

Ernest H. Newcomb

Founder, University of Kansas City
1886-1979

by Daniel Coleman

His name was never a household word in Kansas City and, although Ernest Newcomb played a large part in determining the location of the University of Missouri-Kansas City, he was not even well-known on campus for many years. As the administrative founding father of UMKC, Newcomb is now considered to have been an important figure in the history of higher education in Kansas City, but a change in management during the university's early years strained his relationship with the school for nearly four decades.

Ernest H. Newcomb was born September 18, 1886, near Roanoke, Virginia, but spent most of his childhood in Neosho, Missouri. He graduated from Fourth District Normal School (now Missouri State University) in 1911 and began his teaching career the following fall semester in Newton County, Missouri. In the spring of 1912, Newcomb was elected superintendent of Newton County schools, although his bicycle-powered campaign did little to conceal the fact that he barely met the minimum age requirement for the office.

After trading up for an Indian motorcycle, Newcomb crisscrossed the county visiting schools. A popular and energetic superintendent, his recruitment of the governor of Missouri to address the county's 8th graders at commencement was fondly remembered for years. When U.S. servicemen joined World War I fighting overseas, Newcomb moved to Doniphan, Oklahoma, and taught French to soldiers training at Fort Sill. After the war he received a master's degree from the University of Missouri and became president of Central College, a Methodist women's college in Lexington, Missouri.

The Southern Methodist Church closed Central College during a mid-1920s consolidation of several schools into a single university, and Newcomb came to Kansas City in 1925, hoping to raise enough money to establish a new Methodist college. His plan found supporters, particularly among those wishing to unite the church's southern and northern branches; they conceived of a "Lincoln and Lee University," and received a generous donation of



land on which to build the school. Inadequate funding and lack of church support killed the plan.

Newcomb refused to give up the idea and spent the next several years rallying for a private, non-sectarian institution of higher learning in urban Kansas City. He wrote and published numerous bulletins endorsing this new approach, and circulated petitions among Kansas City's civic and business leaders. He found a champion in philanthropist William Volker, who purchased and donated a 40-acre tract of land located just south of Brush Creek. Newcomb convinced many of his old Lincoln and Lee benefactors to transfer their donations to the new school, wrote its charter, and recruited faculty. A convocation ceremony on October 1, 1933, kicked off a semester in which Kansas City University's first 264 students and 17 faculty members pursued a curriculum designed by Newcomb.

From 1933 to 1938, Newcomb served as KCU's managing executive and secretary of its Board of Trustees. He departed in great "disappointment," however, when his position was eliminated by university management, and Newcomb would not step foot on campus again for nearly forty years. In 1940 he founded the Kansas City Town Hall Forum, a series of lectures, concerts, and travelogues that presaged the continuing education movement and provided a local venue for world famous speakers and performers.

His Town Hall Forum was still thriving when Newcomb died at age 93 on November 11, 1979. KCU merged with the University of Missouri system in 1963, and the University of Missouri-Kansas City Alumni Association recognized the crucial role Newcomb had played in the university's founding by honoring him with a lifetime membership in 1977. The original campus library, which was constructed during his tenure and bore the last remaining "Kansas City University" stone imprint, was renamed E. H. Newcomb Hall several years after his death.

Sources

"Ernest H. Newcomb." *The Kansas City Times*, 13 November 1979.

"Ernest Newcomb, University Founder, Is Dead at Age 93." *The Kansas City Times*, 12 November 1979.

Garron, Barry. "40 Years in the Cold for UMKC Father." *The Kansas City Star*, 13 November 1977.

Hadley, Hugh G. "Times Never Dull for E. H. Newcomb." *The Kansas City Times*, 3 November 1975.

Kingsley, J. Gordon. *Tidying Up Harvard Yard: Foundations of Higher Education in Kansas City, 1849-1933*. Kansas City, MO: Midwest Research Institute, 1993.

Morgan, Ray. "Honor Set for E.H. Newcomb." *The Kansas City Times*, 28 September 1984.

Sandy, Wilda. *Here Lies Kansas City*. Kansas City, MO: Bennett Schneider, 1984.

© 2008

Photo: Courtesy of The Kansas City Star