

# Inventing the Home

## Summary

**How was the modern home invented?** Travel back with us to the days when houses had no bathrooms, when clothes closets were unknown, and when running water meant a fast wife with two buckets. Listen to a modern house tell its life story.

Learn how modern inventions such as indoor plumbing, refrigeration, central heating, electricity, and gas ranges shaped the modern house and its inhabitants. Learn the fascinating story of the evolution of the modern house.

- In 1880, New York city used a million tons of ice, even though electricity and refrigerators were not yet invented. How did they do it?
- The kitchen in most houses today is located at the rear. Why?
- Why are houses with indoor bathrooms such a recent invention?
- How much “nightlife” can you have with three candles and an oil lamp?
- What did the discovery of oil in the U.S. have to do with saving whales?
- What group of women invented “washboard abs”?
- Why are wakes held in buildings called a funeral “home” or “parlor”?
- Why did some people resist cooking on a gas stove even though it was a huge time saver?
- Why did many people still use an outhouse AFTER indoor plumbing?
- Where did folks store their clothes before closets were invented?
- What was two tons of coal doing in the basement of many houses in the 1950s?

This video is useful for courses in housing, household management, or the history of everyday technology.

## Video Quiz

1. Give one reason from history explaining why a kitchen is typically located at the rear of the house.

*The kitchen was located nearest to the pump or outside water source in the days before indoor plumbing.*

2. Other than wood, what common fuel was used both for cooking stoves and heating furnaces well into the 20th century?

*Coal. The video states that twenty tons of coal a year might be needed to heat a house in the north. All twenty tons had to be shoveled into the furnace by hand.*

3. One would expect that new inventions to make home life easier would be welcomed as soon as available. But such was not always the case. Explain.

*People used to cooking over wood fires suspected that the new invention of gas ranges made food “taste funny” or “unhealthy.” Indoor toilets were not well received at first because they were not equipped to vent odors. Although not mentioned in the video, the first microwaves (called “radar ranges”) were viewed with some suspicion by some who feared radiation dangers. A reminder of this early fear remains in our phrase “just nuke it.”*

4. How did people keep food fresh before refrigeration?

*The video pointed out that many people kept live farmyard animals — especially chickens. Others used iceboxes supplied by home deliveries by the iceman.*

5. Even in mansions of the late 19th and early 20th century, the kitchens were surprisingly plain and simple. Why?

*Kitchens were workrooms for servants. Many urban families had servants, even a hundred years ago. In 1870, one of every eight American families had a servant. By the year 1900 it was one in fifteen, and by 1920, one in thirty.*

## Let the Rooms Speak

*The rooms of the modern house tell stories of the past. The stories are told in design, fixtures, and technology. Following are script excerpts along with additional information in italics.*

### THE KITCHEN: COOKING AND HEATING

In New England I was called a “keeping room” because the fire had to be kept going. In the Midwest folks called me simply the “living room.”

Water was both valuable and heavy, and it had to be hauled in from outside. So it made sense for me to be closest to the well or pump. At the close of the Civil War, only about 5% of American houses had running water. (Source: ***Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness***)

The kitchen sink was just a tub with a draining board. Sinks with running water and built into a cabinet didn’t show up much until the 1940s.

The kitchen fireplace was the heart of the house 150 years ago. It was both furnace and stove. Fireplaces for both cooking and warming the house finally gave way to iron cook stoves that burned coal or wood. Around the turn of the century folks realized that cooking and keeping the house warm required two separate systems.

One of the first central heating ideas was a coal burning furnace in the basement. A truck would dump a ton or two of coal down a chute leading to a “coal bin” near the furnace. The homeowner had to shovel coal into the furnace several times a day to keep it hot. A single house up north could go through twenty tons of coal in a winter. These coal burners were still common in the 1950s.

They were replaced by furnaces that burned oil from an underground tank. Or by a hot water boiler in the basement that piped heated water through radiators located in every room.

