

ON THE ROAD

Once characterized as an “ugly boomtown,” Kansas City’s historic parks-and-boulevards system has heightened the area’s beauty in a lasting way.

In the beginning, the city’s outlying areas lay almost completely blank on a drafting board except for a few slapped-together slums. George Edward Kessler, a bushy-browed, German-born landscape architect, had inherited the task to beautify the city by finding locations for public parks and linking them together with lavish thoroughfares, the way a jeweler might string diamonds. What he created is considered by many local residents and occasional visitors as the city’s crowning achievement—a beautiful parks-and-boulevards system that accentuates the rough but natural topography, giving shape and character to Kansas City.

If not for majestic fountains and beautifully landscaped medians on thoroughfares such as Ward Parkway, few citizens would give much consideration to Kansas City’s boulevards. Thousands of drivers maneuver on them every day without the slightest notion that the boulevards are part of the city’s most distinguishing—and also one of its most historic—features. Boulevards introduced to Kansas City at the turn of the century took an “ugly boomtown,” as it was characterized by historians, and turned it into a flourishing transportation system that found the natural beauty in a city at the Missouri River’s elbow.

But the story of how the city came to gain its splendor and develop a renowned parks-and-boulevards system is an involved one, including some of the most celebrated figures in local history. A city with no parks or boulevards eventually grew to what it is today—a city boasting more than 50 boulevards and parkways, reworking its bleak aesthetics to overcome the odds stacked squarely against it.

“Most people know of the boulevards, but they may not know the history,” says Vincent Gauthier, director of the board for the Jackson County Historical Society. “A lot of people still take visitors for a drive down Ward Parkway to show how beautiful the city is, so their impact has lasted to this day.”

Aside from outward beauty, citizens don’t particularly notice the difference between boulevards and average streets. The original thoroughfares were designed to be wide enough so that horses and buggies could turn around easily, Gauthier says. Decades later, the spaciousness allowed the roads to be paved for automobile traffic. Gone with the old dirt roads was the appeal they once had for horse drivers.

Several boulevards in Kansas City merely seem to carry the name “boulevard” somewhere in their titles and don’t benefit from landscaping or fountains as others do. Despite issues with physical identity, the roads still serve as links to parks and playgrounds—and in some places, they represent the natural beauty of the area, which was their original intent.

Kansas City’s parks-and-boulevards system grew from the City Beautiful movement that has its roots in the Columbian Exposition at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Essentially, it marked a return to classicism in which cities were laid out with thorough plans. Cities in America had become ugly and were poorly mapped—if mapped at all—and dotted with slums.

Before the City Beautiful movement, Kansas City was among these unattractive cities in the United States, along with Indianapolis and Detroit, that hadn’t followed the lead of such pioneering cities as Chicago. The windy city was an innovator in being one of the first to have an elaborate and beautiful boulevard system in place.

“The differences between boulevards and ordinary trafficways are the ways they were designed to be used,” says David Boutros, associate director of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection. “Trafficways are like a cross between a highway and a street. Occasionally, they’ll have a landscaped median. Coupled with a parks system, boulevards are like elongated parks. They have a high level of landscaping and attractive open spaces.”



A 1920s-era photo of George Edward Kessler taken about the time he was working with the Kansas City Parks Department. He was born in 1862, and historians estimate he was in his 30s at the time of this photo.

WRITTEN BY KEVIN KUZMA PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED BY KANSAS CITY PARKS, RECREATION AND BOULEVARD ARCHIVES

Not a single park had been established in Kansas City in 1876. City officials, when initially proposed with the idea for a parks-and-boulevards system, would oppose the concept. The city was really divided into two camps. Major businesses and lavish homes belonged to the rich, while residents lived in framed wood structures scattered in and around the city's rough topography. At the time, Kansas City was as far away from introducing a parks-and-boulevards system as it could seemingly be.

The Kansas City Evening Star, led by editor William Rockhill Nelson, earned its reputation as a City Beautiful crusader beginning in the 1880s to 1890s. The parks, the writers argued in editorials—and often in letters to the editor written by *Star* staffers themselves—were beautiful but served other purposes. Poor workers who could find refuge in the area's natural beauty could become more productive by being renewed by nature. Park developments would also “pay” by raising adjacent land values.

Concepts for a boulevard system designed to link several parks grew from a plan to broaden and surface two existing roads. Stretching from Kansas City to Independence, Mo., and Rosedale, Kan., these roads were called boulevards, but they didn't fit the typical aesthetics.

The newly formed park board had divided the city into three park districts and persuaded the city council to establish parks in each section. Nelson, who was among several citizens to formally offer input into Kessler's approach, eventually commissioned him to draft a plan for the West Bluffs. Kessler was renowned for his ability to visualize how to adapt the topography. His work on the West Bluffs represented the first step in the parks system in Kansas City.

Kessler's initial report also proposed a park on the north bluffs and a large park in the unsightly Penn Street ravine in Southwest Kansas City. All three parks were considered major in scope, and they were to be linked with boulevards, playgrounds,

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and a grand formal ballroom. Plans called for 100ft. boulevards with 40ft. roads. These were to be flanked by 30ft. of parkway planted with trees and lined with walks. His plan had managed to create beautiful places, and left ample space for widening the boulevard for automobiles.

