SUBURBAN COWBOY: J.C. NICHOLS, MASCULINITY, LANDSCAPE & MEMORY IN THE
SHAPING OF AN AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOOD (1880-1950)

A THESIS IN
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ABSTRACT

In 1903 Kansas City real estate mogul Jesse Clyde Nichols sat in a Fort Worth, Texas hotel room wondering if his failed efforts to colonize a million acres in Mexico had just ruined his future. He ultimately decided his fate would be left to a coin toss. If it came up heads, he would go home and if tails he would keep on trying. He joked in his memoirs, written in 1949, that it came up tails, so he went home. He was a mere twenty-three years old and he felt he was doomed to fail. What does any of this have to do with Kansas City’s Country Club District suburb? The simple answer is everything. J.C Nichols came home from that Fort Worth, Texas hotel room and acquired the first few acres of what would become his greatest achievement: Kansas City’s most remarkable and enduring suburban neighborhood. Upon returning home from this early adventure, J.C. Nichols entered the real estate business and began to utilize pioneer-centered narratives learned in his youth and his own fantasies that the American frontier was on the outskirts of Kansas City. These masculine tropes compensated for his early feelings of weakness and the result was the Country Club District of Kansas City, which became the surface manifestation of his vision. Though his vision was complex, my work focuses on the ways J.C. Nichols’s philosophies were gendered and how his sense of turn-of-the-century masculinity defined the aesthetics
of the district he developed. Nichols found it important to create narratives—just as his ancestors did—that highlighted struggle and masculine heroism and he applied them to the real estate business. This focus makes my work a unique reinterpretation and broadening of local history as well as a fresh take on the study of the ways environment and gender commingle. Utilizing primary sources ranging from neighborhood bulletins, newspapers and J.C. Nichols’ memoirs and speeches, my work reconstructs the building of Kansas City’s most prestigious suburb with a focus on the predominant masculine culture of the time. It ultimately demonstrates the ways in which J.C. Nichols, like the star of a spaghetti western, emerged from that Forth Worth hotel room and returned home to Kansas where he tamed a burgeoning suburban landscape for Kansas City’s bourgeoisie.
The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the college of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Suburban Cowboy: J.C. Nichols, Masculinity, Landscape & Memory in the Shaping of an American Neighborhood,” presented by Clinton Lawson, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Myth of a Salesman

“He is fearfully progressive; he is also amazingly thorough. Most progressive men are not thorough. Few thorough men are progressive.” These were the words a “distinguished fellow townsman” gave the *National Real Estate Journal* in the winter of 1939 to describe Jesse Clyde Nichols, early 20th century Kansas City real estate mogul. Like most attention Nichols received from local and national media at the time, *National Real Estate Journal* descriptions of him were vaguely turgid. He was a “master salesman” with an “indomitable will power,” a fearless entrepreneur that worked “with effortless originality, and at surprising speed.” Mr. Nichols, the article continued to rave, “saw years ahead of his time” and was able to predict the demands of rapid city growth—sometimes even ten or fifteen years in the future. Even while possessing this kind of drive and presentiment, Nichols was also uniquely “warm-hearted, sympathetic and intensely loyal.” And like most businessmen, J.C. Nichols was ambitious, but his ambition, the article argued, was only for “the sake of the job he has cut out to be done.”

It was the estimate of those that knew him “that no matter what field of endeavor he might have entered, he would have cast the same shadow across it, for his analytical mind and vibrant spirit would have driven him across its frontiers into the unexplored regions where no man who walked that way before had penetrated.”

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1 James Stykes. “Portrait of a Salesman: Jesse Clyde Nichols.” *National Real Estate Review.* Vol. 8, Issue 3 (1929): 27

rather remarkable character trait, Nichols also possessed an “earnestness of purpose” that highlighted his “his courage and his conviction that anything can be done if it is right.” This, the article postulated, would have “enabled a mediocre man to do a good job; but when you put this pressure behind the ability Mr. Nichols has, you get the answer.” It continued on with the suggestion that Nichols had a gift for inspiring his staff and this gift stemmed from his “unerring ability to estimate the possibilities and limitations of his associates.” His work ethic was the subject of many conversations and articles throughout his life—and most especially after his death. He was well known for his tireless efforts expanding the J.C. Nichols Company. Nichols was so tirelessly devoted to his company that he left little time for his family or any other sort of personal entanglement that did not further his business pursuits. For years, the article admitted, “people have been prophesizing that he would break at any minute—and some are still predicting it now.” Like most articles, it left out the fact that he saw the doctor frequently for exhaustion, smoked two to three packs of cigarettes per day and did, in fact, break down from fatigue in 1936 and was forced to spend a few months in South America (as far from the J.C. Nichols Company as possible) convalescing.

The National Real Estate Journal, like most publications or writers that engaged the topic of Jesse Clyde Nichols in his prime, was prone to oratorical extravagances. Indeed, they seemed genuinely stunned by his achievements and utterly bedeviled by the fact that one man was responsible for their creation. Like Frederick Law Olmstead, Georges-Eugene

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Haussmann, Bill Levitt or Robert Moses, J.C. Nichols seemed to conceive new forms of space and superimpose them upon existing and outmoded ones. He seemed capable of not only building land, but making that land indistinguishable from what he saw in his mind. Nichols did not compromise his vision; he rather seemed to force its birth. Records leave little doubt that Nichols was considered an extraordinary man with an intensity and buoyancy about him that could utterly transform a room. He had this ability despite the fact that he was short and slightly rotund, nearly completely bald, bespectacled and always moving much faster than others seemed to be moving. Indeed, Nichols appeared the very epitome of the self-made man of the early 20th century United States.

This study adopts two modes of inquiry to unravel the mystique of Jesse Clyde Nichols: cultural biography and the use of Western American frontier history as a narrative that spawned a specific style of masculinity readily embraced by Nichols. The result of this stratagem provides a compelling argument that J.C. Nichols was not simply a successful and innovative suburban developer, but more of a builder-philosopher heavily influenced by dominant—and overwhelmingly masculinized—myths of American frontier narratives; narratives that experienced a sort of renaissance in the Victorian Era and into the opening decades of the 20th century. The centerpiece of my argument is that J.C. Nichols’s work in Kansas City was far more than a regionalized affectation of the core tenets of the City Beautiful Movement, Parks Movement or suburbanization. It was rather the actualization or surface manifestation of a meta-historical assessment of American culture rooted in the racist and gendered philosophies of a Western History articulated best by historians like Theodore Roosevelt and Frederick Jackson Turner.
J.C. Nichols, as he is understood in regional histories (the only kind that deals with him in any detail), is quickly categorized as a “community builder” and an important innovator in the American movement towards the suburbs. He is further thought of as the father of the shopping center and the architect of Kansas City’s Country Club Plaza, widely recognized as either the first or second “mall” of America. Though confined almost exclusively to histories of suburbia, J.C. Nichols almost never considered the Country Club District a suburb. He was, in his mind, a city planner, a kind of activist landscape philosopher that built his arguments in time and space. I would ever reluctantly label him a suburban developer. His primary focus was on reforming “the city” and working closely with city government. Success, to him, came only in the city’s willingness to absorb his holdings on the edge of Kansas City. Though Nichols built in an area that was far removed from the power center of Kansas City, the Country Club District was to be, in Nichols’s mind, an exurban improvement upon outdated building patterns in Kansas City—primarily grid-building and a lack of planning. Yet, calling J.C. Nichols a “city planner” in the vein of Frederick Law Olmstead or George Kessler (a later employee of the J.C. Nichols Company) is also problematic as the latter two planners did not possess J.C. Nichols’s preoccupation with connecting his endeavors to a mythologized interpretation of American history. J.C. Nichols, in short, is difficult to define.

How, then, does a historian deal with J.C. Nichols? I argue that he was a distinctly Western American city planner. This, to some extent, accounts for the different style and philosophy of his Eastern counterparts like Olmstead and Kessler. Though beautifully planned suburbs like Roland Park in Baltimore (designed by Frederick Olmstead Jr. and
Charles Bouton) were designed according to ideas influenced by the City Beautiful Movement, J.C. Nichols went a step further and connected his to a historical narrative rooted in Western history and best articulated by Teddy Roosevelt and Frederick Jackson Turner.

A major theme of that narrative, I argue, is built on the Turnerian thesis that “out West” a new man emerged. This new man was Turner’s American, one who had shed a European cultural inclination and adopted something distinctly western and egalitarian. This “hero” of the West enjoyed a resurfacing in American cities of the late 18th and early 19th century as the congestion, evolving modes of production and heterogeneity of the urban milieu threatened a traditional understanding of white, protestant masculinity.

Nineteenth and twentieth century American men lamented the kind of opportunities for manly heroism that the Great American West seemed to offer. In turn-of-the century United States the city began to represent ideals diametrically opposed to the imagined value systems of previous American generations. Many commentators chimed in on this corrupting influence of the city in the 20th century.

William Kent, member of the U.S. Tariff Commission, a U.S. Congressman and leader of the movement to create Muir Woods National Monument, wrote an article in February of 1917 published by the Academy of Political Science entitled Getting Men Back to the Land. In it he postulated “no one could have conceived such an aggregation of was waste as cities afford.”

