

The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City **by William H. Wilson**

Kessler's biggest commission in the early years was landscaping a rugged hollow in a new high-priced residential section named Hyde Park. The owners of Hyde Park did not hire Kessler because they loved pretty parks so much as they feared that cheap shacks would crawl over the hollow and pull down the value of their properties on the higher ground. The narrow, two-block-long patch of ground, with its steep slopes, limestone outcroppings, and thick tangle of undergrowth frightened the real estate investors, but when they bought it up and turned it over to Kessler in 1887, they gave it to a man who saw natural beauty below the hollow's bleak face.

Hyde Park, like Merriam Park, revealed Kessler's extraordinary ability to visualize, while walking along the site, what trees to fell and which to leave; which slopes to smooth and what naturally dramatic effects of jutting limestone to heighten by careful cutting or filling, or by an adroitly placed curve in an adjacent path or road.

The visual impact of natural beauty was more delightful to him than that of any breathtaking but coldly geometrical boulevard. Some years later, in the first Kansas City park board report, he wrote feelingly of human needs for "beautiful natural scenery," and praised Kansas City's "charming . . . and beautiful spots. . . "

Nature was revealed in Kessler's parks. As in Hyde Park, he embellished her with walks, seats, and shrubs to make her more inviting, but he never smothered her, or pretended that patterns from his drafting board were better than her own. He had to work in Hyde Park, as he did everywhere, without benefit of zoning laws. To forestall the park's becoming a kind of collective back yard, he circled it with a road to encourage home builders to front their residents upon it. The plan was successful; land along Hyde Park sold well, and soon big houses presented gracious facades to the little park.

Through a mutual acquaintance, a newspaperman on the *Journal*, who formerly lived in Dallas, Kessler wangled an introduction to Mr. W. R. Nelson, editor of the Kansas City *Star*

and advocate for city improvement. Next step: the 1893 plan for Kansas City's now famous parks and boulevards system.