

Accessibility

PROPERTY CARE WHITE PAPERS • 2026

Door Width and Accessibility in Historic Houses

by BEN HAAVIK

Historic buildings have a well-earned reputation for being difficult to navigate for people with disabilities. As stewards of these spaces, our responsibility is twofold: to preserve their historic integrity while ensuring that all visitors feel welcome. At Historic New England, we are committed to expanding access by offering inclusive programming and making thoughtful physical improvements. We are continually reviewing options and implementing changes across our sites to create more accessible, inclusive experiences for all.

Door width is a fundamental accessibility issue in historic house museums, and most doorways in Historic New England properties do not meet current building code standards for accessibility.¹

The *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) Standards for Design acknowledge that it may

be difficult to make historic buildings fully compliant with any code because the intervention may threaten or damage the historic significance of the structure. The ADA suggests that historic properties should comply to the “maximum extent possible,” but offer little guidance on what that may be.² Addressing the concept of “maximum extent possible” is complex, involving philosophical, ethical, and practical considerations. On one hand, the goal should be to share the property as broadly as possible; on the other, our job is also to preserve the architectural integrity of the house. Tension arises when providing access is—or is perceived to be—damaging to the features that make the property significant. A balance might be found by working closely with local constituencies to identify what is essential for accessibility and what must remain intact to uphold preservation standards.

This white paper presents strategies that historic house stewards might consider regarding door widths when navigating conversations about voluntarily improving accessibility or code-based compliance processes.

This white paper can help inform discussions and develop solutions that balance preservation with accessibility. It provides strategies that achieve code compliant 32” minimum clear widths, as well as options for 30” clear widths when full compliance isn’t feasible because of the impact to the integrity of the structure.

Philosophy Statement

BALANCING PRESERVATION AND ACCESSIBILITY

When evaluating intervention strategies for Historic New England's historic house museums, **four key considerations guide our decisions:**

1. **Public benefit** of the intervention
2. **Impact** of the intervention on **historic fabric**
3. **Impact** of the intervention on **character-defining features** and **spatial experience**
4. **Reversibility** of the intervention

At Historic New England, we have a longstanding tradition of being conservative in our preservation practices. We generally favor less invasive modifications when making changes to our historic properties. While preservation remains at the core of our philosophy, we recognize the importance of thoughtful interventions that provide more equitable and inclusive access to our historic resources.

Historic New England and other historic house museum stewards may not always achieve full compliance with ADA guidelines. Our goal is

to provide the highest level of access possible without compromising the features that make a historic building or structure distinctive and worth preserving and presenting. Achieving this balance requires dialogue with the communities affected by proposed changes. These conversations help us identify what aspects of a site are essential to preserve, while also understanding what those communities see as essential for meaningful access. This is why engaging in open, respectful dialogue with the communities affected by the proposed changes is important.

Guidelines

SUBSTANDARD CODE DOOR WIDTHS

Current building codes require a minimum clear width of 32" for a fully accessible doorway. However, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses, doorways commonly range from 26" to 29".³ Large projects are

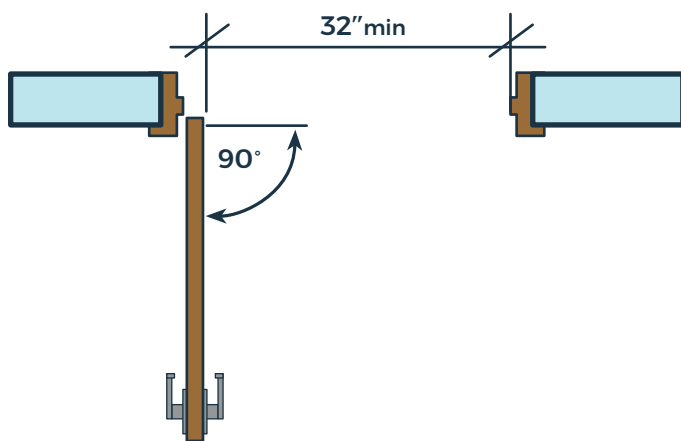


Illustration of clear width from the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design.

likely to trigger a review by a local or state access board. Depending on the board's composition and the arguments presented by the historic site's representatives, some flexibility is possible in most building codes. Variances allowing 30" doorways have previously been granted to historic sites in several states. In fact, the practice is so common that the Association for Preservation Technology Codes Committee advocated in 2021 for a building code change to permit 30" doorways by right in historic house museums. This paper considers a 30" clear width to be an acceptable substandard when 32" is not possible. While a 30" clear width is not a standard variance and cannot be guaranteed, this document may assist a historic site in making a case for its use.

Small projects may not trigger a formal code review during the permitting process. In such cases, a historic site might voluntarily undertake accessibility improvements as outlined in this paper, recognizing that these efforts may not fully meet current code requirements.