Like moths to a candle, he argued, men flock to enjoy the fleeting attractions of the city, upending the laws of supply and demand. The result “men needed

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elsewhere and superfluous in the cities find means for forcing a livelihood in the excess population.”⁶ Immigrants, he argued, fled the United States from rural employment and found no useful application of his/her skills. “To the cities and towns” he noted “many of the most vigorous and energetic of our native rural population.”⁷ This influx of “superfluous” populations drove up land values and promoted “ill placed” and unproductive people. Kent argued that most folks in the city were either “doing the wrong thing, or doing the right thing in the wrong place.”⁸

Though Kent’s argument is a spurious one, he highlighted a notion that gained real traction in the early decades of the 20th century: the city was a cramped cesspool, incubators of lethargy, crime, vice and various other anti-capitalistic forces. Men, he ultimately argued, belonged in the open landscape. Not only did the city confine one’s sense of masculinity, the kind Kent placed behind a plow working his own land, it also resituated women and upended traditional roles and gendered spatial arrangements. Thirteen years before Kent’s treatise on men and land, Marion Foster Washburne wrote a piece called Masculine and Feminine Occupations. “For one thing” he wrote “the cry grows louder that men are being crowded out by women. Office forces are now almost wholly composed of women.”⁹

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⁶ Kent, “Getting Back to the Land,” 136.,
⁷ Kent, “Getting Back to the Land,” 137.
⁸ Kent, “Getting Back to the Land,” 137.
A proponent of a mythologized frontier narrative could not abide this kind of interspersing of women throughout the male landscape. Washburne noted that there were many more women teachers than men in the public schools as well as girls in higher grades. Not only this, but the author asserts that “this means, of course, that there are more women than men who are receiving the training necessary for the better paid business positions—not the best paid, but the middle places.”

Reasserting the kind of arguments made by Kent, Washburne argued “this brings about, of course, a disorganization of industries hitherto planned to meet masculine exigencies alone.” Then, of course, there was the eight-hundred-pound-gorilla in the early 20th century room: sex. “Women, it must be admitted,” Washburne wrote, “do introduce a disturbing element. For one thing, the sex-ferment is uncomfortable in business places.” Though the female “sex-ferment” did break the monotony of the workplace, Washburne admitted, it undoubtedly interfered with the “smooth running of the commercial machine.”

Perhaps more disturbing was the manner in which a woman became unattractive in the urban business world. “At this point the objectors” Washburne argued, “even if they be men, begin to get a little emotional themselves.” This emotion seemed to cause them to “point with pain, almost with tears to the unsexing influence which business pursuits have upon the woman herself.” The woman either “twists the definite, manly business system to suit her exigencies—a thing not to be tolerated for a moment—or she herself is warped to

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10 Washburne, “Masculine and Feminine Occupations,” 556.

11 Washburne, “Masculine and Feminine Occupations,” 556.

12 Washburne, “Masculine and Feminine Occupations,” 557.
meet the situation.” In the end she was either “unfeminized or broken on the wheel; and what decent man wants her to be either?” Washburne then concerns himself with the state of the home while women upset the business world. There was a direct increase, he argued, in flat buildings, apartments, boarding houses, childless homes and divorce. “In an appreciable number of cases, married women have been known to prefer working in a store to doing their housework.”

It’s not surprising then that one of J.C. Nichols’s primary goals was to eliminate this kind of temporary means of housing, especially flats, apartments and boarding houses. He was quite concerned with the notion of “Planning for Permanence.” Indeed, it was his mantra throughout the early decades of the 20th century. One of the more disturbing trends Nichols’s noticed in cities was the propensity of sons to abandon the home owned by the father. Though this was not solely the concern of J.C. Nichols, he tied it to the Western pioneer who built according to the necessities of a transient lifestyle, living in camps, with no real concern for permanence. He sought to correct this, to accept the baton of progress and evolve the building patterns of pioneers. This, of course, was Nichols tying himself directly to a pioneer tradition, not just ancestrally speaking, but ideologically and historically. With this inheritance also came the burden of adopting and honoring a certain style of masculinity—one given shape and form by Theodore Roosevelt and Turner.

This work hopes to broaden understandings of J.C. Nichols and to situation him in a larger historical context. The literature on J.C. Nichols is unfortunately limited. The most thorough analysis of him comes from William Worley and his work J.C. Nichols and the

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13 Washburne, “Masculine and Feminine Occupations,” 216.
Shaping of Kansas City: Innovation in Planned Residential Communities. Though it argues that J.C. Nichols was a major innovator in his industry and points out that the Country Club District was a model American neighborhood, it fails to provide any analysis of J.C. Nichols’s personality, which I would argue, rescues Nichols from a strictly regional interest. Further constricting Nichols’s impact is a conventional and completely biographical The J.C. Nichols Chronicle: The Authorized Story of the Man and his Company, 1880-1994, which provides personal anecdotes that partly reveal the personality of J.C. Nichols, but offers no context or analysis. Like most studies of Nichols, it focuses on his seemingly supernatural abilities and fails to consider any other aspects of the narrative that surrounds him.

There is a wide array of brief references to J.C. Nichols in the literature of urban and suburban history, yet Nichols is rarely probed. Mark Rose credits Nichols with integrating gas and electricity in the Country Club District and for attaching gender identities to them in his work Cities of Light and Heat: Domesticating Gas and Electricity in Urban America. In Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930 Robert M. Fogelson argues that Nichols was a major player in creating anxiety and fear through his constant efforts at protection and restriction. Kevin Gotham Fox highlights the ways in which J.C. Nichols helped implement racist deed restrictions in Race, Real Estate and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience 1900-2000. Fox focuses most of his attention on how exclusionary policies created an urban situation marked by uneven development. Though this was certainly the case, deed restrictions were an elaborate set of determinations that emerged from the seeming lawlessness that appeared in the nearby city. An analysis of restrictions—and
especially their racist content—has to consider these cultural elements, especially in the case of J.C. Nichols and Kansas City. Fox fails to do this.

In John Stilgoe’s sweeping *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* he argues that in the urban east, individuals “rediscovered the suburbs as the scruffy frontier known to their forbearers a few decades earlier.” Stilgoe uses this idea however to take a much broader approach, analyzing intellectual notions of the outskirts of American cities as opposed to isolating a specific case as this study intends to do. Nichols is fleetingly mentioned in classics of suburban literature like Kenneth Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier: the Suburbanization of the United States*. Jackson credits Nichols as an undeniable innovator and a visionary that conceived of the nation’s first shopping center. He also notes that the Country Club District was the place to live in Kansas City by 1930, but offers little further analysis. Sam Bass Warner’s *The Urban Wilderness: a history of the American City* argues that J.C. Nichols essentially forced a future racial divide with his restrictions and created a social catastrophe. For the underprivileged in Kansas City this is true, however, there is far more to this story than the actions of J.C. Nichols. Though not overtly or primarily a racist, J.C. Nichols openly adopted the prejudices of his time and incorporated them into his subdivisions. As Worley notes in his work on Nichols, the above authors did not “attempt to portray Nichols in any great detail.”

As for the literature in gender, Michael Kimmel’s *Men and Masculinities: a social, cultural and historical encyclopedia* offers the foundational thought for this thesis: “the great historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued in 1898 that it was the frontier that defined American history; both in reality and in fantasy, the frontier is also what defined American
masculinity.” There is a significant gap in the literature on suburban development. Specifically, there is very little analysis of the difference between gender roles within a suburban development or suburban household and the ways gender influences the actual building and design of the suburb. In Kansas City’s Country Club District, I would argue that J.C. Nichols’s sense of masculinity had the most significant impact on the area. Kimmel argues that “as the frontier closed, it was instantly reborn as myth.” Though Kimmel mentions Nichols not at all, his arguments provide a nice transition to how Nichols manipulated the frontier to assert a traditional sense of masculinity. To fully understand this, it is best to provide a brief example, one that speaks louder than an author’s historical justifications for analyzing Nichols through the lens of gender and western meta-narratives.

Thus, it’s best to turn to a Missouri spring evening in 1925 when Nichols took a stage to honor local Kansas City lumber baron R.A. Long. “We Kansas Citians know full well” Nichols told a large crowd and an even larger radio audience “we speak tonight not only for our city alone but for the wonderful country beyond us” Behind him stood the nearly completed Liberty Memorial tower, a cylindrical homage to Egyptian Revival Architecture made of sawed granite and Bedford stone. Kansas City’s Liberty Memorial, a strikingly phallic tribute to returning veterans of World War One, sat atop a hill overlooking the city. J.C. Nichols was one of the biggest supporters of the monument and it stood as a nice shadow for his speech on Long. It must have tacitly indicated the strength and influence of men like Long and Nichols. And so, after a brief welcome, Nichols started with his dramatic interpretation of what was really happening in Kansas City. It started with “the Winning of
the Great West.” This victory over the Great West, Nichols said was won “by the sturdy hand on the plow” and “men tireless and fearless in action.”14 Men like Robert A. Long.

J.C. Nichols was enamored with this kind of heroic narrative and it served as the central tenet of most every speech he gave throughout his life (even at middle-school graduations). The American West of Nichols’ imagination was the “home of the pioneer, populated by covered wagons” and it was characterized by “hardship, toil” which served as “the breeders of the fathers and mothers of most of us here and our radio audience.”15 This kind of frontier ideology and sense of history was an integral part of J.C. Nichols and is superimposed upon the Country Club District. Historians have strangely overlooked Nichols’s multitude of references to history, to the “Great West” and to the masculine heroism of pioneers.

Strangely enough, historians who have written the most on J.C. Nichols often portray him as a kind of Western hero himself. His early years, as will be evident in my first chapter, seem to mimic those of an archetypical western hero. His talent in the real estate industry, according to these writers, seems to be granted by the ethers. He is considered a man, who in clarity of purpose and ability to actualize that purpose was unparalleled. Thus, he comes off as a loner type. Though he had a family, he was largely absent as he was dedicated almost exclusively to his purpose. He seems unconcerned with money, until the Great Depression, building for posterity and for the benefit of the white bourgeoisie. Of course, all of this has elements of truth, but utterly fails to paint a realist or believable


15 Nichols, “Robert A. Long.”
picture of the real J.C. Nichols. Nichols, I argue, was a talented and driven man that confronted two major forces in the late 19th century: urbanization and a concomitant shifting of modes of production from agriculture to urban industry and masculine anxiety. To add context to this theory, it’s important to look at the environment J.C. Nichols came from: Olathe, Kansas circa 1880.

