toxic and VOC free. There are a growing number of commercially available lime coatings on the market today with some manufacturers offering them in a range of colors. Relatively inexpensive lime coatings can be found on the web by searching under lime paint, limewash and whitewash.



Tinted lime paint on sheetrock wall and ceiling (left) and plaster (right) in this 19th century Martin Co. Farmhouse.



Lime coatings are “breathable” allowing greater water transfer than most modern paints and less likely to peel under high-moisture conditions. This can be especially beneficial for buildings located in areas prone to water damage from severe storms such as hurricanes. Lime coatings can typically be touched-up with little or no noticeable difference in color several years following application. Limewash does not yellow and natural pigments in the coating (if using a color) hold their color. Lime coatings also resist mold growth with the pH of the lime.

Paint coating staining from leaks from Hurricane Irene. Limewashes can typically be touched-up without the need to repaint an entire room even years following initial application.

Although limewash is commonly thought to have been used historically for sanitary reasons, I believe that this coating was applied to “brighten” dimly lit rooms prior to the advent of electric lighting. Lime has great refractive properties and can intensify the amount of light in a room during daylight and with the use of artificial lighting.

Limewashes are typically applied by damping wall surfaces and bushing on three or more thin coats allowing each coat to dry overnight. Some coatings can be applied by use of a sprayer and roller. While the coating can be messy to apply spills are easy to clean-up.

Limewashes have been used on interior walls and ceilings at the Cupola House in Edenton, Burgess House at Halifax State Historic Site, Hope Plantation in Bertie Co. and a few private homes in the northeast region. For additional information including traditional recipes contact Restoration Specialist Reid Thomas at reid.thomas@ncdcr.gov.



Limewashed walls at the Cupola House in Edenton.