

# Willard E. Winner

Pioneer Builder, Realtor  
1849-1929

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by Daniel Coleman

“Don’t think that I ever let a piece of ground get away from me if I could get the money to buy it,” a 78-year old Willard E. Winner assured a group of Kansas City businessmen in 1927. At the peak of his success 40 years earlier, Winner’s investments encompassed over 20,000 acres of real estate in Jackson, Platte, and Clay Counties. His obituary, however, would report that he “died poor,” making him a tragic example of the boom-to-bust economy of late nineteenth-century Kansas City. Many of Winner’s visions for the city’s future eventually came to be.

Willard E. Winner was born May 4, 1849, in Fairfield, Iowa, to William P. and Mary Moss Winner. In 1858, the Winner family moved to the frontier village of Wyandotte, Kansas, and five years later relocated to Kansas City, Missouri. In 1872 Willard Winner married a young woman also a child of Kansas City pioneers; his bride, Myra Baker, had recently been a member of one of Central High School’s first graduating classes. From his late teens, Winner worked at the Kansas City post office, and although he rose to the position of Assistant Postmaster, he resigned in 1877 to pursue business dreams.

Winner’s status as one of the small number of adults to have been raised in Kansas City gave him an advantage in wooing the area’s elite investors. He organized several investment companies in partnership with his brother, Albert, and their East Side Syndicate developed land for resale in the area located between Kansas City and Independence during the early 1880s. Another early Winner project was Kansas City’s first electric streetcar line, the completion of which silenced critics who had called him “crazy as a loon” for promoting it. He was an innovator in the real estate market, as well, becoming one of the earliest developers to offer small homes on an installment plan to Kansas Citians who otherwise could not have afforded them.

Winner’s activities on the eastern edge of the city yielded huge profits: his expenditure of \$868,000 on 2,400 acres yielded



\$2,655,000 in 1888. This encouraged him to continue in other directions. He turned northward, formed a group known as the North Kansas City Investment Company and purchased some 10,000 acres of Clay County land. Because the one bridge then spanning the river carried rail traffic only, Winner began building another, at his own company's expense, to carry vehicles and pedestrians between Kansas City and his new northern suburbs. To tie the Winner developments together, he conceived of an interurban rail system connecting Kansas City, Liberty, and Independence, and purchased nine square blocks of pricey downtown real estate on which to build a large depot connecting the lines.

Winner's fortunes changed in the 1890s when an upset of the region's farming and banking industries triggered a collapse of the Kansas City real estate market. His north side scheme was flawed in that property north of the river was difficult to sell before completion of his new bridge, while its construction depended upon those same sales. In 1897, when his creditors foreclosed on Winner's own home, it was said that he had made and lost more money than any other man of his era. Foundations of unfinished Winner buildings lay open and abandoned, and nine massive piers of his proposed bridge stood useless in the Missouri River, hung with lanterns each night to prevent shipping accidents.

Despite Winner's precipitous fall, history shows that he accomplished more than most during the speculative boom of the 1880s, and many of his ideas about Kansas City's growth were later adopted by others. His bridge was completed by the Armour, Swift and Burlington Companies in 1911, becoming known as the A.S.B. Bridge, and suburbs now thrive north of the Missouri River. Winner remained a visionary to the end of his life, unsuccessfully promoting a scheme during the late 1920s that called for the creation of a large subterranean shopping area and parking lot deep in the bedrock below downtown. Three decades later, the Auditorium parking garage project would confirm Winner's foresight. He died at age 80 on September 3, 1929, less than two months before unlucky investors worldwide experienced a spectacular fall similar to his own in the global economic collapse of Black Tuesday and the Great Depression that would follow.

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