Olathe, Kansas, an outlying agricultural community outside Kansas City was classified as a second class city in 1870 after it reached 2,045 residents. The town’s first library came in 1874 and during that year its first history was written. In 1875 72% of Johnson County, Kansas—of which Olathe was the county seat—worked in agriculture. 11% worked in the professional and personal service industry, 8% worked in trade and transportation and 9% in manufacturing and mining. Nichols’ father and mother, J.T. and Joanna Jackson, were of farming stock and at the time of his birth lived on a fairly sizeable farm that his father had purchased from Native Americans upon arriving there from Ohio.

Times were changing. In the 1880s, the decade of J.C. Nichols birth, Olathe welcomed the Hyer Boot Factory, the milling industry, Hodges Brothers and Lanter Lumber Company. It welcomed the Patron’s Mutual Insurance Association and the Fairview Race Course. In 1880 Olathe’s population had grown to 2,285 and by 1890 had reached 3,294. In 1892, when Nichols was 12 years old, the Washburn courthouse of Olathe adopted steam heat and electric lights; public utilities became commonplace and the automobile was on the horizon. Over the course of 20 years Olathe—and the nation—was rapidly changing from Jeffersonian ideal to nascent industrial giant. For better or worse, J.C. Nichols, like many American men, would have to learn to adapt to this new environment.
Running concurrent with these changing social trends was the emergence of a new masculine ideal. Historian Anthony Rotundo argues that “many of the cultural forms which gave shape to manhood in the twentieth century emerged in the late nineteenth century.”

It was during this time—which coincided with J.C. Nichols formative years—that “the male body moved to the center of men’s gender concerns: manly passions were revalued in a favorable light; men began to look at the ‘primitive’ sources of manhood with new regard.” Rotundo points out that these cultural shifts took on many variations and did not happened over night. Some of them began in the 1850s “but the moment of greatest change came in the 1880s and 1890s.” Rotundo points out that a “vogue of physical culture” beginning in the 1850s came to mania in the latter two decades of the 19th century. A new focus on physical strength, a lack of complex emotions, fighting and boldness dominated. Not only that, but it became a tool by which one could gauge the quality of a man’s character. A flabby physique suggested a correspondingly soft moral and intellectual composition. Into this environment was born the idea of “muscular Christianity” in which Jesus was remolded as strong and forceful. It was the complete embodiment of mind, spirit and character and it reached its apex just about the time J.C. Nichols must have been questioning how he fit in this kind of culture and how he matched up with his peers. Though he would later consider himself the progeny of that rough masculinity that helped


17 Rotundo, American Manhood, 223.

18 Rotundo, American Manhood, 223.
shape the West, there is little to no evidence that he was on his way to becoming this as a young man.

And on that April night in Kansas City honoring RA Long and his lumber company, Nichols talked mostly about manliness and its ideals. *That* was the real legacy of R.A. Long. Long was not just an incredibly successful businessman—he was first and foremost a real American man, the offspring of earlier pioneers. This was how Nichols saw himself. They were men that were “pioneers in our constructive industry when facilities were limited and foundations themselves were being laid.”¹⁹ In Nichols mind, Long was not just an entrepreneur of his time, but rather a 20th century American man reshaping the West to accommodate new industrial demands (just as men did in the initial push Westward). When Nichols gave these speeches, as he would throughout his career, he was not merely honoring a man, but a vague spirit of fortitude and courage that he believed won the American West and was vital to winning it again from urban forces that sought to compromise it: immigration, communism, blacks, poverty, blight and general “unsightliness.” In short, he was honoring a successful model of bourgeois masculinity.

R.A. Long was certainly this type of man and Nichols accentuated the points that proved it so. In his speech Long came “from a Kentucky farm, without money, experience or influence” and cast his lot “in the heroic making of the West.” There was some truth and much myth in this analysis, but it put Long in the light in which Nichols liked to view himself: a sort of Daniel Boone of the emerging skyline, standing on the edge of the metropolis forging ahead. As Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontiersmen used the frontier to emerge

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¹⁹ Nichols, “Robert A. Long.”
American, Nichols seemed to constantly suggest that the building of cities did the same for new men of the urban 20th century. Alluding to this in the same speech, Nichols said “There is a skyline in the lives of men, as there is a sky line in a city. From humble beginnings and lower structures gradually arise peaks of achievement.” Nichols was not alone in providing this kind of analysis. In 1907 The Kansas Spirit wrote of R.A. Long “If, when a young man just staring into the serious work of life, R.A. Long decided to stay in Kentucky he would probably have been a preacher, as his mother hoped he would be. But the young man heard the call of the West.” Long, according to this narrative, had to resist the effeminizing force of his mother and her desire for him to pursue a life of morally based intellectualism and heed the call of the West. Long, like many men looking for fortune in a new industrial age, migrated to the city and worked to shape it as his forefathers had the plains. Men like Long had moved from the farm to the city, but the true transformation came in the struggle of taming the city according to the will of white, Christian men.

R.A. Long and J.C. Nichols had a lot in common. Long had not migrated west and settled a farm—like Nichols father—but rather had gone into the city and created a small empire built with lumber. Nichols must have felt a kinship with this kind of man. In his memoirs, however, Nichols introduces readers to a completely different person: a young man whose insecurities dominated and for whom failure seemed but a turnabout the bend. J.C. Nichols ultimately became a Robert Long type of man, but the becoming has been overlooked in favor of the neat legacy Kansas City bestows upon Nichols. This thesis begins

20 Nichols, “Robert A. Long.”

21 “A Kansas City Spirit...In the Making.” Kansas City Spirit (June 9th) Editorial section.
by asking a rather simple question: what did being a sort of naturally portly, short, prematurely balding man who thought he lacked courage and stamina in an age of muscula- 

tility mean to him? How did it affect his masculinity? In reading the speeches and memoirs of J.C. Nichols it seems that ignoring these frontier narratives of manly heroism he so cherished is to miss something rather essential about Nichols as a man.
CHAPTER 2
A NEW URBAN FRONTIER: THE EARLY YEARS OF J.C. NICHOLS (1880-1905)

“One day I sat in a Fort Worth hotel,” Nichols wrote of the time he spent in the Great Southwest trying to colonize land for homesteaders. He was in that hotel “somewhat discouraged” and not knowing what do to next in his life. The only solution Nichols could come up with was whether or not he should pin his fate on a coin toss. Ultimately Nichols “flipped a coin to see whether I should return home.” If it turned “heads I’d go home, tails I’d keep hitting the ball.” It came up tails “so I came home” Nichols joked.\(^1\) It was 1903 and Nichols felt, at the rather young age of 23, that he had just ruined his life. “I was convinced that I was a complete failure and there was no future whatever for me.”\(^2\) Adding insult to injury, he noted some of the land he was trying to finance in Texas started spewing oil. He returned to Olathe, Kansas, where everybody knew his name, and walked on the opposite side of the street of anyone that may have recognized him. He was ruined, despondent, out of the game, destined for mediocrity. This was two years before he bought the first tract that would become the seed of Kansas City’s Country Club District.

In turn-of-the-century America, as young men struggled to transition from farms to a more urbanized existence, the arenas for proving one’s masculinity became constricted. Those men like Nichols, accustomed to the rigorous farm life of Olathe, Kansas, found themselves seeking opportunities in urban landscapes antithetical not just to the rural


\(^2\) Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City.
aesthetic, but to the value systems culturally embedded within that aesthetic. The plausibility of adopting the masculinity of one’s father or grandfather was becoming ever scarcer. And for some men, like Nichols, the plausibility of achieving that manliness was even more difficult as he didn’t seem to possess the kind of spirit he so cherished in other men—courage, strength, pioneering perseverance. According to his memoirs, J.C. Nichols failed miserably as a young man at sustaining any real sense of masculine dominance beginning in his Olathe childhood. Like a young Theodore Roosevelt, effete and sickly, J.C. Nichols ultimately sought to create in his imagination the kind of man he aspired to be and it was, his speeches and memoirs suggest, the very same archetypical Western American hero that became prominent in the early 20th century.

These sorts of heroes were created by historians like Theodore Roosevelt and Frederick Jackson Turner. Esteemed historian and cultural critic Richard Slotkin argues in “Nostalgia and Progress: Theodore Roosevelt’s Myth of the Frontier” that “Turner and Roosevelt were drawn to the study of the frontier by an intuitive sense of its importance which predated their studies.”3 Their studies of the frontier, however, especially in the case of Roosevelt, were at once historical and fiction, especially in piecing together an ideal of manliness. “This intuition” Slotkin wrote “was in fact an episode of recall and recognition in which they connected the life around them with the symbol-laden stories about the frontier that they had absorbed as children, along with the other givens of their culture.”4 As this chapter demonstrates, J.C. Nichols was frequently exposed to frontier tales from his parents.


4 Slotkin, “Nostalgia and Progress,” 609.
and grandparents that created what Slotkin calls “intuition.” This is, perhaps, the best way to look at the way J.C. Nichols absorbed and disseminated a gendered philosophy that he rooted in history.

His memoirs, completely neglected by historians, demonstrate his early cultural influences as well as providing a unique and thorough glimpse of the making of a turn-of-the-century man. Though it is difficult to completely trust the voracity of Nichols’s memoirs, his writing nevertheless offers a rare glimpse into his life. His memoirs, like his speeches, are episodic, erratic and colorful. His life, much like the narratives he so cherished, seems to mimic the mythological devices deployed in western narratives.

