

The purpose of this site is to provide useful information about the Rockhill neighborhood: history, events, issues, names and contacts of homes association Board members, and human-interest stories. We hope that sharing this information will strengthen our neighborhood and encourage residents to be even more involved and interested in making our neighborhood a better place to live and that future residents will appreciate the value of the Rockhill neighborhood. We think that a community that educates itself and speaks out for itself can best protect one of the best neighborhoods in Kansas City.

HISTORY

The Rockhill neighborhood got its start when a young man named William Rockhill Nelson came to Kansas City in 1880 to seek his fame and fortune. He established *The Kansas City Star* shortly after his arrival and began to build the newspaper into a successful business. Along with his interest in news reporting, Nelson had an interest in urban development. He believed that cities should be pleasant environments for their citizens. So, after replating the area in 1905, he began building south of downtown just north of Brush Creek with his two friends August Meyer (Vanderslice Hall at KCAI) and U.S. Epperson (Epperson House at UMKC). Nelson helped create the KC Parks Department, through which parks and boulevards were extensively developed, many lined with trees and sturdy houses with plenty of open spaces surrounding them. Most of the houses that he built are still standing today. For example, the eight houses on Pierce Street were built in 1906 by Nelson. He also built some of the houses on the north and south side of 47th Street from Rockhill Road to Campbell Street, as well as the duplexes on Harrison Street to house some of his employees at *The Star*. These houses are on the National Register of Historic Places. In fact, our neighborhood was the first neighborhood in Kansas City, Mo. to be listed on the National Register, the State's list of Historic Sites and what was the new Kansas City Register of Historic places that the Rockhill neighborhood helped create.

Nelson's Estate, Oak Hall, was located on what are now the grounds of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. At the time, Oak Hall was said to be the largest home in Kansas City. It was located on the northwest section of the property and faced Oak Street. As a wedding present, he built a large home for his daughter in 1910 that later became the home of the Rockhill Tennis Club for fifty years, but has since reverted to a residential property. The Nelson guest house, at the northeast corner of Rockhill Road and 47th Street (Cleaver II) was designed as a "sister house" to Nelson's summer home in Magnolia, Massachusetts.

Nelson was a real estate developer before he was a journalist, so he always had that interest. The first development that he created in Kansas City was DeGoff's Way, which is north of Linwood. He was a major proponent of the City Beautiful movement, preferring to use the shape of the terrain rather than a grid of patterns, and used Rockhill (which is named for his mother, not our rocks) to showcase this. A major part of this movement, which emerged in the late 1880's, was the emphasis of maintaining natural beauty, hence our flowing lines, trees, and rock walls. He designed and built

Rockhill Road at his own expense, partly because it was the entrance into his estate on the south side. Under the terms of his Will, Oak Hall was torn down after his death and the property set aside for a museum. Nelson had long brought copies of famous paintings to Kansas City that were put on view to “educate” the masses, which was a common gesture of the wealthy at the time. Eventually, after his daughter’s death, the proceeds from the sale of *The Star* to an employee-owned stock plan provided the money for the museum’s construction.

Nelson envisioned Rockhill as the first highly organized residential development in Kansas City. The same conceptual framework was later used by J. C. Nichols. Nelson created deed restrictions, setback standards, a Homes Association, allowed only three architects to design homes, created the Tennis Club for homeowners and maintained landscaping and carpark facilities. All streets were placed under jurisdiction of the KC Parks Department. Many of the homes and the stone walls in the Rockhill neighborhood were made from limestone mined from a nearby quarry in an area now within Gillham Park. If you drive by Gillham Park today, you can see how the quarry was dug out from the side of the hill!

The original home of the Rockhill Tennis Club was located near Brush Creek in what is now Theis Park. There were eight courts that hosted national tournaments from time-to-time. It was said to be the largest tennis club west of the Mississippi until the 1960’s. The Nelson estate owned a large nursery located on the grounds of today’s Kauffman Gardens. The nursery provided plantings, trees, shrubs, and flowers for the neighborhood. There was also a parking garage there, run by the DeLuca family. Rockhillians could leave their car parked at the garage and be shuttled to and from their homes up the hill.

The Country Club Plaza began development in 1923, well after many of the Rockhill homes were built. The Plaza was the first shopping area built outside a central business district in the U.S. and became a national model. It contained family-owned stores, a movie house, a grocery store, and gas stations. People living in Rockhill could take a “feeder bus” down to the Plaza to do their shopping.

In those days, 47th Street, now known as Emanuel Cleaver II Blvd., was a narrow two-lane street; but in 1951, amidst protests from the Rockhill neighbors, J. C. Nichols had it widened to its current four lanes to improve access to the Plaza. Subsequently, in the 1990s the Rockhill neighborhood helped facilitate the Highway 50 designation transfer to what is now Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., formerly Volker Blvd. The goal was to reduce 47th Street traffic and enhance the traffic flow on Volker into the Plaza with wider streets, large intersections and new bridges.

The Rockhill community has decades of history in protecting its neighborhood and helping to shape our midtown community. While institutions and developers have added great assets to the area, they have also presented challenges. As a neighborhood, we have stopped inappropriate property proposals by UMKC, the Nelson Gallery, the U.S. Post Office, an office park called the Sailors project, and several Plaza

area developments. We have been highly active participants and supporters of the Plaza (Cultural Heritage District Plan (2011), Midtown Plaza Area Plan (2016), and the Plaza Bowl Overlay District (2019)).

Many changes have occurred in Kansas City over the years. Rockhill has a great heritage and is proud of its work to keep our neighborhood one of the very best in Kansas City. We are a welcoming neighborhood that is also one of the most aesthetically pleasing in all of Kansas City.

Rockhill's history will continue to unfold in these pages. Please check back again for updates.