

**Ghost Signs: *The Faded Ads of Lead,*
*South Dakota***

A report on their preservation and restoration.

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Ghost Signs: A Brief Primer

Once advertising names, addresses, products, prices, and images of daily life,¹ ghost signs have now become the “faded ad.”² These are the advertisements that have deteriorated with their host structures, revealing layers of previously covered painted ads. In many signs, the intended message has been lost. This loss allows for a richer content to emerge out of the deterioration of the sign, communicating through nostalgia a bygone popular culture and way of life.

Simply, the ghost sign today advertises history. Their deterioration adds to the character of the structures they are upon. Within their area of placement, a story is whispered. Stories are important and valued. Through the telling of stories, history appears. Histories can be leveraged to bring in tourism, businesses, and new growth. Ghost signs, like cemeteries, important places, past events, and historical figures are a contributing factor in the historical story scape.

Ghost Signs: What Lead has

Lead, like many historic towns, once had painted signs lining the streets.³ Many of the grand structures that hosted these signs were destroyed by subsistence, fire, and mining demolition, leaving only photographs. Through archival photo research, visual inspection, and web browsing, Lead has five remaining visible ghost signs. There are an additional two non-visible signs that are recoverable due to being under the less durable modern latex paint.⁴

Existing and Visible Signs⁵

1. 609 West Main (Schutze Building c 1933; 1994 NRHP - contributing) – west wall: **Coca-Cola**.
2. 305 West Main (Halloran Block c 1897; 1974 NRHP - contributing) – west wall: **Coca-Cola** prior to 1914.
3. 305 West Main – east wall: **Hardware**.

4. 313 West Main (Opera House c 1917; 1974 NRHP – contributing) – south wall West on Julius Street: **No Parking Under Public Fire Escape by Order of State Fire Marshal.**

5. 313 West Main (Opera House c 1917; 1974 NRHP – contributing) – south wall East on Julius Street: **No Parking Under Public Fire Escape by Order of State Fire Marshal.**

Existing but Non-Visible Signs

6. 211 West Main (Seeling & Lang Building c 1890; 1994 NRHP – contributing) – west wall: **Coca-Cola.**

7. 314 West Main (Maleta Block c 1901; 1974 NRHP – contributing) – east wall: **???????**.

Ghost Signs: The Debate

Like much of Historical Preservation, ghost signs are not free from debate. Issues arise in property ownership rights, responsibilities, and preservation requirements. Meeting new preservation requirements and with whose money is a significant hurdle. Zoning codes and ordinances concerning current signs can stand in opposition to preservation of existing ghost signs, such as: content subject matter, appropriate size and colors, and placement requirements. Public opinion concerning ghost signs varies as well. Opinions are often divided into four camps: preserve the sign in its current state of decay, restore the sign to its original condition, ignore the sign and let it continue to degrade, and lastly, paint over the deteriorating sign and use modern forms of advertising.

Ghost Signs: Preservation and Restoration

Recently, Fort Collins Colorado commissioned a preservation and slight restoration of a prominent ghost sign, the Coca-Cola/Angell's Delicatessen sign from 1958 by the Dan Brown Sign Company.⁶ Delicate cleaning, hand painted retouching, archival photography, and brick repointing were used to bring the sign to a point of sealing. Through a litany of tests, the proper sealer/binder was determined that would preserve both the sign and the brick structure. These efforts have staved off further deterioration for a

minimum of 45 years.⁷

The National Park Service has three briefs that generally deal with ghost signs; it is these briefs that are recommended by both the National Trust for Historic Preservation and by the South Dakota Historic Preservation Office for guidance. Brief 1⁸ deals with the historic masonry exterior. Brief 2⁹ addresses repointing. While Brief 25¹⁰ focuses on preserving historic signs. Lastly, the The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works (AIC)¹¹ and the The Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*¹² provide a broad outline for the preservation of structures. As a side note, the Deadwood Fund Grant requires adherence to The Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*.

