

**FENCE GUIDELINES**  
IN  
***Des Moines' Historic Districts***



Prepared by  
THE DES MOINES PLAN AND ZONING COMMISSION  
for  
THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION  
with a matching grant-in-aid from  
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1984

AMENDMENTS:

DATE \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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# INTRODUCTION

Fencing in residential districts serves three purposes:

## Privacy

### Physical

- to reroute pedestrian traffic

### Visual

- to obstruct an undesirable view

### Sound

- to control the level of sound

## Security

- to help maintain a safe environment

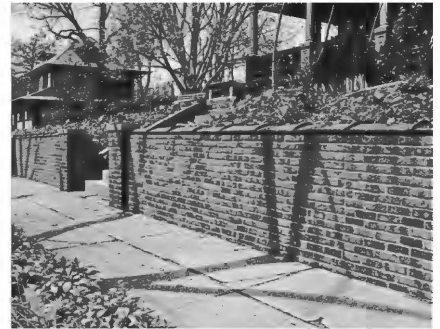
## Decorative

- to build an edge along a walk, garden or property line

- to create a passage from public to private space

Installation of fencing in designated historic districts is required by Ordinance to be reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission through an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness in addition to the proper building permits.

These guidelines serve to assist the Historic Preservation Commission's decisionmaking in the review of applications for certificates of appropriateness for new fences.



# Placement

In general, regulations for the placement and height of fences are governed by the Zoning ordinance. In most instances, the fence guidelines for placement and height are more restrictive than the regulations contained in the zoning ordinance due to the unique historic character of Sherman Hill and Owl's Head. Please note, any fence that does not comply with regulations contained in the Zoning ordinance must also receive approval from the Board of Adjustment after receiving a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Historic Preservation Commission.

## Front, Side, Alley, Corner, Back Yard

- The rear yard fence, both open and solid, should be a maximum of six feet in height.
- A gate is recommended from an enclosed back yard to an alley or another back yard.
- A gate is recommended between two side yards when the fence runs the entire length of the front and back yard.

## Grade Change

- The fence should step along a grade change at intervals set by the length between posts (rather than at variable lengths or with a continuously straight top edge).

## Finished Side

- The post and rail side should be facing the homeowner's yard while the picket side should face the street, neighbor or alley.

If the property owner desires two post and rail sides, this is acceptable. However, pickets should be placed "back-to-back" rather than alternating (board-on-board or "shadow-box").



*A rear alley gate.*



*The step down of a fence to accommodate grade change.*



*The step down of a fence to accommodate grade change.*



*Board on board "shadow-box" fences are not recommended.*

# Design

The design of any fence should be compatible with the style, size, and materials used in the house on the same property.

## MASONRY

### Size

- Pillars in a fence are usually over one foot square.
- Fence bases and retaining walls are usually kept below two feet in height.

### Shape

- Pillars are typically square with a base and a cap.
- Retaining walls are typically linear with a segmented cap.

### Spacing

- The distance between pillars should be an amount equivalent to two times the height. i.e., if the pillar is four feet tall, the posts may be spaced eight feet on center.

### Material

- Railroad tie retaining walls are not recommended in historic neighborhoods.
- **Poured concrete** should match the color and texture of aged concrete retaining walls in the neighborhood as closely as possible. Some poured concrete replacements may have aggregate. Recovered broken concrete is also acceptable.
- **Concrete block** Split-face block closely matching the color and texture of aged concrete or stone retaining walls in the neighborhood should be used. Smooth concrete blocks and interlocking blocks with curved faces are not recommended.
- **Brick** Typically should be used with brick houses or larger houses with a brick foundation that closely matches the color, texture and hardness of the existing brick and with mortar that closely matches the existing color, texture, hardness, joint size and depth.



*Low retaining wall.*



*Square pillar with segmented cap.*



*Brick wall.*



*Brick wall.*

# Design

The design of any fence should be compatible with the style, size, and materials used in the house on the same property.

## METAL

### Height

- Four to six feet in height is typical for long stretches of land.
- Two to three feet in height is appropriate for smaller areas. Guardrails from widow's walks have been used as front yard fences.