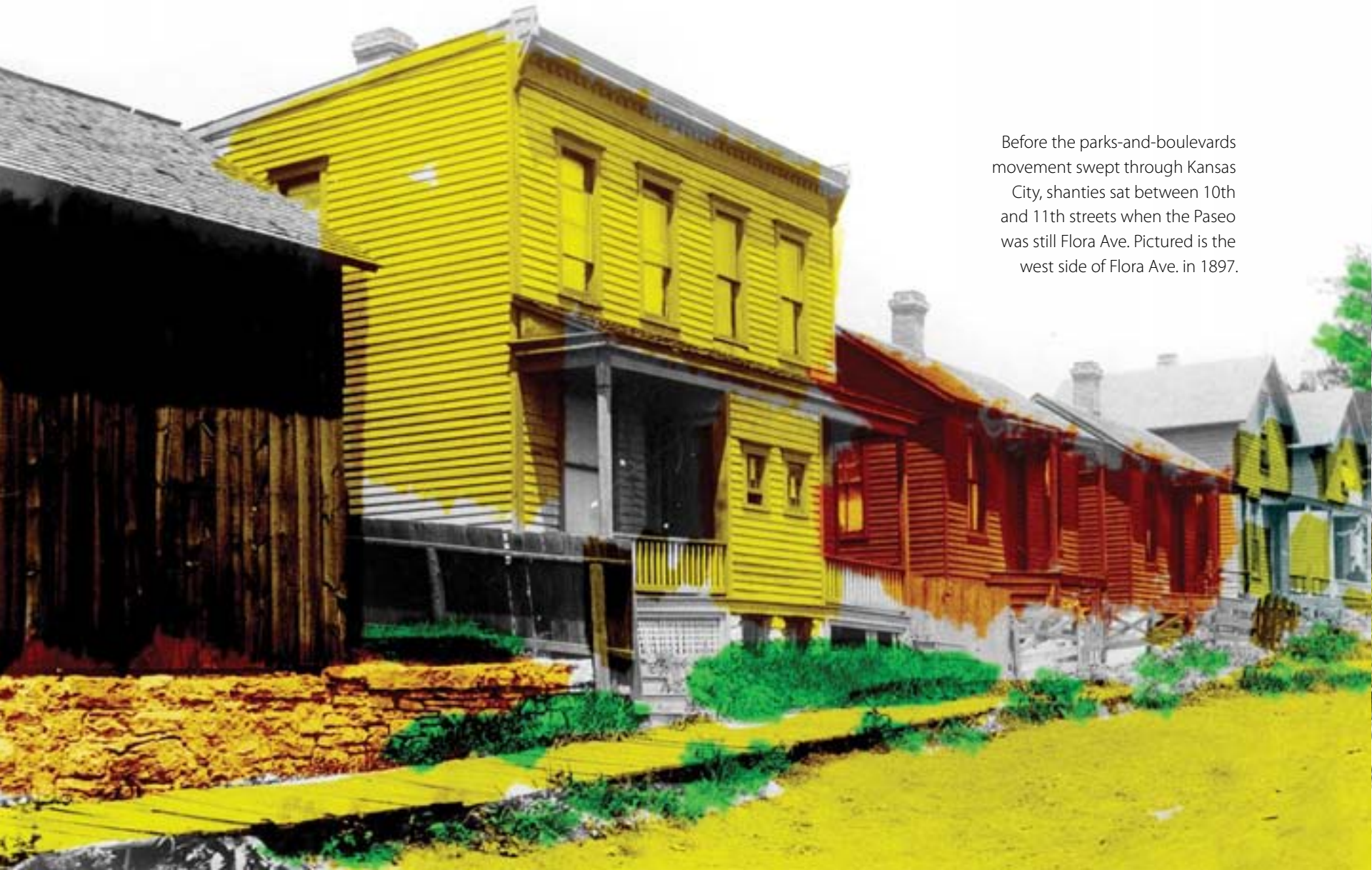
With the plan in place, Kansas City began to build out the miles of graceful boulevards and acres of ruggedly beautiful parkland that it's known for today. Two main features distinguish Kansas City's boulevards from those in other cities. First, the system was designed early in the city's existence, and, therefore, it became a guiding force that evolved naturally with the growth of the city. And second, the system quickly became renowned across the country as a model, or example, after which other cities have patterned their designs since the 1890s.

“Kansas Citians and visitors to our area are the beneficiaries of a legacy left to us by our predecessors,” says David W. Jackson, director of archives and education for the Jackson County Historical Society. Jackson is a Kansas City native and happens to live along Gregory Boulevard, named after Kansas City's first mayor. “The beautiful boulevards, parkways, parks, and fountains exist because of the dedication of those who came before us. Without their foresight, we might not

have the winding, well-kept avenues dotted with parks that maintain our ‘hometown feel.’”

Beauty and its interpretations are subjective, but Kansas City's parks and boulevards arguably offer some of the most striking views in the city. Some are charming, while others are almost completely unidentifiable except by name—yet all inter-link the most attractive areas of the city. Gregory Boulevard winds through Swope Park; Van Brunt Boulevard opens up free of development south of 31st all the way to Elmwood Avenue; Ward Parkway has majestic fountains; Karnes/Roanoke Boulevard is a kind of beautiful secret among the urban scenery.

On a grand scale, the overall effect of the parks-and-boulevards system is that it has continued to link the community as during expansions and annexations the last 100 years. Now there's hardly a place in Kansas City that's not close to either a park or boulevard. Nationally, the system is renowned to this day by planners for its foresight and attractiveness. Locally, it's a relatively undiscovered and perhaps underappreciated treasure, as much a part of Kansas City's history as its fountains, but concealed by its rolling landscape and developed streets—a hidden gem, just the way it was intended. 



Before the parks-and-boulevards movement swept through Kansas City, shanties sat between 10th and 11th streets when the Paseo was still Flora Ave. Pictured is the west side of Flora Ave. in 1897.



The pergola located between 10th and 11th streets between the north road and south road of the Paseo. The house on the left is still there today.