Regardless of whether accessibility improvements are voluntary or compliance-based, we strongly recommend consulting with representatives from the communities the changes aim to support as you consider alternatives.

Technical Information

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING DOOR WIDTH-RELATED BARRIERS

Historic New England has identified **five strategies** for addressing door width-related barriers to access to our historic house museums. From least to greatest intervention, the strategies are:

1. Change the route so widening the doorways is not necessary
2. Remove the door
3. Remove or otherwise modify the door casing
4. Modify the wall system
5. Modify the framing

It should be noted that in preservation circles, “Do Nothing” is considered a viable approach when reviewing possible interventions to a structure. The intent of “Do Nothing” as a choice is to remind preservationists that one of our roles is to minimize our impact on the buildings with which we work. “Do Nothing” was purposely left off the list of possible

interventions because its intent is to increase the accessibility of historic house museums and thus “Do Nothing” should not be a consideration. The goal of any publicly accessible historic property should be to provide access to the greatest number of people possible.

On the following pages, you will find case studies demonstrating how to implement each option. These options can also be combined in imaginative ways to achieve your goals.

Strategy 1

CHANGE THE MUSEUM TOUR ROUTE

Simply changing the tour route to follow a path with wider doorways is a good strategy to start, though it can be easier said than done and might involve incorporating other strategies, as well. Mapping out your route to find a more accessible path through your museum may require changing the tour narrative, but doing so might be worth the effort if it achieves greater accessibility.

Example 1

THE EUSTIS ESTATE, MILTON, MA

A new tour route at the late nineteenth-century Eustis Estate was approved by the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board. The route was carefully chosen to limit door width modifications along the path to the new ADA compliant bathroom and the chair lift. All non-compliant doorways are not part of the tour route.



PROPOSED FLOOR PLANS

- Newly Accessible Public Entrance
- New Vertical Wheelchair Lift
- New Accessible Single User Toilet Room
- Program / Function Space
- Employee Use Only Entrance
- Accessible Route

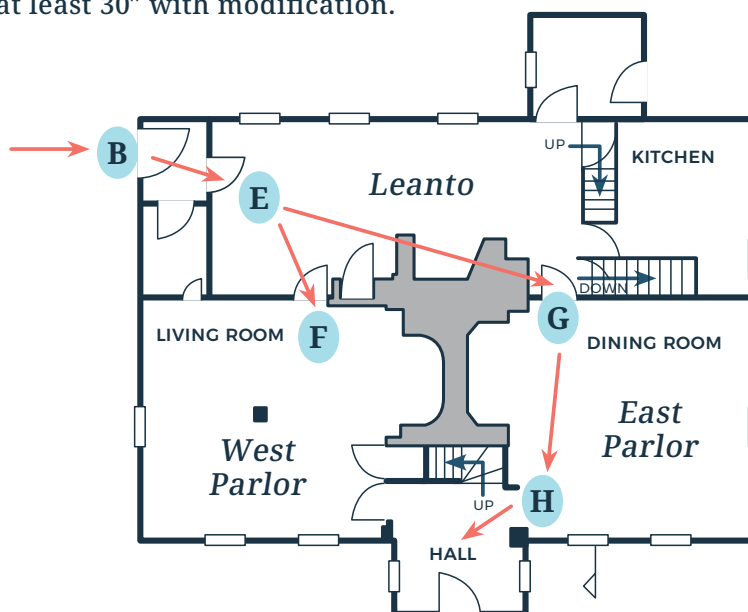
Locations of Requested Variances

- Main Public Entrance (Var. #1)
- Existing Door (Var. #2A)
Width, Maneuvering Clear, Thresholds, Hardware
- Existing Door (Var. #2B)
Width, Maneuvering Clear, Hardware
- ★ Existing Main Stair (Var. #3 & 4)
- Threshold to be modified

Example 2

COOPER-FROST-AUSTIN HOUSE, CAMBRIDGE, MA

Historic New England staff proposed a new tour route in the seventeenth-century Cooper-Frost-Austin House to maximize access and minimize intervention. In this case, the route shows where we can achieve door widths of at least 30" with modification.



HIGHLIGHTED DOORS
REPRESENT ACCESSIBLE
PATH OF 30" OR GREATER
FOR PROPOSED
CIRCULATION IN ARROWS
TO ENABLE VISITORS TO
VIEW FULL FIRST FLOOR

Strategy 2

REMOVE THE DOORS

If the clear width measurement including the door does not meet code but it is close, consider removing the door. While this will not work in all situations, it can be a valuable—and inexpensive—tool in your kit. It is the most reversible of the physical interventions we have identified and has the least impact on a building's historic fabric, assuming the door is appropriately archived. The removal of a door could impact character defining aspects, spatial experience of the space, or program uses, and these impacts should be evaluated.



