

George E. Kessler

Landscape Architect
1862-1923

by Susan Jezak Ford

George Kessler used his vision and skill to transform early Kansas City from an eyesore to a model for the City Beautiful Movement. Before Kessler arrived here in the 1880s, the city's west bluffs were a slum, Hyde Park was a shanty town, and Penn Valley Park was known as Vinegar Hill. His distinctive park and boulevard system brought beauty and a civilized appearance to our town.

Kessler had immigrated to the United States as a child, but returned to his native Germany to study gardening, botany, and engineering. He worked briefly with Central Park designer Frederick Law Olmsted, equally comfortable in flower beds or at a drafting board. He came to Kansas City to design a park in Merriam, Kansas, which attracted much praise.

Kessler opened a Kansas City office and was soon commissioned to landscape Hyde Park. His talent for transforming a rough landscape with winding trails, natural limestone bluffs, and smoothed slopes was revealed in this early work.

In the early 1890s, the new park board commissioned Kessler to draft a citywide plan. He uniquely understood the possibilities of transforming our town's bluffs, hills, rivers, and valleys into a beautiful city. His 1893 plan for a system of parks and boulevards was expanded several times to link the city with winding expanses of green space. The controversial plan was expensive, obliterating poor neighborhoods, and designating high ground for new residential neighborhoods. The Kansas City model, fully supported by Park Board president August Meyer and publisher William Rockhill Nelson, was the beginning of a nationwide ideal known as the City Beautiful Movement.

Kessler left Kansas City in 1904 to help design the St. Louis Exposition. He retained his status as an advisor to planners in Kansas City and many other cities until his death in 1923. After his death, his plan here, connecting park spaces with landscaped boulevards, continued to serve as a model for city planning.



Sources

"George E. Kessler Dies." *The Kansas City Star*, 20 March 1923.

Montgomery, Rick and Shirl Kasper. *Kansas City: An American Story*.
Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star Books, 1999.

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

Wilson, William H.. *The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City*.
Kansas City, MO: The Lowell Press, Inc., 1990.

© 2003