

J. C. Nichols

Developer
1880-1950

by Susan Jezak Ford

The accomplishments of J.C. Nichols were local, but his influence was nation-wide. His ideas for planning the neighborhoods of Kansas City were copied by cities across the country. His early developments—the Country Club residential district and the Country Club Plaza shopping district—led the way for similar plans in our town, as well as in many other municipalities.

J.C. Nichols grew up on a farm near Olathe. Described as always “tightly wound and on the go,” he was a busy young man. He held several jobs in high school and still earned excellent grades. For a year between high school and college he began a wholesale meat market. And at the University of Kansas, he worked as a newspaper reporter, managed the college football team, was elected president of his class and graduated with top honors.

The idea of developing south Kansas City occurred to Nichols when he was selling small houses in Kansas City, Kansas. In 1905, he successfully found investors for the first ten-acre tract of the future Country Club district at 51st and Grand Streets. Four years later, he was overseeing a million-dollar business and the development of 1000 acres. His neighborhoods focused on quality construction, beautiful landscaping and consistent planning—principles that were duplicated in many cities. To accomplish his goals, he hired local talents such as George Kessler, Hare & Hare, Edward Delk and Edward Tanner.

The Country Club Plaza, begun in the early 1920s, was the first shopping district in the country designed for the automobile. The Spanish architecture and local shops became a hub and a destination for Kansas Citians. Nichols’ homes and high-rise apartments soon surrounded the retail shops.

J.C. Nichols did not slow down in his twilight years. More neighborhoods, such as Romanelli Gardens, Indian Hills, Mission Hills and Sunset Hills, were constructed. By 1950, more than 1000 homes and the first group of shops had been built in Prairie Village. The man, who probably more than anyone influenced our city of



neighborhoods, died of cancer in 1950.

Sources

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