

---

---

### JOIN TODAY!

All members receive the benefit of knowing that their membership dues help advance historic preservation opportunities for Cleveland Heights. Memberships are tax deductible.

## The Cleveland Heights Historical Society

2721 Colchester Road • Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44106-3650

Please accept my yearly membership fee for:

- \$ 15.00 – The Marcus M. Brown Membership
- \$ 25.00 – The Patrick Calhoun Membership
- \$ 50.00 – The Barton and Grant Deming Membership
- \$100.00 – The John L. Severance Membership

Please make checks available to: *The Cleveland Heights Historical Society*

Name:

Date:

Address:

City:

State:

Zip:

Phone: (Daytime)

(Evening)

E-mail:

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society  
2721 Colchester Road  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44106-3650

# View from The Overlook

THE JOURNAL OF THE CLEVELAND HEIGHTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NO. 28 • SUMMER 2011

WWW.CHHISTORY.ORG

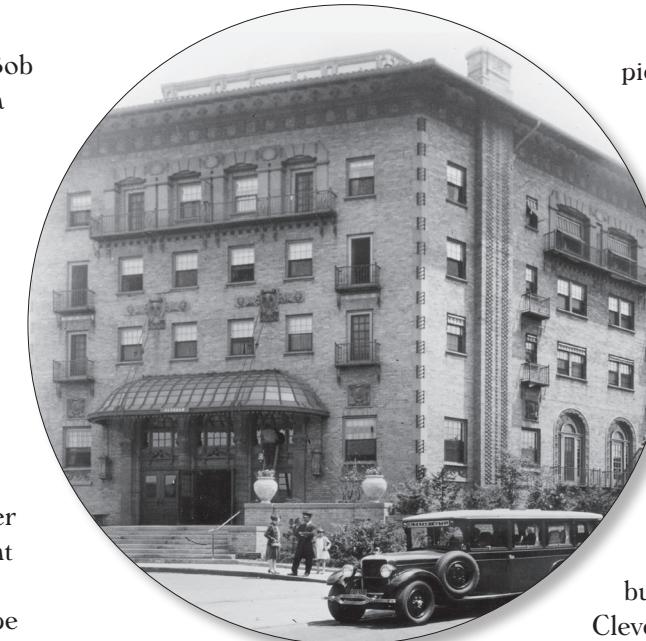
### THE ALCAZAR HOTEL:

## Cleveland Heights' First (and only) "Palace Hotel"

By Ann E. Donkin

Entertainer Bob Hope kept a residence there. So did composer Cole Porter, who reportedly wrote his hit "Night and Day" while in residence. George Gershwin swung there, as did Tarzan actor Johnny Weissmuller (albeit in a different way—with his paramour, actress Lupe Velez). Mary Martin and Jack Benny also spent time there, although it is debatable how much the latter actually spent.

"There," of course, is the Alcazar Hotel—a monumental Spanish/Moorish



*The Alcazar Hotel, c. mid 1920s*

piece of architecture that, after almost 90 years, continues to thrive as a residence hotel, a national and local landmark, and one of the most interesting and beautiful commercial buildings in the Cleveland area.

With several hundred feet of frontage on Derbyshire and Surrey Roads (its actual address is 2450 Derbyshire), the Alcazar is an

*continued next page*

## THE ALCAZAR HOTEL:

### Cleveland Heights' First (and only) "Palace Hotel"

*continued from page 1*

architectural gem. In fact, the architect of the Alcazar—H.T. Jeffrey—used a Spanish castle ("Alcazar" is Spanish for "castle" or "fortress") as his inspiration, along with Henry Flagler's Alcazar, Ponce de Leon and Cordova Hotels in St. Augustine, Florida. The design of the Alcazar also reflects the work of Addison Mizner, who built extravagant facilities in Palm Beach and Boca Raton, Florida, in the early 20th Century.

Cleveland Heights' Alcazar has 300 rooms on four floors, with suites of various sizes. Its long, buff-colored brick facades are broken up with small iron balconies, contrasting brick quoins and terracotta friezes. The deep eaves are capped with overhanging red roof tiles. The sides of the building's irregular pentagon surround a large central courtyard with a terracotta fountain. Featuring a menagerie of spouting frogs and turtles, the fountain's design and construction were executed by the well-known Cleveland firm of Fischer and Jirouch. The hotel's main lobby is outfitted in walnut and imported Spanish tile. It is surrounded by a loggia with arched colonnades. All of these elements combine to provide a feeling of sophistication and elegance that was summarized in an early advertisement as a "Spanish Castle in

Cleveland Heights—one of the most beautiful residential hotels in the world."<sup>1</sup>

However, the Alcazar also stands as a historic symbol—a reminder of the opulence enjoyed by so many people as a result of the industrial boom of the 1920s. From the hotel's heyday right through the present, Alcazar residents and guests could make merry in front of the imported tile fireplace in the lobby or alongside the courtyard fountain (the fountain, fireplace and stairs are reputed to be replicas of those at the Casa del Grecco in Spain). Revelers might also enjoy a meal in the dining room, or a concert or dance in the ballroom. One could rent a single room or suite of up to six rooms with kitchenette. And throughout most of the facility's life, rental arrangements were also available by the night.