Measuring and reviewing construction techniques of a door to consider what modifications might be possible.

Example

COOPER-FROST-AUSTIN HOUSE CAMBRIDGE, MA

This doorway at the 1681 Cooper-Frost-Austin House has a clear width of 29" because of the way the door and hinge align. Simply removing the door would achieve a 30" clear width. In this case, removing the door does not negatively impact the visitor experience, but it does not achieve the code-compliant 32" clear width. By combining Strategy 2 with Strategy 3—removing the casing from the door—we could provide 31" of clear width, which still does not meet code but further expands access without cutting into the historic framing of the house.

Strategy 3

REMOVE OR MODIFY DOOR CASINGS

This approach leaves the door framing intact as a preservation methodology but makes surgical cuts into the door casing to allow for its temporary removal. The amount of additional clear width gained from this modification depends on how the building was originally constructed. During analysis of Historic New England sites, we have identified potential interventions where removing or altering the door casing may add less than an inch, while in others it could provide up to four inches of

additional clearance. While this approach is not reversible and it has a greater impact on historic material, it does allow for additional width that may make a significant difference to visitor experience. When considering this strategy, a careful analysis of the extent to which the additional width will improve accessibility should be measured against impact on the historic fabric, to balance preserving character defining features with creating a significant benefit to the public.

Example

PIERCE HOUSE, DORCHESTER, MA

At seventeenth-century Pierce House, Historic New England modified three interior doors to enhance access and achieve a minimum of 30" clear width. Each doorway presented unique challenges with the existing historic framing and details, so working with skilled and knowledgeable designers and craftspeople is essential when pursuing this approach. As a bonus, in all three door openings, we found fascinating evidence of previous changes

to the house. Now, the doorways are opened on tour days because they support site interpretation as well as making the museum more accessible.

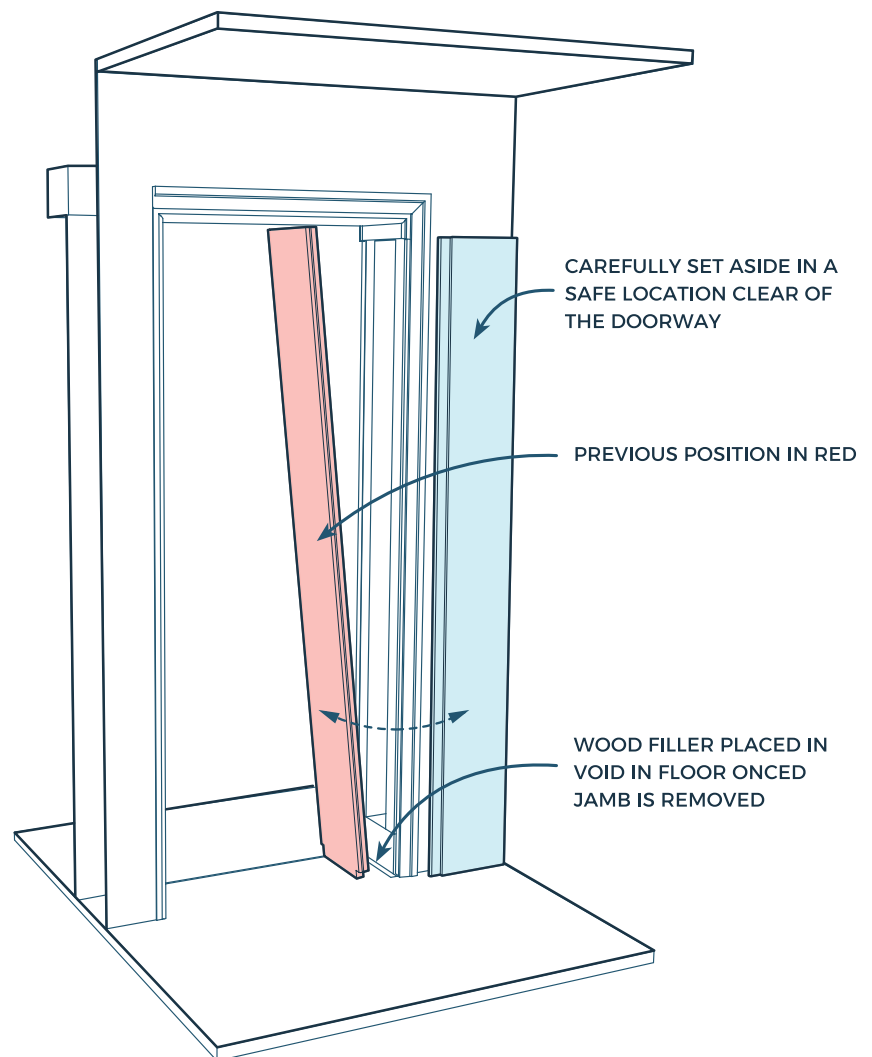
We made surgical cuts to remove trim work from the doorway (upper left), then used magnets (lower left) to reattach the trim until it needs to be removed for access. The rendering (right) was developed by Design Associates, Inc. as part of the project.



