

As Kessler worked to develop his private practice, he kept a sharp eye on the maneuverings for public parks in Kansas City. Civic leaders were pushing hard for green spaces within the city, using the rationale that Kansas City must have parks because other cities had them.

Early efforts to do something serious about the issue of parks date from the 1870s. When the structure of Kansas City's government was being changed in the 1880s and 1890s to find a more suitable form of government to manage the increasingly complex urban problems, supporters of the push for parks saw an opportunity to include an independent park board in the new city charter. In 1889, the first Board of Park Commissioners was formed.

On May 31, 1890, George Kessler sent a letter of application to this board for the position of landscape architect. In this letter he stood entirely on the merits of his own experience.

"Having had and used excellent opportunities for study and experience in my profession both in the United States and Europe," he wrote, "I feel confident of my ability to produce results satisfactory to your commission and the public . . ." Letters of warm praise for Kessler's work from railroad men accompanied this application. However, in January, 1891, the Missouri Supreme Court declared the park law unconstitutional and the board ceased to exist.

Finally after a brief, intense campaign the city charter was amended to give Kansas City a park board with power to issue city bonds. The board that was appointed on March 5, 1892 set an example for all the boards to follow in the next one hundred years.

The driving, dynamic force of the board was its president, August Robert Meyer, an ideal type of nineteenth-century businessman. An European-educated multimillionaire, he possessed a rich personality that combined enthusiasm, gentility, and charm.

Months before the Meyer park board was established Kessler was selling himself by landscaping the ground of Meyer's big new house in suburban Westport. Curiously, when Meyer's board did retain Kessler it did not compensate him for his principal services. Possibly because it wanted to emphasize the utility of his work rather than his ability to create beauty, it appointed him "secretary" at a salary of \$200 per month. It also appointed him, not the landscape architect, but the "Engineer to the Board to serve in said capacity without pay. . . ." Although the board did not pay Kessler for his early planning work, they gave him the chance to do the work and that is what mattered to him.

Meyer's and Kessler's assessment of Kansas City, published in 1893 as the first park board report, appeared at what is generally considered the beginning of the City Beautiful movement. Meyer wrote the main body of the report and Kessler wrote the engineer's report.

Kessler did not shrink from the challenge of the steep hills and river bluffs, the creek beds and gorges, which had given early city developers so many headaches. He saw them as aesthetic assets and he translated to paper his vision of a system of boulevards that would curve gracefully as they followed easy grades to end in three large parks. The system outlined in the 1893 report included 9.85 miles of boulevards and 323.45 acres of parks. He displayed his

grasp of topographical detail and his love for natural beauty in a long, minute description of the lands in and around Kansas City.

Although Kessler moved to St. Louis in 1910 and was national known, he maintained a relationship with the Kansas City Park Board and Kansas City until his death in 1923. By 1920 not only was the full 1893 plan in general and in detail without precedent completed, but it had grown and expanded. The system then comprised 2,668 acres of parks and parkways, 90 miles of improved boulevards and park drives with an additional 37 miles of boulevards and park drives planned within the parks and parkways already owned. Further plans adopted for acquisition of 762 acres of parkways with a roadway system of 24 miles, making a total of boulevards and park drives improved and planned of 151 miles and a total area of parks and parkways of 3,471 acres. The boulevards and park drives had grown 1,400% and the parks had grown 1,000% in twenty-five years. The cost of the park and boulevard system to April 19, 1920, was:

Acquisition of lands  
Construction  
Maintenance

Total \$8,333,968.19

\$5,365,244.20

\$3,220,660.61

\$16, 919,873.01

In 1974 the Kansas City Park and Boulevard System was selected by the American Society of Civil Engineers as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark.

References for this biography on Kessler and the Kansas City Park and Boulevard System are:

*The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City*

by William H. Wilson and

*A City Within a Park*

by Jane Mobley and Nancy Whitnell Harris.