

George E. Kessler

By Jim Barnes -- February 2008 (revised: January 2011, and July 2019)

Twice last year I was asked where the name “Kessler” originated. For those who may perhaps not already know, it honors **GEORGE EDWARD KESSLER** (1862-1923), a landscape architect who ranks among the greatest city planners in American history. Though I must confess that I have read very little from the large archive collections on Kessler, here is my introduction and I hope future scholarship provides you a fuller and, if need be, more accurate account.

“*Kessler Highlands*”, “*Kessler Square*”, “*Kessler Park*”, “*Kessler Parkway*”, and “*Kessler Boulevard*” opened shortly after George E. Kessler’s sudden death, at age 61, in an Indianapolis hospital on the 19th of March 1923. He left behind major development projects in over 100 cities -- accomplishments that include: an extensive parkway system for Kansas City in 1893, landscape for the St. Louis World’s Fair of 1904 and reconstruction of Forest Park afterward, Chapultepec Park in Mexico City, Hermann Park in Houston, Grand Avenue in Oklahoma City, Camp Bowie in Fort Worth, comprehensive city plans for Sherman and Wichita Falls, and other plans too numerous to list—plans still enjoyed by millions today.

Kessler maintained a residence in St. Louis, but lived in Dallas from 1918 to the end of 1921, working on implementation of one of his largest projects, the 1911 “master plan” for this city, which included building “Union Station”, removing tracks of the transcontinental Texas & Pacific railroad from downtown, and relocating the flood prone Trinity River between two gigantic earthen levees. Kessler’s 1911 Dallas plan outlined a Coombes Creek automotive “parkway”; and in 1920 he was hired to draw its route from Beckley to Davis. This design activity so motivated property owners that plans for the entire district were quickly cemented in place shortly after his death.

What made George Kessler so valuable to so many cities were skills acquired through a privately tutored education in landscape architecture that he had received in Germany. He had also spent a year studying civil engineering at the University of Jena. Kessler then traveled extensively among European capitals, observing public works. After three years of this training in these skills then quite unknown to, but much needed by, American cities, Kessler at age twenty returned to the United States in 1882.

Surprisingly, George E. Kessler had actually grown up here in Dallas. The story is told that his father, Edward, had an “artistic temperament” and was busy squandering a substantial family fortune in Germany when his relatives tactfully arranged to send him to America. Son George had been born in Frankenhausen, Germany on the 16th of July 1862. Exactly when the Kesslers wandered into Dallas is not precisely known, but old newspaper accounts mention them living downtown in 1875. There is evidence that teenage George Kessler lived in Dallas for at least three years. It is told that George’s mother, Clotilde, worried that her husband’s unstable character might resurface in her son, so she decided that his formal education should focus on landscape cultivation and civil engineering, hoping that those studies might satisfy artistic impulses but at the same time be tempered by practical considerations. In 1878 George and his sister, Antonie, left Dallas for Germany to begin his special private training at the Grand Ducal gardens at Weimar.

I have often wondered to what extent George Kessler knew the Stevens family or, as a boy, had been familiar with the natural landscape out here along Coombes Creek. Almost certainly the Kesslers must have known the cultured professional agronomist Maximilien Reverchon (1810-1879) and his son Julien Reverchon (1837-1905), a botanist of international renown. During the 1870s the Reverchon homestead’s legendary ‘botanical garden’ was located just up Coombes Creek from our modern Stevens Park Estates. (Their “gardens” included the Creek and what is now the “El Tivoli neighborhood” north of Davis Street). Can it be merely a coincidence that when Julien Reverchon died at the end of 1905 that his precious botanical notebooks and specimen collection were preserved by the Library of the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, the city whose leading landscape architect was then none other than George Kessler? My conjecture is that somehow the Reverchons and their beautiful botanical garden on Coombes Creek were instrumental to young George Kessler and his mother in the formulation of a personalized program of European landscape training, training that ignited his career as one of American’s greatest city planners.