*The Alcazar along Derbyshire Road, c.1925.*



*Alcazar interior.*

### **Beginnings**

After growing slowly from the 1890s through the mid teens, the population of Cleveland Heights took off. From 1910 to 1920, the community expanded from almost 3,000 to more than 15,000 people. By 1930, the city claimed 51,000 residents—an increase of 1,700 percent in 20 years. Numerous events fueled this massive expansion, beginning with the desire of more and more people to escape from an overcrowded and dirty central city. However, it was the automobile's growing popularity and the extension of major streetcar lines that made it possible for so many to relocate to suburbia, and the location of the Alcazar reflects its builder's clear

intention to leverage both auto and mass transit access. Less than a block to the north was the Euclid Boulevard streetcar line. Barely a block to the south is Cedar Road which, along with Euclid Heights and Mayfield, make up Cleveland Heights' main east-west arteries. Shopping opportunities along Coventry, Cedar and Lee Roads were an additional draw for Alcazar residents and guests.

From the very beginning, the Alcazar's four developers (George W. Hale, Kent Hale Smith, Harry E. Steffens and Edna Florence Steffens) had a particular clientelle in mind. Full-page advertisements in area newspapers extolled the facility's virtues to an audience of

<sup>1</sup>"Today the doors of the Alcazar are opened,"  
*The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October 17, 1923, 19A

*continued next page*

# The Cleveland Heights Historical Society



2721 Colchester Road  
Cleveland Heights, OH 44106-3650  
(216) 321-9141  
[www.chhistory.org](http://www.chhistory.org)

#### Board of Trustees

Christopher Roy, President  
Charles Owen, Vice President & Founder  
Sue Godfrey, Treasurer  
Mazie Adams  
Ken Goldberg  
Korbi Roberts

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society, founded in 1983, is a state-chartered, 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization.

#### Our Mission

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the diverse character and traditions of Cleveland Heights.

As a community-based historic organization, the Society encourages and facilitates greater knowledge, understanding and awareness of the heritage of Cleveland Heights.

## THE ALCAZAR HOTEL: Cleveland Heights' First (and only) "Palace Hotel"

*continued from page 3*

elites who knew how to live graciously and well. One such advertisement, published in October 1923 in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, even carried an author's byline to enhance its credibility: "How would you like to live in a Spanish Castle . . . a castle as full of beauty as Spain is full of romance . . . a castle rich in all the delightfully pleasant things of old-world Spain . . . yet a castle rich in all the comforts of new-world modernity?" The writer goes on to describe the Alcazar as a "wonder-place with perfect service, perfect comfort-making and perfect perfection; they have thought of everything for your perfect life, because rent even includes heat, light, gas, maid service, silver, china, bed linen, table linen, kitchen equipment and ice-less refrigerator."<sup>2</sup>

According to the above advertisement, Hale, Smith and the two Steffens were consummately involved. Edna Florence Steffens chose every piece of furniture for every room;<sup>3</sup> and George W. Hale, who traveled extensively in Spain, ostensibly picked each of the 14 tile patterns used in the lobby of the hotel.<sup>4</sup>

Nor was the Alcazar the team's only business endeavor. Harry and Edna Steffens developed the Cedar-Fairmount Building and several other structures, including an apartment building at Cedar and Bellfield. Kent Hale Smith was a partner in the Everett Company, the corporation that actually built the

2 Amos Parrish, "Alcazar is a Spanish Castle in Cleveland Heights," *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October 7, 1923, 19A.

3 Ibid.

4 "The Alcazar: History" accessed 4/25/2011, [http://thealcazar.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=54&Itemid=59](http://thealcazar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=54&Itemid=59)

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1923

CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER

PAGE NINETEEN—A

*Patio—The Alcazar's Inner Garden*

*H. T. Jeffery, Architect*

*Berry D. Hughes, Consulting Architect*

*A. DONALD GRAY, Landscape Architect*

**—to-day**

*the doors of the Alcazar are opened*

Alcazar is a Spanish Castle in Cleveland Heights

*One of the most beautiful residential hotels in the world*



A Cleveland Plain Dealer ad, 1923.

Alcazar. In 1928, he and three others founded the Cleveland Graphite Oil Corporation, which later became Lubrizol Corporation.

### Start-up Blues

On January 27, 1922, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* announced that a new \$1,500,000 apartment hotel would bring the "air of Florida" to Cleveland. But even though there was a severe housing shortage throughout the Cleveland area after the war, the owners of the Alcazar soon ran into trouble. By 1925, the building had fallen into receivership and was taken over by a new company. It changed hands again in 1929. Perhaps the issue was cash flow—an inability to fill the Alcazar's suites quickly enough to generate an acceptable revenue stream. It also is possible that the highly speculative investments and real-estate financing practices that led to the 1929 crash

were at play here in Cleveland Heights.

