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Either side of the mitered quarter-round cap can be removed first, but the overlapping baseboard on the right dictates starting on that side (1).



Wide-chisel pry bars have a thin, sharp blade that does minimal damage to soft woods. Use two in tandem, overlapping as you work along the entire length of the board (2-4).

Surgical Demolition

When we think of what finish carpenters do, we think mostly of what it takes to create beautiful woodwork. But carpenters working on existing homes spend a lot of time taking things apart. If we intend to restore the woodwork—often a desirable option in an old house full of exquisite old-growth woods and deep, well-proportioned profiles—we need to surgically remove the pieces, inflicting as little damage as possible so they can be reassembled and refinished.

That was the case in the 1867 house photographed here. In a room built over a low crawlspace, the task was to take up a beautiful vertical-grain fir floor and cut out sections of subfloor so the crawlspace walls could be insulated with spray foam. The operation depended on removing the baseboard and flooring without damage; the photos show some of the key tools and techniques needed to pull off that trick.

Here are some principles to keep in mind:

Reverse order. A big part of removing woodwork is knowing how it was assembled in the first place. You need to remove it in the reverse order it was installed. Look at joints first. Miters can usually be taken apart from either side. Look at both ends of each piece of trim before you act. The ends of baseboard usually butt each other in the corners, and you have to take off the overlapping piece first. The last few boards of strip flooring usually are face-nailed, and you need to identify and disable those nails to begin disassembly. It's a lot easier to determine the installation order of clear-finished woodwork than it is with painted woodwork. (See the online version of this article at jlconline.com for more on removing painted woodwork.)

Loosen up everything along the entire length before you start pulling a piece off. Disable finish nails by driving them clear through the wood with a pin punch. You may not get them all, but the more nails you disable, the less hold the board will have. Use a utility knife to slice through paint or varnish along seams to break the bond of the finish. Work with two pry bars in tandem. (I like the wide-blade Japanese pry bars by Yamaguchi, Dogyu, or Shark Grip.) Pry against walls at studs to avoid punching through wall surfaces. Avoid prying against finished boards, and when you can't avoid that, use a wide, flat trowel under the fulcrum point of your pry bar to protect the finish surface. As the board becomes looser, it will be easier to identify fasteners that are still holding a piece in place.

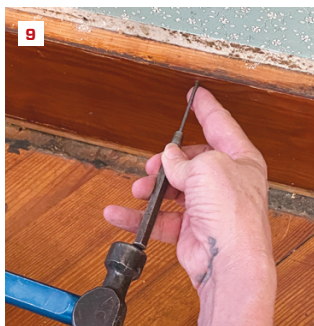
Vacuum at every step. A good industrial vac is an indispensable demolition tool. I vacuum after each piece of wood is removed to make it easier to see my next step and to protect the woodwork. Paint and varnish chips, and especially drywall and plaster dust, are abrasive. In the end, you want clean, unmarred woodwork.



End-cutting nippers **(5)** are a primary tool in a restoration carpenter's tool bags. Yes, they are great for snipping wires, but their main use is pulling finish nails from the *back* of trim. The back surface will get dented **(6)**, but only a small hole will be visible on the face.



If you do need to pull a nail from the face, use a wide, flat trowel to protect finish surfaces **(7)**. (Note: The trowel will get dented and won't be of use for taping drywall.) It helped to pry these long 10d finish nails from both sides **(8)**.



Drive finish nails all the way through with a pin punch.

With most nails driven through, work a pair of flat bars in tandem **(10)** to loosen the board before trying to pry it off **(11)**.

Installers face-nailed the last floor boards. Start here **(12)**.



A flat bar can be used "backwards" to push open a joint **(13)**. Push straight back; don't rotate the bar, or you may dent the edges. Split the tongue off the last full-width floor board with a chisel to allow the board closest to the wall to come loose **(14)**.

With the tongue removed, work in tandem with two bars to pry up the first board **(15)**. Once the two courses of face-nailed boards are removed, the blind nails in the flooring can be sliced off at floor level with a multitool **(16)**.