

HISTORIC
NEW ENGLAND

Accessibility

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Interior Thresholds 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.

While thresholds do not pose an obvious barrier to access to historic museums like building entries or door widths, they can cause issues for a greater number of visitors. Tall thresholds, uneven thresholds, and dark or hidden thresholds can all make navigating a historic site difficult. Thresholds may seem innocuous, but they serve an important role. They cover the gap between the floor and the bottom of the door, which is generally only a fraction of an inch. On exterior doors, thresholds prevent water ingress, block pests, and keep drafts out. Inside historic homes, thresholds help define spaces by marking the transition from one room to another.

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.¹ 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.

Threshold modifications may not always rise to the level of “threatening the historical significance” of a property, but altering them can affect a visitor’s experience and understanding of the spaces in a historic house museum. This white paper can help inform discussions and develop solutions that balance preservation with accessibility.

This white paper presents strategies that historic house stewards might consider for making thresholds more accessible to support conversations about voluntarily improving accessibility or code-based compliance processes.

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

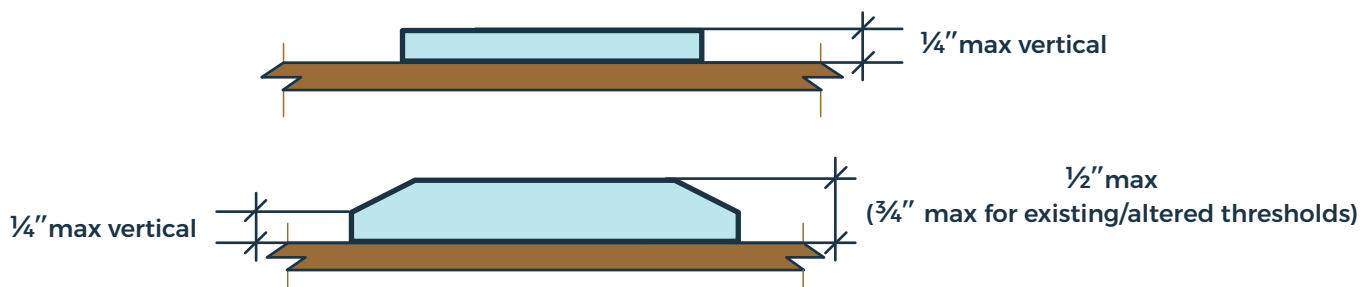
to provide the highest level of access possible without compromising the features that make a historic building or structure distinctive and worth preserving and presenting. Achieving this balance requires dialogue with the communities affected by proposed changes. These conversations help us identify 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 INTERIOR THRESHOLDS

Historic thresholds vary widely in profile, design, and construction, but many pose a tripping hazard or an impediment to a wheelchair.

The ADA standards state: *The height of thresholds is limited to 1/2" in new construction. The edge must be beveled 1:2 maximum above a height of 1/4". A maximum height of 3/4" is permitted for existing or altered thresholds if they have a beveled edge on each side with a slope not steeper than 1:2. These requirements apply to all types of doors required to comply, including sliding doors.*²



NOTE: VERTICAL EDGE MUST BE LOCATED BELOW BEVEL, NOT ABOVE

Illustration from the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design.

Interior thresholds at Historic New England properties vary widely in both height and design. Heights generally range from 1/4" to 3/4", and thresholds feature a variety of bevel types. The original construction methods also play a role in deciding on an intervention and how potentially disruptive it may be. Historically, thresholds either extend under the door casing or are scribed directly into the opening against the casing. Scribing is similar to tracing: it involves marking the contours of an irregular floor, wall, or door jamb onto another piece of wood so it can be trimmed for an exact fit. Thresholds scribed into the casing are generally easier and less invasive to remove

than those that extend under the casing, because the casing doesn't need to be removed in order to remove the threshold.

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 whether they meet full code or not. 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

FOUR STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING INTERIOR THRESHOLD-RELATED BARRIERS

Historic New England has identified **four strategies** for addressing threshold-related barriers to access to our historic house museums. Most options involve some form of intervention, but the specific circumstances of each site guide which approach is most appropriate. The strategies are:

1. Provide transition strips to soften the threshold height
2. Modify or recreate the threshold
3. Remove the threshold
4. Raise the floor height

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

PROVIDE TRANSITION STRIPS TO SOFTEN THE THRESHOLD HEIGHT

Transition strips can be applied to a threshold or wherever there is a change in surface heights within a building (including carpets). There is a whole industry dedicated to this type of product, so commercially made transition strips may sometimes be suitable for a historic structure. However, historic house museums often have specific aesthetic considerations, and products designed for modern construction may not provide the right visual or material match; for this reason, custom-made transition strips may be a better solution. These interventions are deemed reversible and have minimal impact on existing historic fabric.



Thresholds and wooden threshold transitions at the Gore Estate.