Cleaner and more reliable gas and electric heat became the norm only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Natural gas was not in widespread use until 1910. At first, gas was only for lighting or cooking.*

*The solid-fuel iron range came into general use in middle-class homes in the early decades of the 1800s, but the gas version that followed in mid-century was viewed with the greatest suspicion, gas being*

*considered dirty, smelly and dangerous. So were open fires, of course, but people always fear perceived new dangers more than familiar old ones.*

Most people saw gas stoves as a big convenience. But some suspected that food cooked over a gas flame “tasted different” or might not be as safe or healthy. Electric ranges weren’t in use until the 1940s.

*Catherine E. Beecher wrote what could be called the first textbook on home economics back in 1841. It had the clumsy title of **A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School**. She wrote of managing a household and had a chapter on how a house should be built. At this time books about houses were all written by and FOR men, so her book was quite revolutionary. She wrote about how the house worked, not how it looked.*

*Architectural drawings back then merely marked a large space as “kitchen.” Beecher showed where the stove and sink should be. She talked of storage space and efficiency. Her ideas influenced how our kitchens are laid out today.*

*Beecher was important in helping change our idea of the house. At that time, especially in Europe, the house was a place for men to retreat from the world. Beecher saw the house from the viewpoint of the females who worked there.*

*The earliest American immigrants left a Europe that was already depleting its forests. When they saw the heavily forested “New World” they did not think primarily of the beauty of trees and certainly not of conservation. They thought of the forest as fuel for heating and cooking. Wood was the standard fuel for cooking and heating well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thanks to coal, oil, and electricity we no longer have to burn our forests to stay warm. So we can use wood to build things – like houses.*

*In the 1920s and 30s kitchens were seen primarily as an efficient workplaces, carefully designed to save steps and time. Most urban kitchens were small (typically 9’x10’ or 10’ by 12’). Rural kitchens were larger to make room for the huge wood or coal burning stove and to give room for chores like corn husking and apple paring. It is these rural kitchens that still inspire today’s combination kitchen/family rooms. The kitchen today is once again the family center of many houses.*

*Today’s kitchens all feature built in cabinets. But 19<sup>th</sup> century kitchens had little need for cabinets since there was not much to put in them. Food was stored in the cellar or attic – there were no packaged grocery goods.*

*Folks had pie racks, bread boxes, and cookie jars to hold home made goods. Shopping meant buying basic ingredients like flour, corn meal or milk. Supermarkets didn't exist – the first one opened in New York only about seventy-five years ago.*

*Kitchen cabinets were new around 1900. They were like furniture – not built in. Like so many kitchen items in later years, the cabinets were sold as a way to “ease the housewife’s burden.” They sold for \$20 to \$50, a major investment back then. Manufacturers offered payment plans to ease the burden. In fact, a kitchen cabinet was one of the first consumer products to be sold on credit.*

*Automatic dishwashers were first used only in hotels, hospitals, and other institutions that served large crowds. They were not sold to the public until the 1930s. Even as recently as 1960, only 6% of households had automatic dishwashers.*

*Microwave ovens were introduced in the 1970s (the first ones were called “Radar Ranges”) to both suspicion and amazement. Some people feared a radiation hazard while others (once again) thought the food tasted different and was unhealthy.*

*We’ve never given up our attraction for a fire to gather a family, even though almost all functional value has gone. Their symbolic value remains and the fireplace stands as the only example of 200 year old technology that consumers still demand.*

## **REFRIGERATION**

Before mechanical refrigeration, people used an ice box. It was a lined wooden box that held a block of ice. In 1895, you could buy one by mail for about twenty dollars. Of course, the ice would melt away in a few days.

Ice harvesting was a major industry. Ice cut from frozen ponds and lakes in the north was shipped all over the country. By 1880, New York City used over a million tons of ice a year.

In the 1920s, the iceman would deliver ice right to the house. Using large tongs, the ice man would sling a sixty pound block of ice into the ice box. Iceboxes in kitchens were common well into the 1940s. Even in 1945, less than half of all households had mechanical refrigeration.

In 1925, General Electric produced an air cooled refrigerator called the Monitor Top. It was so noisy some people kept it outside on the porch.

