



Cleveland Heights leads the way: The Kelvin House on Rumson Road was one of the first homes built in Cleveland to feature central air conditioning.

The KELVIN HOME

Toward a New and Better Way of Living

*By Christopher J. Hubbert,
President, Forest Hill Homeowners, Inc.*

On Wednesday, September 8, 1937, George W. Mason, president of Nash-Kelvinator Corporation of Detroit, presided over the opening ceremonies of two "Kelvin Homes," one at 5202 Rumson Road in Forest Hill and the other at 21561 Stratford Avenue in the Beach Cliff neighborhood of Rocky River. The Kelvin homes were the first homes built in Cleveland with central air conditioning. They also featured "the latest discoveries and achievements of housing science," including an electric Kelvinator range, refrigerator, washing machine and ironer. According

to an advertisement, they were "homes where all the drudgery is eliminated—where tasks are done electrically."

The grand opening of the Kelvin homes was accompanied by much fanfare and was attended by city officials and civic leaders. The event was heralded by a flurry of articles and advertisements in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Cleveland Press* and *Cleveland News*. Various contractors and decorators trumpeted their involvement in the project. The Second Federal Savings and Loan Association got into the act by running an ad touting its mortgage services with the tagline "Comfort in your financing, too" with a drawing

continued on next page

The KELVIN HOME

continued from page 5

of the Forest Hill Kelvin home. The Rudolph Wurlitzer Company installed a new "Butterfly" piano in both homes and their playing was featured on the "Kelvin Home Radio Show" on WGAR on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. The dedication ceremonies were broadcast as well. After the ceremonies were completed, Mason spoke at a luncheon held at the Advertising Club.

The homes were designed by Detroit architect J. Ivan Dize and built by Oil Heating Devices, Inc., Kelvinator's local distribution agent. In an interview in the *Cleveland News*, the president of Oil Heating Devices, W. R. Kromer, claimed that because of the high efficiency cooling unit, the cost of year-round comfort in the "specially-designed" Kelvin home would in many cases be less than only the cost of heating a comparable residence. Kromer predicted "universal acceptance of residential air conditioning in the near future."

The Kelvin home in Forest Hill is in some sense a result of the failure of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s, original plan for the development. When Andrew J. Thomas' French Norman homes on Brewster Road and adjacent streets failed to sell, Charles O. Heydt, Rockefeller's trusted advisor and president of Abeyton Realty Corporation, and James C. Jones, manager of the Forest Hill allotment, explored innovations in home building to attract attention to the development. The results of their efforts include the five Arcy Corporation steel frame homes on Monticello Boulevard and one of the first air conditioned homes in Cleveland being built on Rumson.

Despite all the hype, the Kelvin home did not sell immediately (perhaps due to its proximity to Dean Dairy on Mayfield at what is now U-Haul) and was rented out like many other Rockefeller homes. In an October 1938 letter to Frank S. Staley, who worked closely with Heydt on real estate matters for Rockefeller, Jones states that the architectural design of the "Kelvin house was only accepted after numerous allowances were made for the location." It appears that Rockefeller did not care for the newer homes being built in the

development and Jones was forced to defend the choices of his architect. In his response, Staley indicates that Rockefeller preferred the garage to be hidden behind the house instead of being a prominent element of the front elevation. Interestingly, he also notes that Rockefeller's sons Nelson and Laurance, perhaps with more contemporary taste, did not agree with their father.

The Story of Kelvinator

In 1914, Nathaniel B. Wales, a young inventor, began developing refrigerating mechanisms for home installation. In 1916, Wales, with the financial backing of Arnold H. Goss, then secretary of the Buick Automobile Company, formed the Electro-Automatic Refrigerating Company in Detroit, Michigan, becoming the first company to produce an automatic refrigerator for the household market. Almost immediately, the firm's name was changed to the Kelvinator Company in honor of the British physicist who originated the absolute temperature scale (measured in kelvins).

By 1923, the Kelvinator Company held 80 percent of the market for electric refrigerators. In 1926, Kelvinator acquired the Leonard Refrigerator Company, a Grand Rapids, Michigan, manufacturer of cleanable ice-box cabinets. That same year the company acquired Nizer Corporation, the largest maker of ice-cream cabinets. George W. Mason joined Kelvinator as president in 1928. Although only 37, Mason already had an impressive record with Chrysler and Copeland Products.