Example 1

**THE GORE ESTATE
WALTHAM, MA**

The Gore Estate (owned by the Gore Society) is not a Historic New England property. On a visit to the site, we admired the custom-designed wood transitions that fit perfectly within tight confines and supported smooth access within the space.

Example 2

**THE EUSTIS ESTATE
MILTON, MA**

At Historic New England's Eustis Estate in Milton, Massachusetts, we mocked up rubber and wood transition strips for the threshold (see image—rubber oriented to the top of the image, wood to the bottom) so they could be evaluated by staff. The state access board approved the rubber for use, but a technical review with local potential users revealed that the rubber transition selected did not actually enhance accessibility.

We also tested custom wooden transition strips but found that they disrupted the visual flow of the space and impeded access along the hallways, so we pursued alternative methods, ultimately settling on a combination of strategies 2 and 3.



Mock-ups at the Eustis Estate to review a rubber transition strip, as well as two variants of wood.

Strategy 2

MODIFY OR RECREATE THE THRESHOLD

Another approach is to remove the threshold and either fabricate a new threshold or modify the original to meet access requirements. This is a preservation decision for the institution about retaining historic material or modifying it for use. At Historic New England, we favor archiving

the original threshold and installing a recreation because modifying an existing threshold is not reversible (see Strategy 1). It should be noted that removing a threshold can be invasive and, depending on its original construction methodology, might damage the door casing and other features.

Example

THE EUSTIS ESTATE, MILTON, MA

At the Eustis Estate, the original interior thresholds were over 3/4 inch and needed modification. We documented, removed, and archived all thresholds within the circulation path. We then employed two methodologies to address the threshold heights; this example highlights one method, while the other

is featured in Strategy 3. In the main hall of the Eustis mansion, we felt that the thresholds helped define the front hall space and their removal would have negatively impacted the spatial experience. Therefore, we recreated the thresholds at a height that complied with ADA standards.



Historic New England preservation carpenter sanding the existing filler pieces once the threshold was removed.



Replacement threshold installed in the same location at ADA compliant levels, before staining and final treatments.

Strategy 3

REMOVE THE THRESHOLD

In certain instances, it may be possible to remove the threshold to create a smooth transition without a change in elevation that would create a mobility issue. Similar to modifying the threshold, original construction methods used for the threshold may make this more or less difficult. Removing a

threshold can be an invasive procedure depending on the circumstances. While archiving the threshold won't necessarily make the process less invasive, it enhances the reversibility of the action because you could potentially reinstall the original threshold at a later date.

Example

THE EUSTIS ESTATE, MILTON, MA

While we recreated the thresholds in the Eustis Estate front hall in a lower profile (see Strategy 2), we removed and did not replace most thresholds in other publicly accessible spaces. In these areas, we did not feel the loss of the thresholds affected the spatial experience.

Once we removed the thresholds, we found they were covering spaces with loose wood filler pieces. We documented the loose pieces, removed them from the subfloor, and archived them. We then installed a new solid piece of wood flush with the surrounding floors to emulate a threshold without any changes in elevation.



Threshold has been removed, showing the filler pieces used at the Eustis Estate.



The filler pieces were removed and a new threshold was inserted into the subfloor and flush with the surrounding floor. This image is before staining and final treatments.

Strategy 4

RAISE THE DOOR HEIGHT

In some spaces, raising the floor height can help create a smooth, accessible transition over thresholds. Changing the floor height of an entire room can have a major impact on both the space and historic materials, but in some cases, it can be an effective solution for improving accessibility. At Historic New England, we use two main approaches. One is to install a thin, replica floor on top of the original, carefully matched to the existing

flooring, to bring the surface up to the height of the thresholds. The other is to use a well-placed carpet to create a smoother transition between the threshold and the adjoining space. Of course, the carpet weave should meet ADA requirements. These interventions are reversible with minimal impact to historic fabric, but they may change the spatial experience of a character defining feature.

Example 1

LANGDON HOUSE, PORTSMOUTH, NH

This carpet at Langdon House smooths out the transition between the threshold and the room beyond.



With feet for scale, this image shows the historic threshold transition between the hall floor and the carpet on the other side. The historic threshold meets ADA requirements.

Example 2

PHILLIPS HOUSE SALEM, MA

This pass-through space at Phillips House is a candidate for either a carpet or a replica floor to eliminate level changes caused by thresholds at each door. The intervention is suitable because of the small size of the space and the low interpretive importance of the flooring in this area.

This is still under consideration and no work has been completed.



Pass through space at Phillips House that is important to the current tour path but has opportunities for access improvements.

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 interior thresholds in historic house museums, the goal may not always be full compliance, but a thoughtful balance between access and preservation.



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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.

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We thank the Gore Society for allowing the inclusion of the Gore Estate 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 Code references are based on the 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design accessed at the U.S. Access Board's website on July 26, 2021 About the ADA Guides ([access-board.gov](https://www.access-board.gov)).

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.