The following are the basic guidelines concerning the treatment and preservation of ghost signs:

1. Retain historic signs whenever possible, particularly when they are significant as reflecting the history of the building or the development of the historic district. A sign may be the only indicator of a building's historic use.¹³
2. Retain historic signs as outstanding examples of the signmaker's art, whether because of their excellent craftsmanship, use of materials, or design.¹⁴
3. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.¹⁵
4. Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Repair shall affect minimal change to the defining characteristics and historical features.¹⁶
5. The surface cleaning of structures, if appropriate, shall be undertaken using the gentlest means possible.¹⁷

Ghost Signs: *Funding Sources*

The South Dakota Historic Preservation Office provided only one source of funding, the Deadwood Fund Grant. Grants range from \$1,000 to \$25,000 and are awarded for projects that retain, restore, or rehabilitate historic buildings, structures, and archaeological sites in South Dakota for residential, commercial, or public purposes. There is a dollar-for-dollar match from non-federal and non-state sources requirement.¹⁸ According to the information provided in the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, a ghost sign that is on a qualified building could meet the criteria specified for the Deadwood Fund Grant.

In the past, if the ghost sign is on a building that is in need of repointing or other exterior preservation, a grant from the National Park Service or the National Trust of Historic Preservation could be sought. However due to budget constraints and freezes, restructuring, and redirection, those sources are not currently available.¹⁹

Ghost Signs: *Adding Age to the New*

In areas of New Mexico and in Blackhawk, Colorado new ghost signs have been put on structures. These signs have been purposely distressed to give the appearance of age. In Blackhawk, the signs advertised fictitious products and services while using area appropriate themes and styles.¹⁸

These signs are not free of controversy. In addition to some of the aforementioned opinions, some find new aged signs repugnant, historically deceptive, and artistically tacky. However, others find that the new aged signs have added to the subjective notions of quaint and charming.

Ghost Signs: *Conclusions*

Only in historical context, ghost signs hold meaning. They tell of a time past

when there weren't many rules concerning sign size, placement, subject matter, and/or colors. They reflect an exuberant period of American capitalism.²¹ When a sign company painted one of these ads, there was the expectation that within a few years, that image would be painted over with a new advertising message. The major reason why these signs still endure is the fact that leaded paint was used. Leaded paint has far better adhesion properties²² than today's safer modern paints.

Preservation of ghost signs is an acceptable practice. The Department of the Interior, the National Park Service, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation place zero restrictions on preservation. However, the established guidelines must be followed for grant funding. Complete restoration is met with disdain and hostility; while sensitive restoration (such as the Coca-Cola/Angell's Delicatessen sign in Fort Collins, Colorado) is acceptable, and in some cases, lauded. Covering over with modern paint, though largely a choice of the structure's owner, is viewed as tragic.

According to the conducted research, Lead, South Dakota's most historically significant ghost sign is the one on the *East Wall of 305 West Main*:

Hardware. The reason being, it speaks to the building's original use and to the type of businesses that were within the area prior to 1914 and tragic fire of the second Hearst Mercantile. Second is on the *West Wall of 305 West Main*, a beautifully painted **Coca-Cola** sign dating to 1909 – 1910. The **Coca-Cola** sign at 609 West Main has more than likely been redone (possibly in the early 1990s); although prominent and noticeable, if confirmed as redone, non significant. The ghost signs at the Julius entrance of the Opera House are generally the type of sign considered non-significant. This may be different due to the Opera House's status on the National Register of Historical Places.

The Lead Historic Preservation Commission has a few choices concerning ghost signs.

1. Let the signs continue to fade into obscurity, and propose to the City Council an ordinance preventing unapproved preservation, restoration and/or painting over.
2. Continue to allow building owners to maintain and upkeep their properties in accordance with current City and State regulations concerning the ghost signs.
3. Start to pursue funding for greater preservation of these fading ads.
- 4.** Work with the owners of *211 West Main* and *314 West Main* to pursue avenues of uncovering and preserving the signs on their properties.

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