Surgical cuts to remove trim work from the doorway.



Magnets used to attach the trim while the opening allows a view into the history of the building.



Rendering developed by Design Associates, Inc.

Strategy 4

MODIFY THE WALL SYSTEM

Some seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century interior walls in New England houses were built using boards to form the walls instead of traditional studs, lath, and plaster. An intervention to widen a doorway in a house museum with this kind of construction might require making cuts in the wall to create a hinged opening. While this approach is

not reversible, much of the historic fabric remains *in situ*. As above, when considering this strategy, a careful analysis of the extent to which the additional width will improve accessibility should be measured against impact on the historic fabric, to balance preserving character defining features with creating a significant benefit to the public.

Example

BUCKMAN TAVERN, LEXINGTON, MA

Historic New England has not modified wall systems like this to create accessible doorways at any of our sites. The Lexington Historical Society, however, has made this kind of alteration to one of its museum properties with interior board walls—the early eighteenth-century Buckman Tavern. In the bottom left image, the hinge is visible inside the room in its

closed position. The image on the right shows how the casing framing the door opening in the hall was used as the guide to make the cut: The entire piece of casing (and the section of board wall upon which it sits) hinges away to provide a wider than normal door opening. The element is held in place with the use of magnets.



Hinges on this board wall reveal a new use for accessibility.



The hinges allow for a section of the board wall to swing open.

Strategy 5

MODIFY THE FRAMING

Sometimes the holistic analysis of door modifications and the impact on the site leads one to the strategy to modify the building fabric to fully meet code. This is the most invasive intervention because it modifies

the structural framing of the house to accommodate the change. This method is non-reversible and has the most impact on the historic fabric, but it also has the greatest impact on access.



The closet door before the trim and woodwork was archived.



New framing to support the chair lift and its opening.



The finished chair lift door.

Example

THE EUSTIS ESTATE, MILTON, MA

At the 28,000-square-foot Eustis Estate, we determined that modifying the door frame and building out the wall slightly to accommodate a chair lift was a minor sacrifice to the historic material compared to providing second floor access for visitors. The existing 31" clear door width

did not meet code and so a larger opening for a code-compliant door needed to be provided. We replicated door trim for the new, larger opening that matched the original trim and grain painted the metal lift door to match the other doors in the space.

Conclusion

By considering a range of strategies and engaging with the communities they serve, historic sites can responsibly increase accessibility while respecting the architectural integrity of a building or structure.

In navigating the challenge of door width in historic house museums, the goal may not always be full compliance, but a thoughtful balance between access and preservation.



Benjamin Haavik

**VICE PRESIDENT
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Benjamin Haavik, Vice President of Property Care and Climate Action, is responsible for maintenance, preservation, and capital improvements for all Historic New England's property holdings, including the thirty-eight historic house museums and landscapes open to the public, plus the Haverhill Center. Before joining Historic New England in 2004, Ben started his career at the Fairmount Park Historic Preservation Trust in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, after receiving his MS in Historic Preservation from the University of Pennsylvania. Ben was subsequently Deputy Director of the Historic House Trust of New York City, where he cared for twenty-four historic sites throughout the five boroughs of New York City.

Acknowledgments

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We thank the Lexington Historical Society for allowing the inclusion of the Buckman Tavern in this document.

All photographs by Historic New England staff.

We recognize that additional strategies may exist beyond those presented here. Do you have an example you want to share? Please contact Historic New England and our property care team and let us know: PropertyCare@HistoricNewEngland.org.

Notes

¹ 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design, accessed at the U.S. Access Board's website on September 21, 2025.

² Ibid

³ Beginning in the eighteenth century, high-style houses began to feature increasingly wider doorways. Until the twentieth century, however, door width remained highly variable between houses, within a house, and even from door to door within the same room.

These guidelines were developed to support Historic New England's Property Care staff in planning work at our museum sites.



Homeowners and stewards of other historic sites may find the guidelines useful in developing their own approaches to maintaining and restoring their historic resources.

We suggest you also consult the [Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties](#) for additional guidance and broader context. Please consider that, depending on the scope and nature of the work, projects may be subject to state building codes and may require review or approval by local and state agencies, including local historic district commissions, building officials, and the State Historic Preservation Office. Finally, historic materials and finishes may contain hazardous materials, such as lead or asbestos, so always consider the safety for workers and occupants.