His story begins with his birth on August 23, 1880 to Jesse T. Nichols and Joanna Jackson, a prominent middle-class Kansas family. The details of Jesse and Joanna’s lives are vague and limited to obituaries and tidbits. J.C. Nichols’s unpublished memoirs, however, offer his personal analysis of their lives. Written in the late 1940s and undoubtedly influenced by his romanticized hindsight, his writing immediately and clearly demonstrates his devotion to frontier narratives. “My father was born in 1847 near St. Clairsville, Ohio, and came to Johnson County immediately after the end of the Civil War in which he served as a private in the northern army. For the first winter in Johnson County he lived in a log cabin near Shawnee, Kansas.”

This being the first passage of his memoirs, we may assume that his father J.T.’s western migration was where he believed the story of his life began. Similarly, his mother “was born in 1853...on a farm near Marietta, Georgia. During the Civil War their farm was overran by General Sherman on his famous march to the sea, and

5 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
everything my grandparents owned was destroyed or confiscated.”\textsuperscript{6} With the help of neighbors, Joanna, her siblings and parents made it to Iowa where they bought a “team and covered wagon and came to Johnson County.” There they purchased 80 acres of land from the Indians, ten miles northwest of Olathe, Kansas and settled down to farm. It was an example of Nichols’s lifelong fascination with casting everything he spoke of—be it real estate, graduating middle school, the Great Depression or World War II—in a broad and heroic historical timeline. He saw himself too—his surname and his bloodline—as an historical evolution of a pioneer spirit. Did it spring from the experiences of his parents? It is impossible to tell. What can be proven, however, that he was certainly exposed to those “symbol-laden” stories of migration that Slotkin refers to and that these stories led him to develop that kind of “intuition” that the frontier was something vitally important to American culture.

It is likely he heard these stories not only from his parents and grandparents, but also from neighbors who arrived in Johnson County, Kansas the way his father and mother did. He probably heard these tales in his school on the Kansas prairie. What we know without a doubt is that he clearly enjoyed their retelling. “When mother was fifteen years old she rode three miles each way (on horseback) every day to teach school in a one-room school,” Nichols wrote in a gleeful tone. He added that in those days it was the teacher’s job to build her own fires and to take care of the school. For a four month’s term she received $50.00 and used “her first money to put the plaster on the walls of her parents’ small crude

\textsuperscript{6} Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
home.” The next year she used her salary to attend Kansas’s Baker University. This most likely served as the foundation for his view of success: a delicate balance of sophistication and rugged work ethic.

“Through her early years were lived on a pioneer farm where she worked hard,” Nichols wrote of his mother, “nevertheless she developed into a most gracious, cultured lady and as a young woman she took an intensive part in the Ladies Literary Society of Olathe; in her church and many other social and educational things.” With the frontier being tamed by men like her father and future husband, Joanna served as domesticator and example of feminine gentleness in an unforgiving landscape. Joanna and Jesse T. were married in 1873 and soon bought a 220 acre farm. J.T. became the manager of the Olathe Grange Store where his salary was $1,000 a year and Joanna clerked in the same store to help make ends meet. His father held his position at the Grange Store for some thirty years until he resigned in 1910 after “he was elected on the Democratic ticket for county treasurer by the biggest majority ever polled up to that time by a candidate for public office in that county.” According to Nichols, J.T. was a leader in the Populist Party days and a great believer in the rights of the common people. Additionally, he was an avid reader of books that dealt with the lives of great men in history. During J.T.’s latter years he became half owner of a meat packing facility in Olathe, Ostrander & Nichols and their hams and sausage became quite famous throughout eastern Kansas.

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7 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
8 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
These were the primary details J.C. Nichols included in his memoirs concerning his parents. His parents were a Westward Migration success story and must have been an early factor contributing to his tendency to historicize struggle and attach it to a meta-narrative of Western expansion. Indeed, Nichols mused “How father and mother ever accumulated some $50,000...reared my sister and me comfortably, and sent my sister to college (as well as helping me)...I’ve never been able to understand.”10 It mirrored his analysis of the life and legacy of Lumberman R.A. Long, who came from a Kentucky farm without money or influence and threw his lot in the heroic making of the West. Perhaps he was even thinking of his father (born just three years before Long) and his mother (born three years after).

The first mention of himself in his memoirs, aside from the location and date of his birth, was mentioning his long childhood journeys to school. “When I was six years old” he noted “I walked a mile on a dirt road to and from school everyday.”11 With this we get the first thread of a rags-to-riches narrative; a narrative he introduces just after noting that his father owned a 220 acre farm and secured a rather decent yearly salary. His next major event: “Between the ages of eight and eleven I worked before and after school, and during certain summers, in Olathe gathering cows (astride Old Fan, our buggy horse) from various barns and driving them daily in the morning about a mile and a half to pasture, and returning them in the evening.”12 This is quite a workday for an eight to eleven year old, especially considering the length of a school day. Whether exactly true or not, Nichols

10 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
11 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
12 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
introduces himself as a man characterized by work, using labor as the essential way he expressed himself. Nichols used work to compensate for any weakness and every shortcoming. And he labored hard to outdo his peers in everything he did. Or, once again, that is the story that survives.

His memoirs quickly turn to the consistent and relentless hazing her caught from other boys in Olathe. This, in turn, undoubtedly fuelled his vigor to outdo them. “At that time,” he wrote, referring to when he was between eight and eleven, “there was an east end gang of kids in Olathe, headed by a boy nicknamed Bulldog, who used to let my cows out to stray every place, making it necessary for me to do considerable work gathering them up.” Finally, young Nichols became so angry that he organized a West End Gang and “licked the hell out the East End Gang which resulted in a broken leg for one of the boys, but thereafter they let my cows alone!” This is one of the few times Nichols seems to have prevailed.

At the age of eight he went to work on Saturdays at the Olathe Grange Store his father managed. He worked a rather astonishing schedule that ran from seven in the morning to ten at night. He worked that late only, however, when he was able to hire out the herding of his cows at nighttime. At a tender eight years of age he began leading the store in sales, which resulted in a pay raise from $1.00 per hour to $1.50. How much of this is true is impossible to tell. Nichols’s tales of his early years, however, describe an epic work ethic repeatedly interrupted by abuse from almost every member of his peer group. At the

13 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

14 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
Olathe Grange Store, for example, his colleagues coaxed customers into asking for white lamp blacks, left handed monkey wrenches or jugs open at both ends. They laughed at young Nichols as he diligently searched for such objects. Once, they persuaded a customer ask for a “nice swiney Canute.” Nichols politely informed the customer it was in stock and thoroughly searched for it. Just upon beginning a fool’s errand to find it, he earned the nickname “Swiney,” which lasted through high school.

J.C. Nichols described experiences that likely felt quite familiar to young men of his time. Anthony Rotundo writes that “the varieties of physical punishment that boys inflicted on each other were as numerous as the settings in which they gathered” and that “beneath this violence lay curious veins of casual hostility and sociable sadism.”\(^\text{15}\) Importantly, however, Rotundo notes that boys revealed their values in the activities they pursued and “traits such as size, strength, speed and endurance earned a boy respect among his peers.”\(^\text{16}\) Rotundo also writes that bravery fell into two categories: stoicism and daring. These qualities were tested in games like “soak-about” where a boy was pelted with a hard ball in any vulnerable area the aggressor chose. The primary goal of the game was to endure the blow without crying out or even flinching. J.C. Nichols writings reveal the extent to which he could not endure these essential and primitive forms of masculinity as a child.

When not humiliating him in front of customers, his colleagues nailed down incoming boxes and stood around to watch Nichols struggle to load them; sometimes they


stuffed sawdust in the Sorghum spout and laughed when Nichols tried to fill a customer’s can. Readers start to feel that these “pranks” were beyond playful and far into the realm of mean-spirited. That he is writing of them in his late 60s is telling. He left the Grange Store at fourteen to work on a farm during the summer. The abuse followed him and the “pranks” became more elaborate. The other farmhands rigged an arrangement that pulled a rope while they slept in the haymow so that it sounded like an intruder walking below “and they would tell me it was robbers, and disappear leaving me quaking with fear.”

“As long as I live,” Nichols wrote, “I will never forget one day on the farm.” That memorable day started at lunch time. After eating lunch all the boys laid in the grass to take a nap. “These quick-witted farmhands had killed a large rattle snake, and they coiled it up so that it would look alive” and placed it about two feet from Nichols sleeping head. They yelled “Rattlesnake!” Nichols turned over to see that he was sharing close quarters with a large, coiled rattlesnake. “I jumped to my feet” Nichols wrote “and ran across eighty acres of farmland before I stopped! This story became a legend in that part of the country.” Nichols learned a valuable lesson there: do not run until you know exactly what you are running from. His only friend, it seems, was an African-American boy named George Washington, “who tried to shield me from some of the unkind pranks, and ever since I have had a kindly feeling toward the Negro race.”

17 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
18 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
19 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
Though the “pranks” could be interpreted as juvenile play, their relentlessness and tendency to make Nichols the laughing stock of his peers must have weighed heavily on him. Especially when we consider his deep desire for the courage and bravery of those mythic stories told him by his parents of traversing the wild, obtaining land from Indians, and settling the Western Prairie. Running in fear (for eighty acres) from a dead rattlesnake or quaking in fear of barn robbers could not have bode well for his early progress in the categories of courage and bravery. That it became “legend” in his part of the country could not have helped. And, finally, the reality that his only friend to speak of was an African-American kid who felt compelled to stick up for him was not an exciting social proposition for a young white boy in 1880s Olathe, Kansas.