In 1937, Kelvinator merged with Nash Motor Company, forming Nash-Kelvinator Corporation. Mason served as the president of the joint operation. As a division of Nash-Kelvinator, Kelvinator continued to grow, expanding into making condensers and compressors for manufacturers of other makes of refrigerators, freezers, and air conditioning units. The company's household product line was supplemented by electric ranges, water heaters, home freezers, room air conditioners, kitchen cabinets, sinks, kitchen waste disposers, and in 1952 a complete line of home laundry equipment acquired through the purchase of Altorfer Bros. Company (ABC), of Peoria, Illinois.

Kelvinator was purchased by White Consolidated Industries in 1968, and subsequently became part of



the Electrolux Group in 1986. Today, Kelvinator continues to offer an assortment of household appliances.

A Brief History of Domestic Air Conditioning

Mechanical refrigeration was developed in the first half of the 19th century and was often employed to manufacture ice as an alternative to natural ice harvested from frozen lakes and rivers. Refrigeration machinery was bulky and expensive, limiting its use initially to commercial applications. The first domestic application of mechanical cooling technology was food refrigeration. Early in-home refrigerators were cooled by blocks of ice and although mechanically cooled refrigerators were available to homeowners as early as the 1890s, they did not become widespread until the 1920s when the technology had become less expensive and more reliable.

It wasn't long before refrigeration equipment was adapted to comfort cooling, or air conditioning.¹ Once again, early air conditioning systems were expensive and initially were limited to commercial uses such as factories and food processing plants. These first air conditioners were primarily water cooled, requiring plumbing connections and a sewer hookup. Most existing homes of the era also required additional ducting for air distribution and upgraded electrical service before air conditioning could be installed. Home air conditioning was a luxury that few could afford and most people first experienced comfort cooling in theaters.²

In the late 1920s and early 1930s several companies introduced console-style room air conditioners, followed shortly by window units. The early portable room air conditioners were built like fine

furniture, with wooden cabinets and decorative grillwork. Room air conditioners were more common than whole-house systems that were generally too expensive for the average homeowner to install in an existing home.

After World War II air conditioning became increasingly affordable. The popularity of whole-house air conditioning allowed new forms of domestic architecture, unencumbered by the constraints imposed by natural cooling, primarily shade and ventilation. Post-war homes could be low slung ranches with large expanses of sealed glass. The availability of domestic air conditioning has even influenced where we choose to live, fueling the population growth in the warm climates of the south and west. ■

Author's Note

I would like to thank Kenneth W. Rose of the Rockefeller Archive Center for alerting me to the presence of the Kelvin home in Forest Hill and Tony Evans of Electrolux for providing Kelvinator's history. To learn more about the history of air conditioning, please visit the website of the

American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers at ASHRAE.org.

Sleeping Soundly on Summer Nights, by Mike Pauken, P.E. (ASHRAE Journal, May 1999), was the source of much of the information in this article regarding air conditioning.

1 Stuart W. Cramer coined the term "air conditioning" in 1906 to describe mechanically controlling the temperature and humidity of interior air.

2 The first documented theater to be air conditioned was the New Empire Theatre in Montgomery, Alabama in 1917.

Tomorrow
GRAND OPENING

DEDICATION CEREMONIES
BROADCAST WGAR
2:30 P. M.
WED. SEPT. 8th

YOU are cordially invited to visit and inspect
Cleveland's first homes built for and equipped with
Complete Year-Round Air Conditioning

The KELVIN HOME

Toward a New and Better Way of Living

- Complete Year-Round Air Conditioning. Coolness in Summer. Warmth in Winter.
- Automatic Heating.
- Modern Electric Kitchen with Kelvinator Electric Range and Two Powered Kelvinator Electric Refrigerator.
- Kelvinator Electric Washing Machine and Kelvinator Electric Dryer.
- The Latest Discoveries and Achievements of Housing Science.

These Kelvin Homes will be open for Public Inspection, Each Day from 2:00 until 9:00 P. M.

IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF KELVIN HOMES THE FOLLOWING SYSTEMS WERE SELECTED FOR RELIABILITY, RESIST AND QUALITY OF PRODUCT:

Building Contractor: **Beale & Coates**
1335 East 24th St. **OIL HEATING DEVICES Inc.** Phone 2424