

Kelvin

A Brief History and Photographs

Kelvin was constructed in 1831 by Colonel Edward Jones as a private girl's school—one of several private educational institutions in Pittsboro during that era. According to *The Architectural Heritage of Chatham County, NC*, it was, when surveyed in the 1980s, “Pittsboro’s finest example of the regional Federal style.” The book also notes that “Kelvin’s simple but finely proportioned Federal interiors portray the work of a talented regional craftsman.”¹

Colonel Edward Jones (1762-1841) was born in Ireland and came to America in 1783, settling in Philadelphia and moving to Wilmington in 1786. After failed ventures as a merchant, he became a successful lawyer and politician in Wilmington before moving in 1801 to Chatham County, where he lived the rest of his life. He built his home, called Rock Rest, eight miles north of Pittsboro. He was a trustee of the University of North Carolina and an early trustee of Pittsboro’s all-male academy.²

The history of Kelvin is described in *The Architectural Heritage of Chatham County, NC*:

[Jones] and his wife, Mary Mallett Jones (1773-1837), became the parents of four daughters. Before 1828, Mrs. Jones had started a private girls’ school at Rock Rest. Its remote location proved unsatisfactory, and the school was moved to Pittsboro and Kelvin was built. In 1838 Jones’ eldest daughter, Charlotte, married William H. Hardin, and included in the marriage agreement was Kelvin with its ten adjoining acres. The young couple managed the school and enlarged the building with a one-story north wing.

Kelvin faced east toward the center of Pittsboro, across from what were then the town commons. The large yard contained many varieties of trees and shrubs—evidence of Claudius Denson’s late nineteenth-century nursery.³ The stand of large oaks on the property led to the grounds being referred to as “Kelvin Grove.”

The Hardins moved from Chatham County by 1846, and Kelvin was purchased by Dr. Spence McClenahan, a prominent local physician, politician, and businessman. After McClenahan’s death, his widow and children lived at Kelvin through the Civil War, but she sold the house in 1869 to Claudius B. Denson, who served as headmaster of the Pittsboro Scientific Academy until it closed in 1886, and who established a botanical nursery on the property. Later owners were William L. London, Alice Bell Ferebee, Judge Daniel L. Bell, and finally, Judge Bell’s daughter, Elizabeth M. “Betty” Bell.⁴

