

Growth of the Cities

In the years after the Civil War, Missouri's great cities experienced a period of extraordinary growth. By 1870, St. Louis was the 4th largest city in the United States, with a population well over 300,000. Kansas City was smaller, but growing rapidly. Five thousand residents in 1860. Thirty thousand in 1870. The population was growing dramatically every decade. Two of the nation's greatest cities were forming, right here, in Missouri.

This is the Wainwright Building in downtown St. Louis. It's kind of tiny compared to its neighbors, however, in 1891 it was the tallest building in St. Louis. Let's go check it out.

An architect by the name of Louis Sullivan utilized a new steel frame construction, which made for a lighter, more open, architectural design—nice stone work.

People called it a sky scraper--it was the world's first. Growth of the cities...comin' up.

The world's first sky scraper is an appropriate symbol for the development of Missouri cities. A need for growth; technological innovation; and bam!!—explosive change. The Gateway to the West. Come on!

Great cities don't just happen. There's a wide variety of constantly changing variables that contribute to the growth and expansion of all major cities. But all great cities of the world have a few things in common. Location; the opportunity for commerce; and individuals with vision to make it happen. Wow!!

Take the story of St. Louis, and a man named James Eads. He built this bridge.

The coming of the railroad presented a challenge to the City of St. Louis. For years, the city's position at the confluence of two great rivers, gave it a competitive advantage over other communities. Commerce moved by water, and St. Louis was in a prime position to dominate the steam boat trade. It had location. But things changed with the coming of the railroad. Commerce was moving by rail and the river was no longer a benefit but a barrier. Railroad cars were actually being ferried across the river by boat. Not a very efficient way to run a railroad. In order to compete, the city needed to bridge the Mississippi, and that wasn't going to be easy. The river at St. Louis is deep and wide, with a bottom composed of shifting sand and mud. It would take a great leap of technology and engineering to get St. Louis a bridge. A man, named James Eads, rose to the challenge. Eads had a long and varied career. He had a boat salvage business and contracts with the government to clear snags from the river. He made iron-clad boats for the union forces during the Civil War. Though he had never built a bridge before, and he had no formal engineering training, he knew the river. He studied its currents, its eddies, he learned the language of the water. He even explored the bed of the river, in a diving bell of his own design. Construction began in 1867. Four million pounds of steel, six million pounds of wrought iron. Rock pillars that descended 90 feet below the water to bed rock. And the lives of 13 men. All used to build this structure. With three arched spans stretched over 1,500 feet of river, the bridge is still considered one of the marvels of modern engineering. On July 4, 1874, the bridge was opened to travel. A procession 15 miles long snaked across the structure. Stores were closed, governors gave speeches, Eads was honored as a hero. St. Louis was connected to the east by rail and its growth continued. Across the state, in Kansas City, location was again providing an opportunity for commerce.

This is what's left of the Kansas City Stock Yards, and this is the stock.

Kansas City abridged the Missouri River fairly early in 1869, this competitive edge allowed the city to efficiently transport crops and livestock from the western plains to the east's hungry cities.

In 1870, two railroad men, L.V. Morse and James Joy, bought five acres of land for a livestock yard. The volume of business exploded, the next year they incorporated, becoming the Kansas City stockyard company, acquired another fifteen acres and built a livestock exchange building to house the growing business. By 1880, nearly 1,000,000 head of livestock passed through the yard. By 1918, Kansas City had become the second largest livestock market in the world.

This is the City Market in Kansas City, like the livestock market there's been buying and selling, commerce going on here for the past 100 years. It's markets like this, and the economics of supply and demand that make our cities grow.

But there's more to great cities than commerce; there's great architecture and art, parks and open spaces. Businesses might build a city, but it's the quality of life that keeps it alive.

Few men cared as deeply about the quality of life as J.C. Nichols and George Kessler. Nichols broke ground as a real estate developer, he understood that the success of any city depended on its ability to build and preserve its architecture. In 1906, Nichols accepted the invitation to develop the landscape around the Kansas City country club. Nichols sought to turn the country club district into an area that would support the many citizens that were attracted to Kansas City's promise. Through his uncompromising dedication to delivering the highest quality of life, he sculpted the district into an art-like form. Broad contoured streets lined with thousands of manicured shade trees, were the principal feature of his design. Flowers, sculptures and fountains were generously added to produce a park-like feel to the entire area.

A park is simply one of the fine arts; just as much so as music and fine painting. Greenswards with trees and gardens, have the power to preach a sermon, to give inspiration to those who come to enjoy. Every people in the history of the world that has accomplished anything worthwhile, has done so as a direct result of inspiration. No inspiration ever came from a city of ugliness.

George Kessler specialized in landscape architecture. Kansas City's parks and streets were his first major chance to apply his idea. Kessler always tried to make his designs as natural as possible. His ideas have been duplicated in other cities across America.

We are closing an era. The original plan has been realized in general, and in detail to a degree perhaps without precedence in public works. Land has been secured. Progress made on construction, details planned, the finish is adhered. No locality could rival the topographical eccentricities of our city. They became the basis for a diversified park and boulevard system.

Obviously J.C. Nichols' concept of urban development and Kessler's plan for urban design were successful. Today the country club district and Kansas City parkways and public art are considered models for modern city planning.

Whether you're at the Wainwright Building, the east bridge, the city market or the plaza, the vitality of Missouri's cities is plain to see. Check them out—they're part of your Missouri heritage.