Frozen foods first appeared in grocery stores in 1930. An inventor named Clarence Birdseye (yes, that Birdseye) came up with a way to freeze food so it would still taste good. Frozen vegetables were a pricey 35 cents – double the cost for the same food fresh.

*So an iceman would deliver ice, a coalman deliver coal, and the milkman would bring fresh milk every day or two. In fact, a common feature of houses even into the 1940s was a “milk chute.” It was a small box built into the wall usually near the rear door. It had a door on the outside and the inside. The milkman would open the outside door and place the milk in it. The housewife need not go outside to retrieve the milk plus it would be protected from freezing in very cold weather.*

A *Good Housekeeping* book in 1926 contained this helpful advice for ordering ice: “Cut out the figures, ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty, etc. from a large-typed calendar, and when ice is needed, attach the necessary figure to the ice card with a clip.” *Who needs Martha Stewart?*

*People asked if we could keep food cool, why not cool people on hot summer days? Some government office buildings tried elaborate systems with rooms filled with ice and fans blowing cool air. It wasn't very practical, but it sure felt good on a sticky summer day in D.C.*

*A movie theater installed an air conditioning system in 1922 as a marketing experiment. It worked, and soon theaters promised viewers could “relax in air conditioned comfort.” Lots of patrons were more interested in the cool air than the “cool” flicks.*

*It wasn't until the 1990s that three of every four American homes had air conditioning in at least one room, and nearly half of American households had central air.*

## **SERVANTS**

Modern kitchens are often the most used room in the house. But if you look at the luxurious mansions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the kitchens were surprisingly plain, even dumpy. Why? Because the home owners never planned to spend much time there.

Even a mere hundred years ago many urban middle class families had at least one full time servant. Kitchens were work rooms for servants.

In 1870, 1 of every 8 American families had a domestic servant. 60%

of all women who worked were servants. By the year 1900 it was one in fifteen families, and by 1920, the number of servants was halved.

The near disappearance of servants meant that more women now spent time in their own kitchens.

So between 1850 and 1920 kitchens went from almost Medieval (hauling in water, cooking on a wood fire) to modern (hot and cold running water, refrigerators, and a gas range). It was more of a change than we've seen in OUR lifetimes.

*It wasn't until after World War II that household help no longer lived in. From 1850 to 1920 many houses had back doors used as "the servants entrance" as well as rear stairs leading to upstairs servant quarters.*

## **CLOSETS**

Before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century people hung their clothes on a wooden peg or a nail in the wall. The typical family didn't need a closet. They wore most of what they owned.

Most families had a chest or trunk in which they stored just about everything. As mass produced clothing became popular, the chest gained drawers and turned into today's "chest of drawers." The well off who had more clothes used large cabinets such as this. When people moved, they took their "closets" with them.

We're not sure when or where the first houses with built-in clothes closets were constructed, but the first ones were deep enough for garments hung on pegs, but not deep enough to accommodate a hanger. Why?

Because the modern clothes hanger was not invented until 1903. The first modern closets were 24 inches deep – just enough to accommodate a clothes hanger. You'll still find that depth in many older houses.

*Colonial references to "closets" are to small, unheated rooms used as dressing rooms or studies. Older houses had spaces between a fireplace chimney and a wall enclosed as storage space and sometimes space beneath a staircase as well. But these were not "clothes closets" in the modern sense.*

## **DINING ROOMS AND LIGHTING**

Here's a room that really hasn't changed much in 150 years – the

dining room. Most dining rooms still feature a chandelier with “flame tip” bulbs. They recall the days when the chandelier (the word means “candle holder”) held small candles instead of light bulbs.

Except for a fireplace, candles and oil lamps were the main source of artificial light. The candles were often wall mounted and backed with metal or even mirrors to reflect light. Candles were expensive, so most people made their own from animal fat. They burned all right, but they gave off plenty of smoke and soot.

The practice of spring cleaning started because after a long winter the house was coated in soot from candles and oil lamps.

Lamps fueled by oil were the standard illumination from the Civil War until electric power arrived much later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The oil in these lamps often came from whales. The demand for whale oil was so strong that the animals were nearly wiped out.