At Seventeen he started a huckster route and arose at 3AM to buy up eggs, chickens and butter from farmers to sell to nearby Kansas City grocers. The first day of his route he made a trip past the Grange Store to show off to those that had tormented him just a few years before. He arrived on a team he bought himself; a team consisting of one large horse, one blind horse and one small horse. He found them “still in a playful mood.” As he rode away he discovered a group of signs on his wagon announcing “low prices for rotten eggs,” “foul smelling butter at low prices,” and “scrawny chickens at bargain prices.”20 His huckster route was, despite this initial discouragement from his old “friends,” a success. With his first profits he bought a revolver to protect himself on these long journeys with cash in hand. He doubted, though, that had he possessed the courage to shoot it had anything arisen.

20 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
If he lacked courage, he did not lack ambition. Although it is hard to discern truth from bravado, Nichols claims he organized the first debating team at Olathe High School as well as the first football team and then wrote the first school song. We know for sure he was valedictorian of the class of 1897 and gave a speech entitled “Is Peace a Dream?” at the Olathe Opera House. On top of these accomplishments, he “forgot to mention” that when he graduated from high school “it was with the highest grades that had ever been made by any pupil in that school up until that time.”21 He earned a 99.2% and he wondered where that other eight tenths of a percent got away from him and theorized that it may have been “while I was making love to my future wife.”22

His competition, two local farm boys who later became school teachers, came close to his caliber of academic performance. They did not, however, do it while running a huckster route or working in the Grange Store on Saturdays. They did not “spoon at night with girls...did nothing but study. I knew my competition and by the Gods, it damned near killed me to lick their grades.”23 And then he forgot to mention that he also taught Sunday school at the Presbyterian Church. It is clear that Nichols’s need for accomplishment was insatiable. So was his need to achieve while being distracted by classic masculine interferences: love making (with his future wife) work, athletic involvement, and religious devotion. Whether his accounts are exactly true is, again, irrelevant. His writings are most likely some form of youthful bravado meant to compensate for his insecurities. According

21 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

22 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

23 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
to Nichols’s way of thinking, academic achievement while studying endlessly to gain it was
less admirable than doing it while working constantly and sleeping with women. That was a
success in masculinity and scholastics: a fine American balance.

In the fall of 1898 he entered the University of Kansas. Far from waning, his energy
seemed to reach its apex. He was a correspondent for the Kansas City Star, ran a wholesale
meat market in downtown Kansas City and was steward of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity (with
free board). As steward of the fraternity he got the dining hall out of debt and took over
the management of the Athletic Association. He got them out of debt too. His tenure as
athletic director led to an undefeated football team, a baseball team that won “most” of its
games and a pretty good track team. This was all done in his first two years there.

Again, his description of his accomplishments seems to reach levels of absurdity. At
the age of twenty-one, during his last summer in college, he claims he “got appointed
deputy United States Marshall and went after some Japs who were importing prostitutes to
the United States.” Again, this is likely an exaggerated tale that worked to help Nichols
negotiate the perceived lack of nerve that characterized his youth. “One time,” he
continued, “I took a train into Nevada where I hired four mule teams and drove fifty-five
miles to a mining camp and handcuffed a Jap while he was still asleep...thank God he was
asleep! I drove back with my prisoner and flagged a through transcontinental train, showed
my United States Marshall badge (got hell from the conductor) but got my prisoner in Salt

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24 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
Lake City three days before the expected time.” Not only did he arrest his Japanese target, but in usual style, he got it all done ahead of time.

On this same strange journey out West, Nichols claims to have “took a desperate Jap to Seattle...all handcuffed and docile...but when the train stopped at a wayside station the local Japs tried to take him away from me. Somehow my nerve came to my rescue (or perhaps it was my fear) and at the point of my two revolvers I put the raiders off the train and finally turned my prisoner over to the Washington state penitentiary.” It is immensely unclear why J.C. Nichols was on the West Coast arresting Japanese pimps or how he was appointed, if he was (no records exist), Deputy U.S. Marshall, but the tale clearly helped him establish a precedent of courage and heroism. Cleaning The West of the prostitute importing Japanese at the point of two revolvers undeniably compensated for some of his earlier losses to his lack of nerve. It is also important to note that J.C. Nichols wrote this just after World War II and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Could he have been utilizing myths of masculine altercation based on an enemy most readers would have understood in the late 1940s to be the enemy? Again, it is hard to know for sure. It is quite possible all of these tales are completely and utterly true.

This kind of Western journey parallels Theodore Roosevelt. “In Ranch Life” Richard Slotkin writes, “Roosevelt tracked and brought in some horse thieves, then ‘buffaloed’ a man in a saloon brawl. This Slotkin argued, was a progression of heroic growth, that started with killing animals and, finally, a man. Slotkin argues that the “the symbolism and the

25 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

26 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
pattern of heroic progression here paralleled those in Cooper’s *The Deerslayer*—one of his favorite books.”27 This kind of progression would explain, in some sense, why J.C. Nichols went west to chase criminals. It also might be compensation for the fact that he never served in the military like Roosevelt. Slotkin writes that “the killing of animals (and tracking of criminals) was presented as a surrogate for manslaying and war. His next move, however, was not “out west,” but to Europe.

Between his junior and senior years Nichols travelled with a young seminary student named Wilkie Clock. They herded a few dozen head of cattle to a freight train that then took them to Boston. By doing this they received free transportation on a cattle boat headed for Europe. They travelled below deck and slept on hay bales. Before they left Boston they paid $15.00 each for Hanford bicycles and “dead-headed them across in the cook’s meatbox.”28 Upon arriving in Europe they rode the bikes through England, Belgium, Holland and into Germany. They allowed themselves a dollar a day for room and board and whenever they thought they could get away with it “we used a sympathy gag to get free room and board.”29 In Cologne, Germany they sold their bikes for a rather astonishing $60.00 per bike. Having sold their bikes for such high prices they took a boat up the Rhine where they got a job and made some money on the way. They toured Switzerland and climbed a mountain. They went to Paris and saw a lot of “rue life.” It was life that Nichols’s religious friend Clock claimed he did not want to see. He even threatened to leave Nichols

in Paris. On the way back, they got immigration tickets to Montreal and then Nichols got a ticket to Kansas City which left him with 85 cents in his pocket. He claims he lived on ginger snaps and apples for three days until he got to Kansas City with six cents left. There, luckily, he met an old friend “to whom I was able to sell my old worn out sweater for fifty-nine cents (cut price) which, plus the six cents, paid my fare to Olathe.” He sold his story to the *Olathe Mirror* for $25.00 and “thought I’d struck it rich.”

It is probably true that Nichols love of architecture and the aesthetics of neighborhood development started on this trip to Europe. *The Olathe Mirror* published an article on August 9, 1900 called “Clyde Nichols and Wilkie Clock Are Enjoying Touring Europe on Bicycles.” He wrote of England: “every home is surrounded by parks or beautiful lawns and flower gardens. Poor hovels are not to be found. Only lords seem to flourish; I suppose the peasants are under the roof in the background.” Nichols noted that “the roads are paved and generally smooth as glass. Wherever possible a road runs around a hill instead of over it.” Nichols reported that “we stop on every knoll to drink in the exhilarating breezes from the fields of daisies, buttercups, and poppies and then ride down a beautifully shaded road bounded by hawthorn hedges.” Nichols was completely smitten with the English countryside and this, no doubt, had an impact on the ways in which he imagined the pastoral charm, which he attempted to recreate in the Country Club District.

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30 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

31 Jesse Clyde Nichols, “My Trip to Europe,” *The Olathe Mirror* (August 9).

32 Nichols, “My Trip to Europe.”

33 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
Nichols notes in his memoirs that “this three month’s trip made a lasting impression on me. I was struck most forcibly with the imposing plans, and permanent character of the cities and the buildings, and I believe it was when the spark was struck that ultimately brought the Country Club District into being.”

Despite this spark, he came back to finish his senior year at the University of Kansas where he was elected class president and, as he did in Olathe, “graduated with grades equal to any previous records in the school up to that time.” He also won a scholarship to Harvard.

It was during this time, Nichols admitted, that his parents had become increasingly prosperous and there was no real need for him to work the way he did, “but from my earliest childhood I had been deeply impressed by the manner in which my parents and grandparents worked hard, and I was fired by a keen desire to do my full part at all times.”

Yet, there is much more to Nichols’s need to work than this. He was not just doing his part, he was working obsessively. This assumption, of course, is based on the veracity of his life story. Was he actually working that hard? Was he, given his tendency to wax poetically about great men, laying the foundations for his own tale? Or are we reading a man uncertain of himself, even in his late 60s, proving himself worthy of the esteem he had garnered over the years? It is probably a combination of all of the above, cleverly mixed in an attempt to measure up to the mythic lives of the company he found himself in: R.A.

Long, William Rockhill Nelson, George Kessler and so on.

34 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

35 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

36 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
His journey to the “untamed” side of Brush Creek in South Kansas City to build an unparalleled suburban landscape began, quite accidentally, local legend argues, at Harvard. Though he intended to become a lawyer, Nichols was permanently sidetracked by an industrial history course he took under Professor O.M Sprague. The professor influenced him with an argument that land development moved south and west from the northeast in search of fresher natural resources. This, according to Nichols, moved him away from law and towards a career in land development. However, land speculation and community development would have offered a clear path towards him being an essential part of taming land and building livable communities there, just as he imagined his parents did. What we know for sure is that it led straight to his next move: a trip to the Southwest to attain land for homesteaders.

After graduating in 1902 Nichols set out West to Mexico, Texas, Arkansas, New Mexico and Arizona intending to gain financing to buy large tracts of land for colonization. The only explanation that Nichols gives for this rather ambitious plan was that “during that year at Harvard I found myself becoming interested (as a result of one course I took in economics) in colonization of new areas in the United States and Mexico.”37 This included a scheme to buy one million acres in Mexico. Nichols wrote that after finishing Harvard in 1903 “I wasted almost a year in Mexico, Texas, Arkansas, New Mexico and Arizona, trying to interest men with money to finance me in buying up large tracts of land for colonization.”38 It was immediately deemed a fool’s errand and led to the first major failure in Nichols’s life.

