

This short article on the beginnings of Kansas City's park and boulevard system is an enjoyable read that gives a good general feel for the physical condition of the area and an overview of the obstacles that were overcome. George Kessler is prominent in the piece but two key figures are not mentioned: August Meyer and Delbert Haff.

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On a clear day in the early 1890's, a small train was rattling along on one of Kansas City's old belt lines. Aboard the train, staring pensively at the general appearance of Kansas City, was a young man with big plans. His name was George Kessler . . . and he was a 21-year-old, German born engineer who had studied gardening, architecture, botany, and landscaping . . . in various capitals of Europe.

Looking at the north and west bluffs of our downtown area, he saw little more than sliding hillsides . . . blanketed with rubble, tumbled-down shanties, and a wide assortment of trash. He saw Penn Valley when it was known as the "Vinegar Hill" neighborhood. He saw scattered homes on bare sun-baked little hills . . . occasionally separated by thick jungle-like foliage. And, in looking at what everyone in this area agreed to be an ugly, severely scarred city, young George Kessler saw not only a place that he wanted to call home . . . but an opportunity to bring fame to himself . . . and international renown to the Heart of America.

He was on his way to Merriam, Kansas, where he was engaged to layout an excursion park for the Kansas City-Fort Scott and Gulf Railway Company. From a few small hills, a hollow, and some dry gullies, the young man carved a picturesque and pleasant little amusement park that drew thousands of holiday passengers for the railway company.

With this finished, he turned his attention to Kansas City for a closer appraisal of its street and residential design. At the same time, a man named Bill Nelson . . . who owned and edited the Kansas City Star . . . was trying to get local citizens to take a serious interest in the appearance of their city. One day, Nelson asked Kessler to scan the west slope of Quality Hill and submit whatever plans he thought would alleviate this appalling eyesore that stood in Kansas City's front yard.

The young engineer went directly to the west rail bottoms and climbed up into the tower of the old Union Depot. For an entire afternoon, he made sketches and stared at the high slope of west Kansas City. He showed the rough plans for beautifying that part of our city to Nelson, who rubbed his hands and said, "Keep right on drawing and designing, son."

Though he was enthusiastic, there was doubt in Kessler's mind . . . and he said, "This will mean a great deal of money and a lot of work."

"That's right," agreed Bill Nelson, "But we're going to do it." And the wheels began to turn. Very few men were in accord with the plans of Kessler and Nelson . . . and the entire city was reluctant to spend money. But, behind these plans were men like Adriance Van Brunt and a few other civic leaders. They had a designer . . . and they had plans. Now all that was needed was

money and public support.

Resistance sprang up in many forms and in many quarters. There was no legal authority to establish a park commission. Old houses stood in the paths of proposed boulevards. The land boomers . . . the real estate promoters . . . would stand to lose great profits, and therefore they began to wage high-powered political war.

As the time passed . . . and the opposing odds grew greater . . . George Kessler toiled on without any guarantee of acceptance or pay.

"The highlands," he said, "must be protected. We'll change these dry creek beds into parks and boulevards . . . and homes can stand on the hills, surrounded by natural beauty." The young engineer continued to work . . . confident and optimistic . . . while the chances of translating all his blueprints and hopes into actual scenery grew slimmer. He ignored the controversy with all its news of setbacks in the state legislature, financial problems, ridiculing of his proposals, and constant antagonism.

As the newspapers, speakers, and leaders prodded them, the people soon began to realize the truth in Kessler's words. The fight raged in courts, in meeting halls, and in editorial columns . . . finally, with a city bond vote . . . the entire population spoke unanimously favor of parks and boulevards.

The mountain had been scaled . . . the troubles resolved . . . now everyone turned to George Kessler and said, "It's all yours" and young Kessler was all ready. In 1895, Independence Avenue was begun . . . then Gladstone . . . then The Paseo and Cliff Drive. Shacks and dumps were scraped away . . . rickety old fences and signboards . . . inefficient sewers . . . all were swept away and replaced by the verdant beauty of grassy hillsides an cool, tree-shaded lakes and walks . . . bounded by smooth, spacious boulevards.

Penn Valley Park, Gillham Road, West Terrace, Liberty Memorial . . . these are a few of the masterpieces in city planning . . . designs and triumphs conceived by George Kessler . . . the man who wanted to bring the parks to the people.

For thirty years, this landscaping artist worked with the Kansas City Park Board . . . and in those thirty years, Kansas City acquired a reputation as a clean, beautiful center of life. And across the nation major cities sent representatives to the Heart of America to see how a community could blend smoke stacks and trees . . . how concrete could live with flowers and fields. They cried for the help of George Kessler . . . they wanted him to work the same kind of magic in their cities.

The mark of George Kessler is all over North America . . . and very few people know who put it there. Kessler worked hard and swiftly, never stopping long enough to let anyone praise him or show their appreciation. But in Kansas City, in his day, the people thanked George Kessler, and he thanked them for his first opportunity and his only real home. As he said, he had done a very natural thing for he made the most of what nature offered him . . . and in so doing gave the Heart of America an ideal that has never diminished.