Petroleum was discovered in Pennsylvania in 1860. And from petroleum came a fuel called kerosene that worked better than whale oil. You could say the discovery of oil helped save the whales.

Gas chandeliers and wall fixtures were in many urban homes by the 1840s. Gas lighting produced a revolution in daily life. It was the first system that could light an entire room. Candles, and oil lamps produced only limited pools of light. After gas lighting, average household candlepower increased by twenty times.

*In Philadelphia, between 1855 and after gas lighting in 1895, the average household increased its candlepower by twenty times.*

As recently as 1930, only two of three houses had electric lights. (*Source is Commerce Department study as quoted in **Building The Dream***). Farms were often the last to be electrified. In the 1930s and 40s the day electric power lines arrived was a major event. Electricity changed the house.

## **THE PARLOR**

The parlors of the nineteenth century were formal rooms, showcases for family treasures, or for receiving visitors.

The parlor was also the traditional setting for weddings and funerals. Funeral wakes were traditionally held at home.

The parlor was set up with the casket and specially decorated for the

wake. Strict rules detailed what a grieving widow should wear for years after the funeral. After embalming gained favor, funerals moved from the family's own parlor to that of the embalmer or funeral director. We still use the terms "funeral home" and "funeral parlor."

Another role for the parlor was to serve as a place for the rituals of courtship under Victorian society. Dating was "safe" in the parlor.

After the mid 1800s, a piano (or a reed organ) was a badge of a cultured family and proudly displayed in the parlor. The least expensive piano sold for about \$200 -- about a half year's wages for an average worker. *(They were actually pianofortes, a forerunner of the modern piano.)*

The piano a hundred years ago played the role of the television today.

*A parlor without a stereoscope was rare in the 1800s. It was as common as a television set today. The stereoscope was a small handheld device with twin lenses that gave a double image of a photo, creating a three dimensional effect. The Viewmaster® toy today is similar.*

*Rooms in houses once had gender attached. Children, for example, were routinely forbidden access to the parlor. And women were not allowed in the man's study or billiard room.*

*Upholstered furniture is not a new invention, but it was beyond the means of most Americans -- sort of like owning a boat today.*

*The idea of sitting back, of slouching, of being COMFORTABLE in a piece of furniture is a new idea. Furniture wasn't originally built to be comfortable. It either served a specific purpose (like a table) or was to show status. Chairs, for example, began as thrones back in the Middle Ages -- they were invented to show status, not provide comfort. Even today the person in charge is sometimes called the "chairperson."*

*So-called easy chairs were at first considered acceptable only for the elderly or the ill. They were found mainly in bedrooms in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 19<sup>th</sup> century usage, "comfort" was used to show contrast with aristocratic pretense and displays of social standing.*

*The rocking chair, is a 19<sup>th</sup> century American creation. Rockers were viewed as appropriate only for the elderly or the ill. An English traveler visiting the U.S. wrote "How this lazy and ungraceful indulgence ever became general, I cannot image; but the nation seems wedded to it." (as quoted in **The Refinement of America** by Richard L. Bushman)*

*Adults in their prime were still embarrassed to be seen in a rocker. Not until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (with some help from President John Kennedy) was the rocking chair (and its relative the recliner) seen as merely comfortable.*

## **THE BATHROOM: BATHING AND TOILETS**

Many thought bathing was hazardous to good health. In 1845, the up-to-date city of Boston passed an ordinance forbidding bathing unless specified by a doctor. A survey in 1880 found that five of six Americans had no means of washing or bathing except for pails and sponges. In fact, a hundred and fifty years ago houses did not have a room that you would recognize as a bathroom.

Factory made bars of soap weren't sold until around 1900. Before then, people made their own soap out of animal fat. Of course they didn't use it very much. In 1860, *Godey's Lady's Book* (a sort of **Ladies Home Journal** of its day) told women not to bathe at all at night and certainly not more than once a week.

In 1860, Boston had one bath tub for every 45 people. New Yorkers must have been less clean cause they had only one tub for every 460 residents. Away from the cities bath tubs were novelty items.

