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Kansas City Was Birthplace in 1917 of Institute Whose Founders Included Famed Landscape Architect-Won Distinction for City and Himself with Early Designs for Park and Boulevard System, Prompted by William Rockhill Nelson

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The opening today of the 3-day conference of the American Institute of Planners is a return home for this organization, founded in 1917 in Kansas City.

Members of the Institute are technical men in all parts of the country, who couple training and foresight to prevent cities from becoming a monotony of brick and stone, devoid of verdure. Their organization got its start here because Kansas City was a pioneer in city planning. The city's foresight, and early progress in that field stemmed largely from the work of one man, George E. Kessler; and he, in turn, had been given the opportunity because of the efforts of William Rockhill Nelson, founder of The Star.

Kessler was one of the founders of the planners' institute in 1917. He was by then a nationally recognized leader in the field, having gone far since he started with the beautification of Kansas City's west bluff in 1892.

Kessler was born in Frankenhause, German. He came to this country as a boy and later returned to Germany for Education in Engineering and other studies.

A Cliff of Squatters' Shacks

Colonel Nelson first had pointed up the need for parks and boulevards in an editorial several months after The Star was founded in 1880. He kept pounding away on the subject. In 1892 he met George Kessler, a struggling young landscape architect trying to get a start at Merriam. He invited the young man to submit a sketch for beautification of the west bluff, then lined with squatters' shacks.

In 1892, too, the first Kansas City park board was named by Mayor Benjamin Holmes. The members were: A. R. Meyer, S. B. Armour, Adriance Van Brunt, William C. Glass and Louis Hammerslough. George Kessler was hired as consultant. That was the start for Kessler of an association of thirty years with the park and boulevard system of Kansas City.

It was Nelson who put Kessler to work on the West Bluff beautification in 1892. In 1895 a political campaign with the slogan, "Make Kansas City a Good Place to Live In," succeeded in

the passage of an amendment to the charter to permit work on a park system. And the work actually started, under the masterful hand of Kessler.

In 1895 Independence avenue was built to conform to boulevard specifications. In 1896 and 1897 Gladstone was completed, from grading to paving. In 1898 work was started on the Paseo from Ninth street to Seventeenth street. It was completed in the fall of 1899. Shortly afterwards, construction started on Cliff drive in North Terrace park and Penn Valley park and Benton boulevard.

Obstructionists Organized

Meanwhile, large property owners had banded together and were putting up a fight against park and boulevard expansion, since they feared a special property tax. A Missouri Supreme court decision in 1898 finally defeated the opposition in a case regarding condemnation proceedings of 200 acres in North Terrace park.

Kessler, meanwhile, had discarded all conventional ideas of landscaping as inadequate for Kansas City's topography. He selected a plan that adapted parks and boulevards to the terrain, rather than attempt to make nature conform to man's idea of order and prettiness. Once, when questioned about his program, the master planner said:

"Unless you can make your home city attractive for the skilled working man, you cannot make him a permanent resident no matter how many factories you build."

The influence of Kessler was now everywhere. He had much to do with laying out the approach to the Union Station. He became adviser to Kansas City, Kansas, and to the directors of the Liberty Memorial. He formulated a plan for the Blue river valley, part of which was put into effect much later, by WPA workers in the 1930s. He revised the plans for the campus of the University of Kansas at Lawrence, the Mt. Washington cemetery, William Jewell college at Liberty, and Washburn college and Gage park in Topeka.

A close friend of Kessler was S. Herbert Hare, senior partner today in the firm of Hare & Hare and a distinguished city planner, himself. Mr. Hare recalls that before Kessler came to Merriam and then to Kansas City, he had been a "cash boy" in a large dry goods store in Dallas, carrying money to the clerks and performing other errands for them.

Mr. Hare knew the master city planner until Kessler died in 1923 in Indianapolis. He says that Kessler had told him that his hands were tied at times by political consideration, but he was able to push most of his projects through. Hare and Kessler worked together in planning the lumber city of Longview, Wash. in which a boulevard was named for Kessler.

The work Kessler began here quickly brought him bids from other cities. He moved from Kansas City and started a firm in St. Louis, where he helped plan the exposition of 1904 and Forest park, today one of the most beautiful parks in the country with its fine zoo, lagoons, golf courses and municipal opera. When World War I came he helped build sixteen cantonments for soldiers.

Help to Other Cities

Some of the cities influenced by Kessler in their park and boulevard systems are Indianapolis, El Paso, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Syracuse, Denver, Wichita Falls, Tex., and he even went south of the border to help in Mexico City. The late J. C. Nichols, when he heard of the death of Kessler, said:

"George Kessler's work will live for generations. With Colonel Nelson and A. R. Meyer, Kessler was among the first to grasp the civic possibilities of the topography that seemed to be an obstacle."

His basic plan was so sound that the city continued to build on it, and to win the praise of discerning visitors. One of the best-known and most pointed statements is by Andre Maurois, French author and lecturer. After a period of lecturing at the University of Kansas City he wrote in his journal:

"Who in Europe or in American for that matter, knows that Kansas City is one of the loveliest cities on earth? And yet it is true. The downtown section is like any other in the United States, the violent contrasts of skyscraper and wasteland. But the residential section is a masterpiece of city planning. The street follow the curves of the hills or the winding of the streams. Flowering shrubs encircle the houses. The homes themselves, designed in the best of taste, are artfully grouped in a immense park whose trees are unequaled in variety and luxuriance. . . . Few cities have been built with so much regard for beauty."