### Shape

- Simple designs should be used with simplistic houses and more elaborate designs should be used for more elaborate houses. Catalogs can be found through iron manufacturers

### Spacing

- Metal fences usually come in four to ten foot segments that are to be attached to metal posts or masonry pillars.

## Material

### Woven wire

#### Iron

Small wire fences with rounded top edges were typically used with smaller houses.

Members of these fences should be of substantial thickness (not thin).

#### Chain link

- should be used only when all other designs do not meet the requirements set by the purpose.
- should be painted black or a very dark color.
- should be hidden with vines or other vegetation.
- should be restricted to back yards only.



4' to 6' in height is typical.



An iron fence that compliments an elaborate house.



4' to 10' segments between masonry pillars.

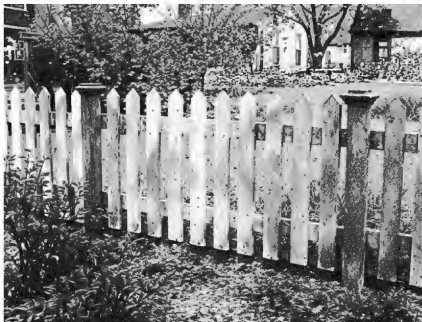


2' to 3' is appropriate for small areas.

# WOOD

## Size

- Posts are typically built with four equal sides with a base and a cap, and are slightly taller than the pickets. Six to 12 inch squares are common for a prominent post. The minimum width should be the height of the post in feet translated to the equivalent width in inches, e.g., if the post is four feet tall, the width should be at least four inches wide.
- Pickets should be 3/4 to one inch thick and one to six inches wide (if wider pickets are used, a pattern should be cut into the center of the boards to minimize the wide appearance).



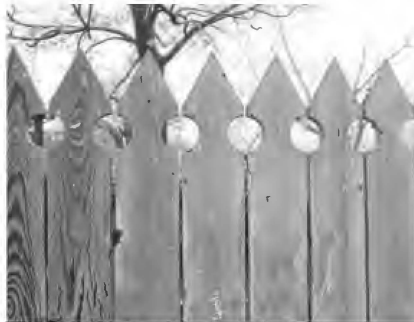
Post with cap slightly taller than pickets.



Provide at least the thickness of the board (3/4" - 1") when privacy is a concern.

## Shape

- Most fences are made of three elements: post, rail and picket. The rail is typically the only horizontal element. The rails should be placed between or on the back side of the posts not the front.
- The picketson fences in the front and side yards should be placed between the posts (not run continuously in front of the posts).
- The tops of most pickets should be cut to some design 'Dog-eared' fences are acceptable in rear yards only.
- Lattice can be used on the top of a fence to add height without the visual weight of a board fence.



Top of pickets cut to a design.



Lattice used as the top of a fence.

## Spacing

- The spacing between posts should be approximately 4 to 14 feet, depending on the design.
- Posts are a very important visual part of a fence and should not be hidden by the pickets.
- The space between pickets should be approximately equal to the width of the picket in front and side yards.
- When privacy is a concern, the boards may be spaced closer together, however, it is encouraged to keep the height of the fence as low as possible and to provide at least the thickness of a board (3/4 to one inch) between the pickets.
- board-on-board "shadow box" fences are not recommended for historic neighborhoods, (fences that have pickets that alternate on both sides of the rail, rather than "back-to-back"). See photo p. 2 "Finished Side."
- Adjacent fences that are on different properties should join.

## Material

- Painted fences are preferred to in the front and side yards. Stains and unpainted wood are not recommended in historic neighborhoods.



Posts should not be hidden by the pickets.

# Design

The design of any fence should be compatible with the style, size, and materials used in the house on the same property.

## PLANTS

### Trees

- can be used with a fence or instead of a fence.

### Shrubs

- can be used with a fence or instead of a fence.



*Shrubs make an effective "fence."*

### Vines

- are desirable when used with a trellis or fence to provide extra privacy and to add character to an undesirable fence.



*Vines on an iron fence.*

### Plants and Flowers

- can create an edge that acts as a visual fence.
- soften fence bottoms and give fences a base



*Plants and flowers create a visual fence.*