The bathroom is another modern addition to the American home. After all, it requires indoor plumbing. Words like bathroom and toilet didn't have their modern meanings until after 1920.

Before bathrooms, the toilet was basically a covered pit in the backyard – folks called it the “privy” or “outhouse”. In the post Civil War years the toilet in bad weather or at night was a bowl in the bedroom that was emptied during the day – they called it a chamber pot. A hundred fifty years later you still hear people call a toilet “the pot” – because that's what it once was.

The first indoor toilets were expensive. —and they smelled. If you look at modern houses you see one or more small pipes called “stack vents” coming out of the roof. These vent odors, but they weren't perfected until nearly 1900. So early indoor toilets were not the instant hit you might expect.

It wasn't until the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that a “bathroom” (usually near the bedroom) developed as a single room for

bathing-washing and toilet. Outhouses were still common in rural areas well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1940, a little more than half of American houses had a full indoor bathroom.

Even in 1950, only two-thirds of American homes had full bathrooms. And multiple bathrooms were pretty much limited to mansions. Even large families shared a single bathroom. Ordinary houses with multiple bathrooms weren't common until the late 1950s.

*U.S. households with inside flush toilets: 1% in 1860, 7% in 1880, 15% in 1900, 20% in 1920, 60% in 1940, 87% in 1960, 98% in 1980, and over 99% today.*

*A room with no tub or shower is called a half bath or a powder room. The name "powder room" comes from the 18<sup>th</sup> century fad of wearing powdered wigs. To powder a wig was complicated. People would cover their clothes with a powdering jacket and hide their faces in a paper cone as a servant used a bellows to poof on as much as a pound of flour-like powder. It was a messy process so the grandest houses had a special room set aside for this -- the powder room.*

*The hotel Statler in Buffalo New York was the first night-to-night hotel that could claim "every room with a bath." It meant a toilet, tub, and sink. They caused a sensation by offering "A room with a bath for a dollar and a half." The year was 1907.*

*A Philadelphia woman wrote about trying a newfangled shower bath (basically a box of water poured over her head) in 1800. She wrote "I bore it better than I expected, not having been wet all over at once, for 28 years past." And when women did shower, they wore a cap and gown.*

*The conveniences of modern life were slow to come to farm families. In 1920, most farms still had outdoor toilets. Electricity did not reach most farms until almost 1940. Even in 1920, farm women spent over ten hours each week pumping and carrying water into kitchens from outdoor sources.*

*Around the turn of the century people were suspicious of sewers. As late as World War I most Americans considered sewer gas a source of disease. One doctor said, if he were building a house we would put all his plumbing in some sort of annex to keep it away from the living areas. Understanding exactly what causes diseases is relatively new knowledge. In the late 1800s, during the Victorian era, the look of the bedroom was governed by beliefs about health and cleanliness.*

*Doctors suggested rugs instead of carpets so they could be cleaned each week. Carpets stood accused of absorbing “impure air, gases, and contagious effluvia.” (As quoted in **The Light of the Home** by Harvey Green)*

## **BEDROOMS**

150 years ago most houses in America were two stories. That was the best way to get the most floor space using the least lumber or bricks. Bedrooms were upstairs because they didn't need heat all day.

Since the bedroom did not have its own fireplace, people kept warm at night with warming pans and lots of blankets. Often a stone was heated in the fireplace and placed in the bed at night as a bed warmer.

A quilt filled with goose feathers was a prized family possession – that's why so many farm families kept geese around. Their feathers were more valuable than their meat.

This trundle bed has a mattress on the floor, to be pulled out at night. Kids often slept on bedding on the floor. A bedroom specifically for children is a very modern idea. So is the comfortable mattress we take for granted. 150 years ago mattresses were filled with straw – softer than floorboards but not much of a cushion.

