



Removing Graffiti from Historic Properties

Contact: Jeffrey Harris, OCR, 617-626-4936
jeffrey.harris@state.ma.us

Goal: Remove graffiti that defaces historic buildings or structures; prevent damage to cultural resources during removal process

Guidelines

General

- Act as soon as graffiti is identified. The longer it remains, the more difficult it is to remove. Prompt removal also can discourage future vandalism.
- Do not paint over graffiti on previously unpainted masonry or concrete, as it may damage the material, attract future vandalism, and detract from the historic character of the resource.
- Always begin with the gentlest cleaning method possible, applying cleaning agents using the shortest dwell time.
- For any cleaning technique, test in an inconspicuous area of the graffiti first to make sure that it does not leave a residue or damage the underlying material.
- Avoid the use of “off-the-shelf” aerosol-based graffiti removal products, which can stain other areas as the dissolved paint runs down the surface.
- Avoid the use of abrasive cleaning techniques or harsh chemicals, which can cause permanent damage to a historic resource that is worse than the graffiti itself.
- To avoid creating stark “clean spots,” clean the entire masonry unit, or feather out the cleaning into the surrounding area.
- Protect surrounding plantings during cleaning.
- Always follow product manufacturer’s directions for application procedures and safety precautions. Note that some cleaning measures may not be effective in cold temperatures.



Action Steps

- To the best of your ability, identify the vandalized building material and type of graffiti material.
- If graffiti impacts a significant cultural resource, fragile stonework, historic gravestones, or covers more than a few square feet, contact the Office of Cultural Resources to determine whether the assistance of an experienced contractor is required.
- First attempt to remove graffiti using clean water and a plastic or fiber-bristle brush. Low-pressure water spray may also be effective (100 psi or below). Also try adding a detergent to the water, such as clear dishwashing soap. These techniques may have limited effectiveness on old graffiti or non-soluble markers/paint. **Never use wire brushes, steel wool, mechanical sanders, or power blasting equipment.**
- If graffiti covers a **previously** painted metal, wood, or masonry surface, it is acceptable to cover the graffiti with paint if matching paint for the underlying color is available.
- If graffiti is applied to unpainted brick, stone, or concrete, select a cleaning agent that is appropriate to the type of masonry. "Acid sensitive" materials include limestone, marble, shales, polished stones, glazed terra cotta and glazed brick. "Non-acid sensitive" materials include slate, granite, unglazed terra cotta and unglazed brick. "Alkali sensitive" materials include some granites, Indiana limestone, and sandstone.
- Cleaning agents should also be selected to be appropriate to the type of graffiti. The most commonly used materials are spray paints and felt-tip markers.
- Commercial graffiti-removal products are available at most hardware or paint stores. Some products, including Motzenbocker's "Lift Off," are safe to use without the use of respirators. Other products, such as "Goof Off", Peel Away 1, or Proso's Graffiti Wipe may require the use of respirators in certain conditions, and staff should not use such products without proper respirator training and fitting. Be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions for use. Personal protective equipment should include solvent-protective gloves and eye protection. Apply product in a well-ventilated area. Collect runoff for proper disposal. **Do not allow hazardous chemicals to enter into the storm drain system.**
- Following cleaning, rinse the surface thoroughly with clean water, then rinse again. Even the gentlest cleaners can discolor materials if left on surfaces for a long time.
- Assemble a graffiti removal kit to enable quick action. Kit should include a scrub brush with natural or plastic bristles, rubber gloves, safety goggles, spray bottle, detergents and cleaners, clean towels or rags, and plastic tarps.

Preventing Future Graffiti

- Quick removal of new graffiti will often help to discourage vandals from returning in the future.
- Alert police, rangers and Friends groups to graffiti incidents. Implement a ParkWatch program and post a phone number for reporting vandalism. Only law enforcement officials should directly confront vandals.
- Consider the installation of security lighting in areas that are popular targets for graffiti.
- While transparent barrier coatings can be applied to surfaces to ease the removal of future graffiti, they generally are not recommended for use on historic masonry. Please consult with OCR prior to applying any such coating.