

## From Swope to Southeast

At the turn of the century and before Southeast was built, the land belonged to Colonel Swope. Thomas Hunton Swope (the title of Colonel was honorary) was a real estate magnate and philanthropist. He was the largest individual land owner in Kansas City. In 1896 at the age of 70, Colonel Swope donated 1,334 acres for a public park. West of the entrance to Swope Park was the site of the Swope farm and country home.

In 1905 Swope leased the old home and grounds to the Evanston Golf Club for 15 years. The Swope home served as the clubhouse. The grounds were bordered by Cleveland and Prospect, 63<sup>rd</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup>. Aside from the necessary improvements in transforming the grounds into a golf course and the erection of suitable buildings, nothing was done to mar the natural beauty of the rolling terrain.

Colonel Swope, a lifelong bachelor, died in 1909, leaving “120 acres, to the south half of the ground occupied by the Evanston Golf Club, to Thomas H. Swope, Jr., valued at \$240,000.” In 1920, the Colonel’s nephew and namesake had the property subdivided into lots in an addition named Park Gate. The plat map of Park Gate shows Swope Parkway running along the east of the property and Meyer Boulevard providing the main thoroughfare from the west to the grand entrance of Swope Park on the east.

During the 1920’s the Kansas City School District acquired lots in Park Gate, and in 1936 construction began on a new high school building. On June 4, 1937, the cornerstone of Southeast High School was laid. The building was constructed as Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works Project Number 2409. The architects were Wight and Wight who also designed the City Hall, the Jackson County Courthouse, the Kansas City Life Insurance Building, and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

From the late 1800s, Kansas City developed esthetically and recreationally under the City Beautiful movement. William Rockhill Nelson, editor of the Kansas City Star, promoted the need for parks and boulevards in the pages of his newspaper. August R. Meyer became president of the first park board in 1892. Delbert James Haff served as general counsel to the park board and forged the legal structure for the City Beautiful movement. George E. Kessler, landscape architect, was “Engineer to the Board,” and his 1893 assessment included a master plan for parks and boulevards. Colonel Swope’s gift of Swope Park gave momentum to Kessler’s plan.

Today, some of these city leaders are remembered in the lovely area surrounding Southeast. The school sits back from the grand sweep of Meyer Boulevard. Swope Parkway and the entrance to Swope Park provide an elegant approach

from the east. A traffic circle and fountain at the entrance to Swope Park memorialize Delbert James Haff.

Colonel Swope owned the property. The City Beautiful movement created the setting. Famous architects designed the building. The Knights and Ladies of the Castle brought Southeast to life.

Sources:

The Kansas City Public Library, Missouri Valley Special Collections

The Kansas City Star and Times

Jackson County, Missouri, Recorder of Deeds