37 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
38 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
According to Nichols, his future father-in-law went with him on one of his first trips and the result was that Nichols “damned nearly lost his consent to marry his daughter.” In addition to this, his future father-in-law went home and told his daughter he thought Jesse Clyde “queer.” This must have been hard to take for young Nichols, whose sense of masculinity and general confidence was, at best, volatile.

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39 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
“I got my courage back,” Nichols wrote, and called two friends from the fraternity at the University of Kansas, F.E. and W.T. Reed who had become Kansas City lawyers. They alerted Nichols to a piece of property in Kansas City, Kansas that had to be sold for cash due to foreclosure. Nichols seized upon the idea of buying the land and subdividing it. He returned to Olathe and raised $22,500.00 from “my old farmer friends” and bought the land. Nichols even regained the trust of his future father-in-law, whose opinion obviously concerned him. “It is gratifying to me even yet to recall that during this dark period,” Nichols remembered “my future father-in-law backed me up, and at that time it meant a lot to me.”

Once in Kansas City, Kansas, Nichols rented a space for a desk at the rate of $5.00 per month in the back of a prescription counter of a drugstore at 13th and Chelsea Park carline. After some thought, he decided he could afford an extra $1.00 for a telephone line. At that point he started building small houses on lots twenty five to thirty three feet wide and sold them for $800.00 to $1,000.00 each. The houses possessed no modern facilities and there were no street improvements. “During these days,” Nichols remembered, “I slept on a sofa in a little parlor in the home of my head carpenter (or a good part of the time on the floor).” He was up at 5:30AM to look after his horse and was on the building site at

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1 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

2 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
7:00AM. He worked all day with the building crews until they quit at 6PM. At that point he began selling the houses from 7PM until 10PM.

Having the ability to quickly raise $22,500.00 in 1903, it is doubtful he needed to worry about the extra $1.00 per month for a telephone line or the $5.00 to secure a desk in the back of a pharmacy. It is also doubtful that he needed to sleep in the parlor in the home of his head carpenter had he not wanted to. It was important for him to beat the odds, to achieve things through a struggle, perceived or not. Though it was not the Great West, it at least possessed the hallmark traits: land, rustic beginnings, and triumphant finish. In reality, three major factors led to his success in Kansas City, Kansas: the business connection of The Reeds, his immediate access to the large sum of $22,500.00 and the great flood of 1903.

There were also a wide set of peripheral and cultural influences that led to his success. First and foremost was the fact that cities were being viewed as incubators of crime and disease. What he became as a man was due also the conditions of the Kansas City housing market during his start as a real estate developer. Indeed, a 1912 report carried out by the Board of Public Welfare of Kansas City on the housing conditions offers a nice introduction to the urban milieu in which Nichols stepped. One of its major issues was overcrowding. “When 94 families with 263 individuals, of whom 84 are children under the age of 14 years of age, occupy 138 rooms” it reported “and when the only playground is a small ‘court’ between the double row of tenements, housing all these people, it is not to be wondered at that bickerings, quarrels, disease, promiscuity and familiarity interfere with
the efficiency, happiness and morality of the tenants.”

In that same district, it noted, there were 13 adult delinquents during the last two years, 4 juvenile delinquents, and 18 families “more or less dependent on charity besides many more making demands upon the time of friendly visitors.”

In these tenements on Kansas City’s east side there were 20 or so outhouses in a double-deck arrangement, grouped together and in dilapidated conditions that served 20 or 30 families. However, they were used “day and night promiscuously by men, women and children.” This fact, the report argued, clearly showed why “modesty is rare” and “immorality prevalent.” There were houses on this side of town, built to house one family, that had five families with 8 children, 19 persons in all, doing “light housekeeping.” This kind of overcrowding led to suburban developer’s focus on protection, on deed restrictions that limited each house to one family. In fact, J.C. Nichols deed restrictions for each neighborhood began with a clause disallowing any kind of additions or modifications to allow for other families or tenants. The reason that men like Nichols were so successful in their suburban enterprises was that they had the answers to these kinds of early anxieties and the government was largely inactive until the Roosevelt years. Also, these living conditions were directly connected by boosters and surveys like the one above to health and morality.

“It is anything but complimentary to our civic spirit” it argued “that sunlight and air and water, commodities so necessary to health which the Almighty seems to have provided

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prodigally, should be denied to any part of our population.”

Having a house where the average man could build a home was essential to happiness, it continued. “Human nature” it argued “supported or not by Godly tendencies, is not equal to the strain of front doors on dirty side alleys; of upstairs quarters in the turmoil and dust and strife of small-shop life; of an environment where brawling and swearing and ‘can rushing’ are the order of the day.”

And at night, it continued, “of dismal, dingy rooms; dilapidated porches and fences; of peephole shacks; or of common halls and stuffy rooms.” What about the children, it asked.

It urged Kansas City to find an answer to these problems, but the answer during this time was in private enterprise. And private enterprise catered to the middle and upper middle classes and the wealthy.

The report highlighted some of the most pressing problems it encountered. The first, of course, was with outhouses. In the Penn Valley district of Kansas City, which housed working class men and their families there were 1,179 dwellings. To accommodate this population were 200 modern outhouses, 439 dry sewer connected and 530 vaults. In six districts surveyed, out of a total of 5,698 toileted facilities, 2,942 were outhouse vaults and sewer connections with no flush. This led to typhoid fever, an abundance of flies, intestinal diseases and general filth. The report called it a crime against health, decency and morality.

That suburban developments in the Country Club District and other outlying developments offered cutting edge technology in these areas was an immediate answer to these kinds of conditions on the west side of Kansas City. Suburban areas like the Country Club District were answers to the problems facing the city. It was actively eliminating the nuisances,

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4 Kansas City (Mo.). Board of Public Welfare, 28.
threats and devaluing conditions of the urban situation. Though some may have been overwhelmingly concerned with the plight of the poor, many, it can be imagined, did not wish to live anywhere near 20 double-decker outhouses used by poor people. Thus, the restrictions of a J.C. Nichols subdivision must have been immensely appealing to those thinking of investing large sums of cash in real estate.

General dilapidation was also a major concern, “not only on the outskirts of the city, but scattered here and there in business sections, along the Belt Line railroad and even in some of the best non-restricted residence portions.” Dilapidation, according to the report, was not only an “index of the absence of civic pride, closely affecting the aesthetic culture of the people” but also indicative of poor sanitation and untidy housekeeping. This “aesthetic culture”—the focus of chapter two—became very important to housing reformers. In fact, in 1912, Kansas City sponsored a “Friendly Visitor Department” which sent volunteers out to “teach the poor the art of housekeeping.” There were nearly ninety of them and their job was to instill confidence of the tenants in poor housing districts; to teach residents how to cook, keep house, care for babies and “everything necessary in relation to sanitation and morality.” Ultimately, the report predicted, they would start day nurseries and group meeting to afford the housekeeper the opportunity to “make her home more attractive to husband and children than the neighboring saloon or other place of vice.” It suggested that propaganda concerning the topics of good housekeeping be sent out

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5 Kansas City (Mo.). Board of Public Welfare, 28.
“in the Italian section of the North End and the negro districts and other places where the poorer of Kansas City live.”

One “friendly visitor” reported finding a husband and wife living with two daughters in a dank cellar. The wife was frail looking and displayed signs of tuberculosis, one daughter 12 years of age had a suspicious cough. The father, who recently suffered a back injury at his job, returned to this “hovel” to convalesce. It was so dark, the visitor noted, that in full sunlight an oil lamp had to be kept burning. They were subsequently moved by the organization to a cottage with good ventilation and exposure to sunlight and within three months all had recovered. This kind of squalor was becoming and more and more prominent in the city proper and the well to do were moving south or east to escape it.

Quality Hill, on Kansas City’s West bluffs, was once the home to the city’s elite had, by the time of this report, fallen into a decade long bout with dilapidation. It’s once stately homes now occupied by several families that did not maintain the structures. The well to do were moving to neighborhoods like Hyde Park, south of the city en route to Westport and other budding neighborhoods protected at the very least by distance from what was seen as undeniable urban decay.

The city was also becoming far more heterogeneous at the turn of the century. Not only was a large Eastern European population emerging on the West Side, the housing report focused on one neighborhood in the West Bottoms. It had 530 residents, “divided as follows: Negroes, 290; American 135; Russian, 36; German, 21; Austrian, 17; Greek, 4; Irish 7, Indian 1; French, 1.” What individuals like J.C. Nichols saw was not an emerging, vibrant
cosmopolitan neighborhood, but a lack of restriction. The report noted that “unfortunate” selections were made in many locations when accepting applications for rooms. Without restrictions, it was up to individual landlords to dictate the terms of what was acceptable. This meant that when business was good, better tenants could be culled from the list of people searching. As business dulled, however, “there is a surrender of rooms for almost any price obtainable.”

Thus, when J.C. Nichols crossed over Brush Creek opposite the estate of William Rockhill Nelson, he was opening a location of retreat from these sorts of problems above. When he introduced restrictions, they tended to be gladly welcomed. When he banned blacks and Jews, and later all variety of immigrants, from owning homes, there was minimal flack. Though this thesis argues that Nichols adoption of a mythical frontier pushed him to the real estate business and became an essential part of how he saw his developments, the above factors pushed the population of middle class and wealthy Kansas Citians with disposable incomes to him. He was settling and protecting a landscape for folks like William Kemper and Tom Pendergast to live in peace from the decay and grime of what was perceived to be a sinful and deteriorating city.