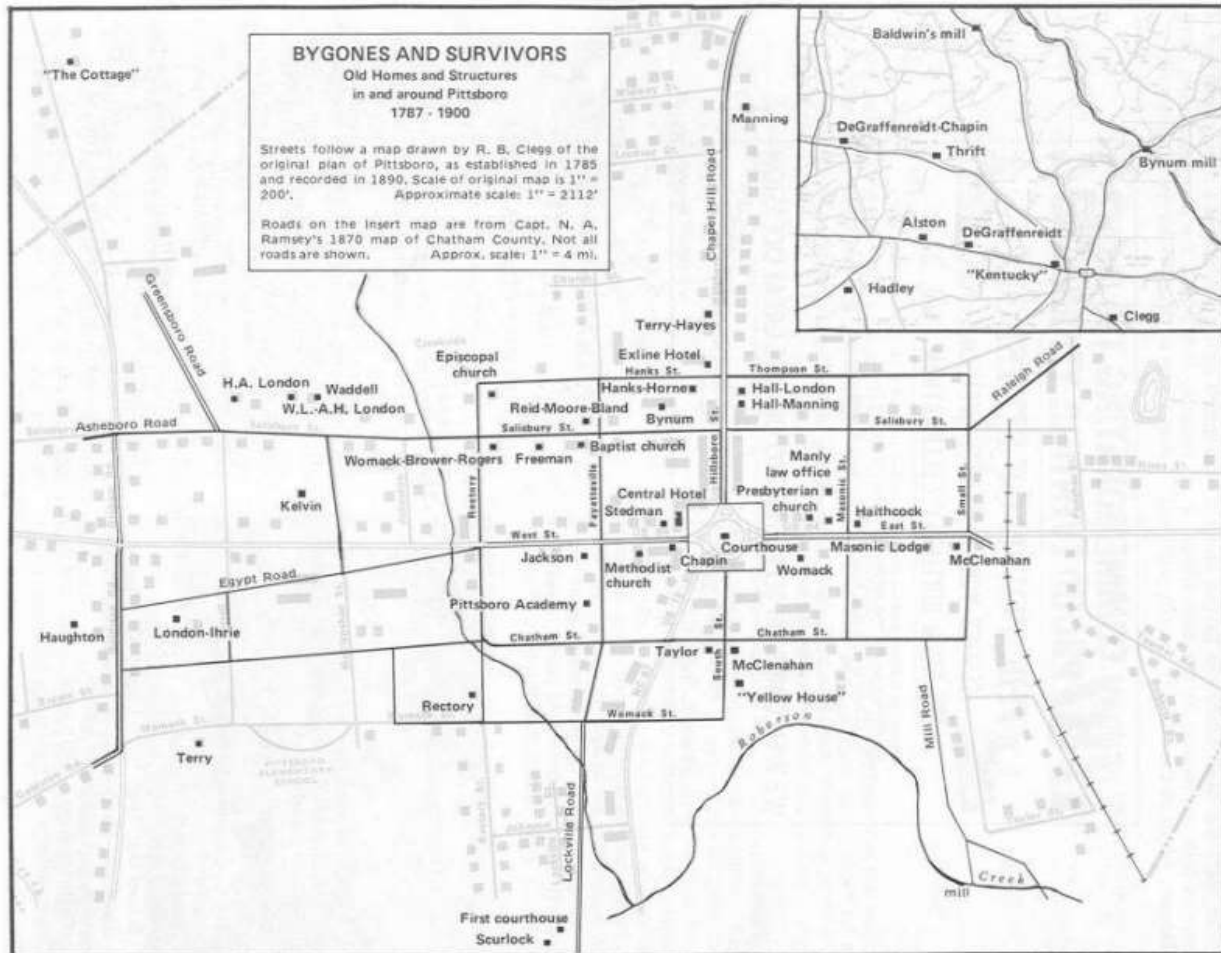
Over the years, “Kelvin Grove” was said to be the location for political gatherings and celebrations—such as the 20 May 1887 celebration of the first passenger train in Pittsboro, where the crowd was estimated to be between 2,000 and 4,000 people. The porch of the residence was used as a stand for the speakers and honored guests. Brass bands from Durham, Raleigh, and Siler City entertained the

crowd, and drills were performed by the Durham Light Infantry and the Governor's Guard of Raleigh. There were many speeches.⁵

Kelvin was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.⁶

A fire damaged Kelvin in February 1994. There was some local interest in saving the structure, but it was soon demolished, and townhouses built on the 2+ acres that remained of the estate.

The following map shows old homes and structures in and around Pittsboro during the period of 1787-1900. Reprinted from *Bygones and Survivors: Old Homes and Structures in and around Pittsboro 1787-1900*, by John Haughton London, 1984.



The following images of Kelvin were collected by Dav Robertson, in conjunction with his paper "[Teenagers at the Kelvin School in Pittsboro](#)," which can be found on our website. The paper is based on a letter written to a student at Kelvin from a former student friend in 1832. Robertson also provides additional history on the Kelvin property.



Kelvin front view, Chatham County Historical Association collection.



Kelvin from north end, Chatham County Historical Association collection.



*Kelvin, south room mantel detail.
Chatham County Historical Association collection.*



Kelvin fireplace from National Register Nomination, 1982.



Kelvin, south end from National Register Nomination, 1982.



Kelvin doorway. Courtesy of Preservation North Carolina.



*Kelvin entrance detail.
Courtesy of Preservation North Carolina.*



*Kelvin interior doorway.
Courtesy of Preservation North Carolina.*



Kelvin rear view. Courtesy of Preservation North Carolina.



Kelvin south view. Courtesy of Preservation North Carolina.

¹ See *The Architectural Heritage of Chatham County, NC*, pages 108-109 for architectural details and history.

² <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/jones-edward> Accessed 16 Apr 2023

³ *The Architectural Heritage of Chatham County, NC*, pp 108-109.

⁴ *The Architectural Heritage of Chatham County, NC*, pp 108-109.

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<https://chathamhistory.org/resources/Documents/PDFs/ResearchArticles/ProsperityCametoPittsboroonthetrain.pdf> Accessed 16 Apr 2023. Also, *The Chatham Record*, 26 May 1887, page 3.

⁶ Ruth Selden-Sturgill (March 1982). "[Kelvin](#)" (pdf). *National Register of Historic Places - Nomination and Inventory*. North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office.