*The earliest American settlers didn't really have “furniture,” they had boxes called chests. In addition to a box or two, a home had a board – we call it a table. They were called boards because that's what they were – a few boards held up by some kind of (often temporary) support. So when folks looked for “room and board” that's exactly what they got.*

*Instead of starter homes or apartments, a first living arrangement for newly weds, singles just entering the workforce on their own, or the elderly were boardinghouses. The boardinghouse was a large house with single rooms upstairs for the boarders. Meals were shared in a common dining room. A saying at the time was that the boardinghouse was “for the newly wed or the nearly dead.”*

*Brass and iron bedsteads were thought more sanitary than ornate wooden ones. Decorators even advised against wallpaper. They thought it captured the “bad air” of sleeping rooms. That people got sick from invisible organisms called germs was slow to catch on. People in the 19<sup>th</sup> century blamed bad air, which they called miasma. Bad air in the bedroom was a big problem.*

## THE LAUNDRY ROOM

Modern houses have a laundry room complete with automatic washers and dryers. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century washing clothes was done in the kitchen or even outside. The laundry took the better part of two long, hard days.

Detergents were quite basic. The best stain remover was boiling water. But some folks said a little liquor worked better.

Wet clothing is VERY heavy. The first devices to help with the load were mechanical wringers to squeeze out water. They were huge time and labor savers and enabled us to say someone looks like they were “put through the wringer.”

With washing so difficult, commercial laundries thrived even before 1920. Folks solved the ring around the collar problem with detachable collars.

Once clothing was washed it was hung outside to dry. The first electric dryer wasn't invented until 1930. It had two little problems – it weighed 700 pounds and often scorched clothing. Dryers weren't common in middle class households until near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*A typical day for a farm wife on an 1830s Illinois farm might be: “Up at daybreak, make the fire. One day wash, 2<sup>nd</sup> iron, 3<sup>rd</sup> make soap, 4<sup>th</sup> candles, 5<sup>th</sup> bake, 6<sup>th</sup> clean house.” And remember that each of those tasks took the better part of a day and required heavy lifting. An 1862 Department of Agriculture report found that Monday was washing day, the toughest day of the week for women. It was back breaking work, hauling water, lifting heavy wet clothes, and wringing them in harsh lime solutions. So much for “stay-at-home wives,” but the report found that, on three out of four farms, “the wife worked harder and endured more than any person on the homestead.”*

## A HOUSE IN THE SUBURBS

A house in a suburb is a common part of the American dream. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century people had good reasons to flee cities and invent suburbs. Large cities were over crowded, dirty, and generally unsafe.

The threat from crime, fires, and mass epidemics was very real. Mud and dirt were everywhere. Traffic congestion and gridlock are not recent problems. Kids had no place to play except in the crowded streets.

Fires often destroyed entire neighborhoods. The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 destroyed over 15,000 buildings and killed as many as three hundred. Large urban fires were a real threat well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Visitors to New York city thought of the fires as a kind of tourist attraction. A Swedish visitor noted in 1840 "When the fire breaks out tonight...we'll go out and look at it. It was like deciding to go to the theater to see a play.... And, sure enough, we did not have long to wait for the spectacle." (as quoted in Dennis Smith's **History of Firefighting in America**).*

While the Chicago World's Fair of 1933 promised a better life in the future an outbreak of dysentery killed ninety-eight and left 1,400 ill. Its cause was traced to faulty plumbing at two hotels.

Many viewed city life as oppressive. Planners proposed new towns that would solve all these problems. A new kind of roadway would solve all that traffic congestion.

*The towns came to be known as suburbs and the roads "expressways" or "freeways."*

They pictured these new towns much like small, rural cities where kids had plenty of room to play.

*In the late 1940s the government subsidized house building by giving veterans low mortgages, often without a down payment. Mass produced housing such as in Levittown, NY created a housing boom.*

The biggest change in the last hundred and fifty years is that once every household was a "butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker." Today, we are consumers instead of producers.

*In 1900, cooking, baking, and food preserving were done almost entirely at home. Going to a restaurant was rare and fast food almost non-existent. Most clothing was made, washed, repaired, and handed down to younger family members at home. Vacations were almost unknown, so recreation also took place at home. Funerals and weddings happened at home. Because so much of life took place "at home" the very idea of home had a different meaning a hundred and more years ago. The changes described in this video not only changed our houses, they changed our idea of "home."*

## **Bibliography**

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