Yet most of the Alcazar's start-up blues must have been invisible to patrons, tenants and employees. Throughout the 1920s, the facility hosted jazz bands, singers, dance recitals and even a dance studio. There also were debutante balls and cotillions, as well as weddings and bachelor parties. Meals in the dining room were generally fancy, multi-course affairs lasting several hours.

The 1930s, not surprisingly, told a different story. A 1933 ad claimed that the Alcazar was "Famous for \$1 dinners." Another invited people to "drop in for beer and sandwiches." Even the ads themselves were more modest—notably smaller than the promotional behemoths of the previous decade. Clearly, the facility was seeking a different kind of resident—any resident,

*continued next page*

## THE ALCAZAR HOTEL: Cleveland Heights' First (and only) "Palace Hotel"

*continued from page 5*

actually, who could pay the reduced rates the Great Depression demanded.

### **Life as a Residential Hotel**

Although the Alcazar was unique among Cleveland Heights buildings, its role as a residence hotel was similar to those in other large cities. The Waldorf Astoria in New York City is probably the most well-known example. The draw of these facilities was simple: By combining the privacy and flexibility of apartment living with the luxury, convenience and services one would expect in a fine hotel, a person could enjoy life without the responsibilities or expenses of keeping house.

Billed as a luxury facility when it was built, the Alcazar sought to evoke the feeling of a smaller version of what author Paul Erling Groth calls "palace hotels: hostelry that maintained the pinnacles of price, luxury, fine food, social prominence and architectural landmark status."<sup>5</sup> According to Groth, the palace hotel as a housing model was most prominent from the 1880s to the 1940s, catering only to the most wealthy clientele. To reach the heights of service, comfort and luxury, these facilities often employed up to five people for each guest.

Most early versions of palace hotels were built in resort towns for vacationing industrialists. The most well-known example is the trio of facilities noted earlier:

<sup>5</sup> Paul Erling Groth, "*Living Downtown: the History of Residential Hotels in the United States*," (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 40.

Henry Flagler's Alcazar, Ponce de Leon and Cordova Hotels in St. Augustine, Florida. Flagler once lived in Cleveland and partnered with John D. Rockefeller in the founding of Standard Oil. But although Standard Oil made him rich, Flagler's place in history was secured by his "groundbreaking" moves in the fledgling tourist industry. He was one of the first entrepreneurs to encourage high-brow northerners to vacation in Florida. His strategy was not just building luxurious hotels; he also sought to highlight the state's Spanish heritage, thereby overshadowing the many negative associations northerners had with slavery and the Civil War.

Unfortunately, Cleveland was neither New York nor a Florida tourist Mecca with balmy January weather. As a result, there simply were not enough people of extreme wealth to support the Alcazar as a palace hotel. There also was extensive competition both at the top (think Wade Park Manor and the Park Lane Hotel) and at the mid to lower levels. The Bolton Hotel, on Cleveland's east side, for example, had bachelor rooms and two- or three-room suites with kitchenettes in a refined homelike atmosphere. Most of the ads for the mid-tier establishments read the same way: no glitz, no glamour, no fantasizing about Spanish castles . . . simply a convenient way to live. For many decades, this was the Alcazar's niche: a "mid-price" hostelry with perhaps one staff member for every two guests.

### **From the War through the Present**

The Alcazar began to show its age by the 1950s. In 1963, it was purchased by a small,

non-profit organization for the purpose of providing independent living for seniors in the Christian Scientist community. Soon the facility was opened to members of any faith. It also operated as a hotel until 2004 when its hotel license was not renewed. The Alcazar now offers bed-and-breakfast accommodations and corporate and senior housing.

Nowadays, the Alcazar might well be looked upon as a model of sustainable urban living. It provides housing for a large number of people on a small footprint, and energy-consuming activities such as cooking or heating are condensed and centralized, thereby using less energy in the aggregate than the same number of people would use if they were more widely disbursed. The Alcazar also encourages a lifestyle that does not necessitate the everyday use of a car. And since the activities of daily life remain more centralized for the facility's residents,

there exists the opportunity to form a close community.

In fact, as we move into the second decade of the 21st century, many people are working to redefine their cities not as exclusive suburban refuges but more as inclusive communities where relationships are enhanced, long commutes are avoided and a far-removed monochromatic lifestyle is avoided. In effect, diversity in all its forms matters. Thus it could be said that the Alcazar Hotel—much as it originally sought to cater to a narrow segment of society—is now doing the best job it ever did of representing the things that today's Cleveland Heights residents value: architectural quality, walkability, sustainability and human connectivity, to name but a few.

*Ann Donkin grew up in Cleveland Heights, where she became an old-house enthusiast. She is pursuing a Masters degree at Cleveland State University.*



Alcazar patio (courtesy of Cleveland State University).