

Thomas H. Swope

Land Developer and Philanthropist
1827-1909

by Susan Jezak Ford

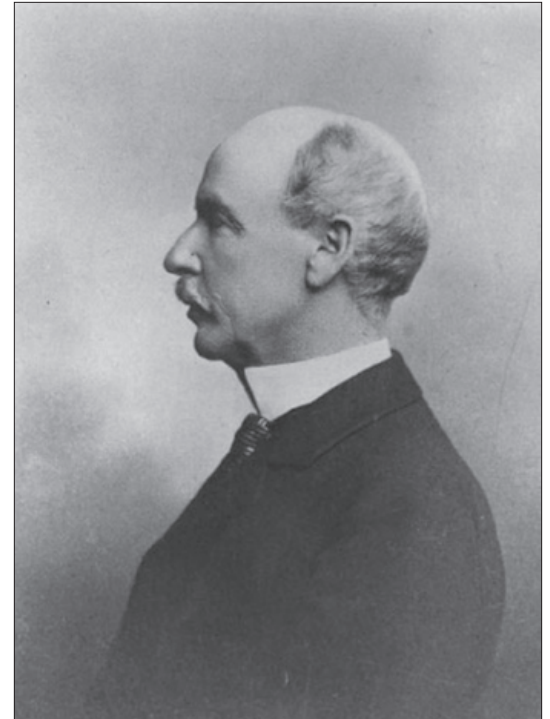
Thomas Hunton Swope led a quiet but successful life as one of Kansas City's most prosperous land developers. He generously gave tracts of land for a hospital and the vast acreage of Swope Park. But it was the millionaire's death that created a frenzy in the press for years, as his physician was tried for his murder.

Swope came to Kansas City in 1857 and invested heavily in land. One of his most profitable developments was Swope's Addition, located at 10th Street and Grand Avenue. He continued buying and selling land and donated a tract at 23rd and Locust streets to the city for a hospital.

Swope's most famous legacy to the city was the 1,334 acres along the Blue River, promptly named Swope Park. The shy bachelor donated the tract to the city in 1896, before city boundaries, streetcar lines, or paved roads had reached the property. The donation created such excitement that a city holiday was declared. The celebration included a lengthy parade of vehicles and animals that journeyed to the undeveloped park for an afternoon of speeches and songs.

Swope lived quietly in his Independence mansion with several members of his extended family. In 1909, illness mysteriously struck the household, claiming the lives of Swope, the executor to Swope's will, and a nephew. All of the dead had been treated by Dr. Bennett Clark Hyde, husband to Swope's niece. Hyde was indicted for murder on evidence that he had recently obtained cyanide capsules and typhoid cultures. Swope's exhumed body showed traces of "some convulsive and paralyzing poison." Hyde was found guilty in 1910, but appealed to the Missouri Supreme Court. Two controversial retrials ended in hung juries and a fourth trial was cancelled. Swope's death was never resolved.

Kansas City streets were packed for Swope's 1909 funeral procession. Citizens had paid their respects as his body laid in state at the Public Library. Swope was finally buried according to his wishes at a memorial in Swope Park.



Sources

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