

1953 to 1963 CORVETTE EXTERIOR COLORS

By Noland Adams

We don't know just when, but we suspect the first Corvette restoration began in the late '60s. Since that time, there has been a question about the original exterior color.

We are not talking about color variation here. Like which polo white is correct? This author has seen as many as seven Polo White '53 to '55 Corvettes lined up for judging, and no two colors were exactly the same. Which is correct? Probably all, as long as the white is not as pure as "refrigerator white".

Instead, we're going to look at the exterior (paint) colors like red, white or blue. In 1953, there was no choice, white only. In 1954; black, red and blue were added. 1955 saw the addition of several rarer colors, and the paint colors were never the same; always a change.

1956 and 1957, the exterior color was written on the top of the front chassis crossmember. Photos in my '53 to '62 Restoration Guide show the paint color's name; red and black. Unfortunately, it was written in chalk or crayon which deteriorated over the years. To our knowledge, no examples of the exterior paint color's name on a '56 or '57 crossmember have been seen.

The only way to determine the original paint color on these cars is to remove clips and moldings and check for the color underneath. Assuming the car has been repainted, one must look under hard-to-remove items like the windshield and defroster vents. Don't overlook the panels behind the seats, and overspray in the trunk area. You're looking for any sample of the original paint, no matter how faded.

A couple of years ago, this writer was informed about the exterior color name being written on a fiberglass panel behind the trunk cardboard. One of the first cars we checked was Steve Banich's '60. The color did show through as "TURQ.", and the car's color was indeed turquoise. We were ecstatic.

We had checked a few cars when we had a chance. But, it's a little difficult to convince the owner of concours-ready car to pull the trunk cardboard just to satisfy our curiosity. But a few cooperated, and we saw a '59 with "BLACK", and a '58 with the color name, too. Now we really had something!

Let's stop to detail the exact location of the paint name. It is on right side of the vertical fiberglass panel, to the left of the right trunk lid hinge. The reason this has been hidden is that

it's behind the trunk cardboard. It is written with a green crayon (like a lumber crayon), in letters about 4 inches high.

Paint will be covering the color name, here's why. For an example, let's use a white car with a red interior and trunk. The St. Louis plant assembled the body, installed hood, trunk, and doors, prepared the body, and primed it. It was sanded again, then painted the final color coat, white. This included the edges of the doors, hood and trunk, while some overspray floats into nearby areas.



The color name "BLACK" inside the trunk of 1958 to 1960s (note the support on the left, and the trunk hinge on the right).

Selected areas of the interior and trunk are masked off and painted the interior color, red. These are the areas that would show after the installation of large parts, like the seats and trunk mat.

Now back to the exact spot where the color name appears; in the trunk, just to the left of the right trunk hinge. This area will appear red, although there could be a bit of white overspray underneath. To uncover the paint name, rub the edge of a blunt object over the area; a quarter works fine. The red paint covering the crayon flakes away easily, revealing irregular lines. The paint is over 25 years old, and usually it's easy to remove. Follow the lines, and you will uncover the complete color name (or abbreviation).

We had gone a long time without other 1958 to '60 examples to examine. A rare opportunity to check more cars came around during the 1987 SACE Convention. We drove an hour from the convention in Nevada City to Lanny Johnson's wrecking yard in Yuba City, north of Sacramento.

Lanny had a large wrecking yard operation at one time. In 1987, he was closing the main section, as it was a lot of non-Corvette stuff. But he still had the main bones to over 30 1956 to '60 Corvettes. There, we happily rubbed the trunk paint away on about 12 cars to discover the paint colors, "IVORY", "RED", "TURQ." and "BLACK".

There were 8 or 9 1961 and '62 partial bodies, too. We'd always heard the paint was behind the

passenger's seat back. Now was the chance to find out. Armed with a curiously worn quarter, I approached a '61 body. After just a few horizontal scratches, green crayon showed through! With a victory yell, I called to the nearest SACE members to share this new discovery. As I continued to rub away "SILVER" appeared. I was in orbit, again.

On another body, several of us rubbed away until the word "MAROON" appeared. These names were about 2½ inches high, written at a 40-45 degree angle. The first letter of the name is written near the upper left corner of the panel.

Then, another surprise: if equipped with a hard-top, the letters "HT" also appeared ON the panel. These letters are about 1½ inches high, and appear upright. That is, they're not written "downhill" like the color name.



Behind the passenger's seat back on most 1961 and '62s, we find the color name.

On a couple of 1961 or '62 panels, we found number "55" written on the upper right side of the panel. We didn't know what they meant, so we just wrote them down for future reference.

Back at the convention, we examined Jack Crinion's '61 closer. Jack removed the passenger's seat to check for the color name. Because it had the "41", we assumed this was the job number. But search as we might, there was no color name to be found. In the lower left, we did find "HT", which was correct.

Jack borrowed Ken Weichmann's window handle remover, and proceeded to dismantle his door panel. Sure enough, there was the job number, but it was "92". That left "41" and "55" a mystery.

Since Jack's car is an early '61, we decided to check inside the trunk. Jack removed the cardboard, and we began to scrape away on the paint. To our joy, green crayon was revealed. Finally the whole word "BLACK" was in view.

Back at Roy's house, we attempted to check 58 # 3, which was awaiting restoration. And Lucy

Badenhoop had her sharp '58 low horsepower fuelie there. We attempted to check both cars, but both have power tops. This doesn't change the color name, but the upper top operating solenoid is mounted on top of the area where the color name is usually written. If the color name is there, it's hidden.

Saturday we joined by 1958 # 35, a nice charcoal car. The owner agreed to let us check for the hidden color name in his trunk. After proceeding to announce to all within hearing that we would reveal the paint name, a small crowd gathered. I recall someone even had a videotape camera. I began scraping, but found nothing. Getting desperate, I moved around to the entire panel. Instead of the expected "CHAR", there was nothing. Finally, I decided the color name just wasn't on early '58s. The crowd muttered a few words and drifted away.

The following weekend, Mary and I attended the Black Hills Corvette Classic in Spearfish, South Dakota. On Friday, July 18, the entire main street of Spearfish was blocked off and filled with Corvettes. Corvettes of most every year, and certainly every color, what a stirring sight to see!

Mary and I walked around until we found a 1960 whose owner was willing to take out the trunk cardboard for a look. There was a much larger crowd, and a videotape camera on hand as I began. Again, I scraped and scraped, and I was surprised to find a '60 without a color name.

Later, we found a '58 with "TURQ." In this case, the owner was quite pleased to verify the car's original color. Later, we found a 1960 with "MAROON".

Then we pulled the passenger seat of a 1962 Fawn Beige car to show "FAWN". Since this was a soft top only car, there were no "HT" letters, which was correct. Plus, there were none of the mysterious large 2-digit numbers.

Now, we can chart the location of 1958 to 1962 color names.

Year, Serial No.	Location
1958 up to S/N 1,000	None
1958 to 1961 S/N 2,000	In trunk
1961 S/N 2,000 to end of '62	Behind passenger's seat

Now, get out those quarters and start scraping. Remember, the serial numbers in the table above are approximate. Your input is needed to improve the color chart. Please check your Corvettes, and let us know what you find so we can fill in the gaps.