All of this existed beneath the surface of J.C. Nichols world when he came back home from the southwest. And it influenced his first big success. In May of 1903 the Kaw and Missouri rivers flooded to the point that the valleys surrounding it were one body of water from bluff to bluff. The West and East Bottoms of Kansas City, its main industrial centers, were covered in water ranging from six to twelve feet. During the first half of May

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7 Kansas City (Mo.). Board of Public Welfare, 32.
1903 it rained each day in Kansas City. The river basins had no surface storage space and the result was immediate and relentless flooded. Many homes were simply swept away by water and before the flood was finished it had caused an estimated 22 million dollars in property damage, including several bridges that were torn down and washed away. This led to a large number of homeless seeking higher ground, most living and working the Kansas City bottoms. Nothing of the magnitude of the flood of 1903 had hit Kansas City since the flood of 1844.

Nichols’s nearby houses were in a prime location on higher ground, modestly built, and affordable. Nichols recalls the situation, “in 1903 there had been a most disastrous flood in the lowlands of Kansas City...so we named our properties The Highlands and had some circulars printed setting forth the wonderful advantages of our houses. As destitute families left their flooded houses with their few belongings, we handed out these circulars. I have always felt a little ashamed of this.” At the end of his first year in Kansas City, Kansas, and probably more do to the dire situation surrounding his choice of location, he returned all of the investment to his farmer friends in Olathe and after paid a 65% profit.

“It was one of the hardest years of my life,” Nichols wrote, “because I was ridden by the obsession of another failure, and I was so determined that that should not happen that I wouldn’t stop work even for meals, sleep or pleasure.” After his success, The Reed Brothers, stayed with him and prepared for another venture. His farmer friends from Olathe were also ready for a fresh enterprise. Nichols’s success was surely due in part to

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8 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

9 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
his perseverance, but also much to do with being in the right place at the right time with the right connections. Yet, his work in Kansas City, Kansas would start the myth of J.C. Nichols and his “vision.” The Reeds and the Olathe Farmer Syndicate that supported him were moved to the background of an irresistible tale of a local kid’s up-from-the-bootstraps narrative. And he did not mind telling it himself. It was important for him, I would argue, to reimagine his life as a vicious struggle against unseen forces, just like his father in the Western Migration. In Nichols’s case it was urban blight, uneven and sporadic development, immigration and the very preservation of the life he knew in Olathe, Kansas.

A decade after he stepped to the podium to honor R.A. Long, he took the stage at a conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma to deliver what seemed a fairly straightforward speech entitled “The Building and Selling of Homes.” Just after the introduction, he informed his audience that “realtors are the true pioneers of our country. They have colonized our new lands; they have built cities; they have created the basic portion of our basic wealth.”

After warning against wasting space, imploring the increase of window space, simplifying staircases, creating two or more bathrooms, offering the luxury of air-cooling, and limiting the unsightly alley, and a host of other progressions in homebuilding, Nichols was ready for history.

“Have you ever stopped to realize that when you file a plat and develop streets in your subdivision, you are dealing with one of the most permanent factors in world

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10 Jesse Clyde Nichols, “The Building and Selling of Homes.” Speech given at the National Real Estate Board. February 12, 1936, in Tulsa, Oklahoma.
history?"¹¹ The basic city street, Nichols argued, may still remain through countless ages.

“The Apian Way laid out 2,000 years ago is still a travelled highway” Nichols said, gaining steam. Slowly he made his way to his familiar tale “the very desire to own land carried our frontiers from the Atlantic to the Pacific: even into the deserts and into the mountainsides; into marginal land unfit for human habitation.” He told his audience that “these pioneer days are past; new land frontiers are gone, but even greater frontiers are open in the better development of our towns...this is the heritage of ever realtor in our country today.”¹²

Detouring momentarily to remind realtors that “if you can smile before noon, you’ll have business soon,” and a host of other aphorisms, Nichols returned to land ownership. “The human race fought for thousands of years just to gain this right,” he told a crowd likely trying to follow his strange ebbs and flows, “The Pilgrim Fathers were driven to this country to own land and lived their lives as they desired.” By the end of his speech, Nichols had covered 2,000 years of history to inform a group of realtors in Tulsa that they were the new generation of builders—that their street in their subdivision could be The Apian Way.

In 1903 Nichols was travelling the backstreets of Olathe to avoid facing friends and hoping that his first land venture was not a complete failure. In 1936, he was orating grandly, suggesting that homebuilders like him were the true pioneers of the country, building a suburban street that just might withstand the centuries. It was a difference in confidence and is extraordinarily important in an examination of Nichols’s life. Insecure and uncertain of how to proceed in his chosen occupation in 1903, his next move would lead


¹² Nichols, 6.
him to the J.C. Nichols of 1936. It began much like his venture in Kansas City, Kansas: with 10 acres just south of Brush Creek in Kansas City for $800.00 an acre. Smaller in scope and originally designed as a quick profit-turner, it quickly became J.C. Nichols’ frontier.

That he recast ten acres of land he bought south of Brush Creek in 1905 as a frontier of sorts was not completely preposterous. It was a kind of frontier, just a new urban one that was starting to emerge in bustling American cities at the time. Though it laid outside the city limits it was but a stone’s throw from William Rockhill Nelson’s grandiose Southmoreland subdivision. One can imagine the stately homes of the well-to-do in Rockhill’s budding neighborhoods overlooking the pig and dairy farms and unkempt landscape to its south. In fact, the only way to cross Brush Creek to get to those ten acres was over Nelson’s stone bridges. J.C. Nichols’ ten acres in South Kansas City was a sort of liminal space—one of those turn-of-the-century locales being squeezed by development and urban culture—an early scene of gentrification. As such, it was a perfect arena for Nichols to negotiate his sense of manliness. It was where he became a self-made man while preserving his sense of pioneer achievement—of settling land and building homes for posterity.

It allowed for him a connection to the legacy of his father’s generation and to an undeniable sense of American manliness: asserting dominion over landscape. It also allowed him a chance to redeem himself after his failure in the southwest to colonize land, a situation in which the landscape won. This is not to argue that it is the only reason Nichols chose the land he did; only that it coincided rather nicely with his budding fascination with the American pioneer narrative and with a sense of progressive history hinged on taming
and settling land. Students of Nichols suggest that his choice of those 10 acres was out of sound business sense and much less due to personality. That he simply chose the land due to it being in the line of a predictable housing trend somewhat upends the idea that he chose it for the challenge; that he imagined it as an urban frontier.

The most intensive studies by William Worley argues that Nichols’ took a class on industrial history at Harvard taught by Professor O.M. Sprague that propelled him into the real estate business. The central thesis of the class was that “land development moved south and mostly west from the northeast as it migrated towards more available natural resources.”\textsuperscript{13} Nichols suggested in a 1929 interview that this was the idea that moved him towards land development. Though is likely true, I would argue against it being a major contributing factor to his foray into city building. Though Nichols masterfully balanced mythical history with practical theories on developing neighborhood, his passion for the endeavor seemed to be in locating that moral dimension in urban design, the one that highlighted families, safety, Christianity and connecting to an American heritage that once embraced those traits over profit alone.

Worley continues his analysis based on the idea that Nichols’ thrust into the real estate business was centered on an economic land growth theory. “Significantly” Worley argues “Nichols seems to have transformed his ideas about growth in land values from an industrial history course into a practical experiment in urban land development.”\textsuperscript{14} It seems unlikely that Nichols could conjure such enthusiasm and zeal for an idea rooted in \textit{industrial}

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\item[14]Worley, \textit{J.C. Nichols and the Shaping of Kansas City}, 64.
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history. It is far more likely, I would argue, that the land was—in a very bourgeois sense—an untamed landscape in need of reclamation, in need of submission to a new kind of pioneer, the suave American businessman and entrepreneur. Farther damaging this theory that J.C. Nichols was an amazingly prescient businessman is that his idea really wasn’t that good. Though the ten acres had potential, it was a tough road ahead for a twenty-five year old man with limited financing. His neighbor, William Rockhill Nelson, was sort of a hobby land developer and immensely wealthy before he started. Nichols was far from it.

Worley points out that “the creek was marshy and tended to flood, and no residential development had been achieved as far south and west as this little ten acre plot.” ¹⁵ Worley notes that what Nichols had in his favor was the trend of wealthy Kansas Citians to move as far east or south from downtown towards the outskirts as possible. Though this was true for the east, the south was only that way because of William Rockhill Nelson’s Warwick Boulevard that went from the city to Southmoreland and, as such, very near J.C. Nichols’ new property. Would this have occurred without a sponsor like William Rockhill Nelson and his influence? Was it really an immutable law of urban economics? And did J.C. Nichols even have any concept of this at the time (even with his short industrial history training)? Worley attaches this idea to Homer Hoyt’s “Sector Theory” or the notion that the wealthy move from city centers to more outlying regions in a rather predictable and narrow pattern. Ultimately, these are very neat and far-reaching theories that Nichols probably didn’t often think about. It is more realistic to say that urban landscapes change dramatically and unpredictably over time. After all, J.C. Nichols most prestigious

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¹⁵ Worley, J.C. Nichols and the Shaping of Kansas City, 65.
developments—Mission Hills and Sunset Hills would move just south and straight west from Southmoreland and his initial 10-acre plot. This was neither east nor straight-line south from downtown. Taking Nichols out of the context of rather sweeping theories of urban development makes his move to south Kansas City more risky and less in the path of inevitable success. This is also supported by the fact that he tried to *colonize* one million acres in the Southwest and throughout Mexico.

That Nichols’s philosophies were very much in-progress and not based on immutable laws of economics is clear in his writings. “We worried a lot because we found ourselves spending so much of our time street grading with scrapers, and building wooden sidewalks from old lumber out of an old barn at about 26th and Grand Avenue which was given to us free for razing it and hauling it away. Taylor and I tore the barn down with our own hands and built two and a half foot sidewalks with the lumber. These were the first wonderful improvements in the Country Club District!” One of his other objectives was to get rid of a “foul smelling hog feeding lot, a brick kiln, some undesirable squatters and a Negro amusement park.” Nearby in what would become Nichols’ Rockhill Park subdivision there was a dairy “with more than two hundred cows and we had to wait many months to get the dairyman off of the property. Also there were some old ramshackle buildings…cider mill…stone quarry, etc. along the carline that took us a long time to get rid of.”

Nichols secretary, writing many years after his death, noted that “the city had extended

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16 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

17 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.

18 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
about fifty blocks south from the river, where the tag ends started with farms, pigpens, and cow barns.”

This was the state of Bismark Place (located between Walnut and Main Streets, Fifty-First to Fifty-Ninth) J.C. Nichols first subdivision. In a Motion for Rehearing of the case Hayes v. Kansas City on April 7, 1922 the rock quarry Nichols spoke of in his memoirs tried to block the city from interfering with its rights to use Baltimore Street. Owners of homes in Bismark Place sought to limit their use of Baltimore Street, which was deemed part of the original subdivision. In their argument, the owners of the rock quarry stated that Bismark Place was not contiguous with Kansas City when originally platted. That, in 1897, the city limits were more than two miles away and that Westport—a separate municipality—interfered. Also, they noted that “said property had never been used for urban purposes, but for many years after the filing of said plat, property was enclosed and used for agricultural and dairy purposes.” They also pointed out that the property was “rough and uneven” and that homes should not have been built on what later became Baltimore Street. Respondents testimony argued that “smoke, fumes and gases” issued from the brick-kilns constituted a nuisance. Aside from offering a glimpse of the legal side of early gentrification efforts in Kansas City, this case offers a nice look of what Bismark Place looked like in 1905 and an image of where J.C. Nichols started.

He did, however, feel confident enough in 1905 to send for his fiancé Jesse in Olathe, marry her and move her to Bismark Place where he had built a home for them at 5030 Walnut Street. They lived in the home for more than a year and Nichols relished in

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19 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
retelling the hardships of this initial year of marriage. During that year, Nichols remembered in his memoirs, “we carried our own water from a spring about a quarter mile distance” and they were more than a mile from the nearest streetcar. There were no graded streets and “it was more than a year before we had gas, water, sewers and electricity.”

Nichols was living on his own frontier in suburban Kansas City yet there was no real reason for him to have to live with such inconveniences. His father-in-law was wealthy by the standards of the day and his own father solidly middle-class. The extent to which this journey into Kansas City’s exurban dystopia was self-imposed is highlighted by Nichols recounting how “Mrs. Nichols’s beautiful trousseau shoes were soon ruined by the mud, but her wonderful sense of humor came to her rescue, and she continued to carry on cheerfully and willingly.”

This kind of contrast offered some authenticity to Nichols’s desire to frame it as a wasteland frontier that he settled, but the image of a young Jesse Nichols laughing as her trousseau shoes succumbed to mud indicates how harmless it actually was there. “By this time” Nichols noted “even her banker father had concluded he was not going to have to support us.” This must have been a noticeable concern of his father-in-law up to that point, probably from his perception of the colonization scheme in the southwest. At 5030 Walnut they had a cow for milk and “of course, we had horses and buggies, which we had kept at a barn at 47th and Troost which was a mile and a half

20 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
21 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
22 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
Nichols finished his story of these times by wondering “how Mrs. Nichols’s confidence in me withstood the strain of those hectic early days.”

Yet, almost absurdly balancing this portrayal of a rugged hinterland, much like Rockhill Nelson’s mansion across the creek, was the nearby Kansas City Country Club. It lay just to the southwest of Bismark Place on land Hugh C. Ward inherited from his pioneering father Seth Ward (who earned a fortune as an Oregon and Santa Fe Trail outfitter). The course was present day Loose Park. It was designed by notable golf course architect A.W. Tillinghast in 1896. Though the land of Bismark Place may have been “rough and uneven,” it was not far from very early and fairly successful models of high-class neighborhoods. Kansas City’s business elite would travel directly past Bismark Place on their way to play golf at the Kansas City Country Club. If they happened to miss Nichols’s developments, he reminded them of his proximity by using an umbrella term to refer to Bismark Place and his next few subdivisions: The Country Club District. There seems to be, on one hand, a lot of truth to the idea that the Country Club District began in less than ideal surroundings and was catapulted to success by one man—Mr. Nichols. Geographically speaking, on the other, the location was in a direction of clear possibility for the right land developer with a disposable income. Though probably not in the path of an immutable industrial economic law, the Country Club District was in the path of where rich people were starting to spend more time. Though not a guarantee of success, it was a nice start.

J.C. Nichols was clearly not convinced that the Country Club District would be his life’s work as he bought land in Clay County immediately after establishing Bismark Place.

23 Western Historical Manuscript Collection—Kansas City.
“One of our early mistakes” Nichols notes in his memoirs “was acquiring land in Clay County, Missouri for future residential development.” He bought 230 acres of land know as Wigglesworth Farm and listed it in the books as Clay County Farm No. 1. He did this because it was rumored at the time there was to be a highway bridge built over the Missouri River to take the place of the old ferry that had been running since the Civil War. He soon learned that growth in Clay County was extraordinarily slow and there were unlimited directions for it to sprawl. “In fact” Nichols remembered “our total sale price, if we were to count all the carrying charges on the land the years we carried it with little income, would have represented quite a loss.” This purchase is almost never mentioned in the story of J.C. Nichols and, financially speaking, it was undoubtedly a bigger failure than his trip the Southwest that had ended with the coin toss in a Fort Worth hotel. It also further damages the notion that he strictly followed the economic theories of Professor Sprague or Homer Hoyt. Clay county was straight north and somewhat east of the city.

After the Clay County incident, Nichols went back to the Country Club District and focused on it exclusively. This proved to be the best decision he could have made. “Almost from the start” Nichols wrote “our sale of lots was good.” Nichols had to meet prospective buyers at the end of the Rockhill streetcar line at 47th and Troost. He then took them on horse and buggy to the District. “It was quite a surprise” he remembered “when people bought lots even with no assurance as to when utilities or street improvements might be provided.” Still Nichols dealt with naysayers. “Some of our facetious competitors” he noted “cracked that our lots were like cemetery lots where people might buy, but had no wish to use.” It was at this time that the old man on the bluff, William Rockhill Nelson, sent for
young J.C. Nichols. Nichols remembered that Nelson was very much interested better residential area and better planned communities. He gave Nichols an endorsement, or at least hesitant acceptance, by saying any use of the land would have been better than how it had been used by its pre-Civil War owners.

Nichols then notes that he almost lost Nelson’s friendship when the newspaperman learned that “we had the audacity to name our second subdivision Rockhill Park.” Nichols notes that he had a hard time convincing him that they had not known Rockhill was his middle name. That surely was a hard sell and Nelson probably didn’t believe it because it was most surely not true. Yet, Nichols was proud to say that Nelson forgave him and they maintained a friendship until his death. After Nelson died he left $11,000,000 for the purchase of works of art and J.C. Nichols became the trustee.

Nichols confessed “looking back over those early days I realize I was very sensitive and had a real inferiority complex which made it necessary for me to battle constantly to screw up my courage to sell groceries, mining stock, meat, maps, fruit or real estate.” It was only because he believed so firmly in what he was doing that he was able to go forward, he said. “Strange as it seems I always used to have a feeling of relief when I called on a prospect and found him out” Nichols continued “all my life I had to fight this natural timidity and I certainly sympathize with a person who is selling anything. It takes real guts and courage to be a good salesman.” It was probably this lack of confidence in his early years that led to his reliance on frontier narratives and to a strong, irrefutable model of masculinity for him to follow.
After establishing Bismark Place and selling it for a profit, Nichols entered a stage of feverish development. There was Rockhill Park and Rockhill Place in 1906/1907, both paid for by Herbert E. Hall, one of Nichols’s financial backers. He also paid for all of the improvements on the twenty-five acres of land. His contract with Nichols was that he would receive 50% of all profits gained above cost. Highlighting some of the problems of building on the hinterland, neither of these suburbs had modern sewage, but rather relied on individual septic tanks that were not very well constructed. The result was that, because of the steep grades of many of the lots, sewage flowed downhill onto the properties of other residents. This, as one can imagine, caused great dissatisfaction. This would not be taken care of until 1912 when the Supreme Court of Missouri confirmed the extension of Kansas City’s city limits to include the property. They soon began building modern sewage systems.

Next to a finished streetcar stop at 55th and Brookside Boulevard, J.C. Nichols built the area’s first shopping center. In April of 1908 Nichols ran into a fairly sizeable problem for a young real estate developer—an old family farm surrounding his subdivisions that impeded the buying of more land to develop. It was owned by E.S. and Kate Yeoman. Kate had inherited it from her father and refused to sell it to anyone unless cash was offered up front. This was impossible for Nichols, always stretched financially at this time. In 1908 a deal was struck when St. Theresa’s Academy, a prestigious and very expensive Catholic school, sought to relocate from Thirty-ninth Street in Westport to the Country Club District. The school offered $40,000 for twenty acres and then Nichols offered that money to the Yeomans. They accepted the deal. This deal truly shows Nichols’ desire to build not just for
profit, but in the interest of establishing a lasting neighborhood, one that flowed neatly and hosted the proper cultural landmarks that gave it the class and sophistication he desired.

On the other hand, it showed how willing Nichols was to dismantle these old family farms—the farms of frontiersman like his father—in the interest of making over the land in his image. In a contract with the Yeoman’s there is a hand-written statement that reads: “it is understood that the barn now on the said premises shall remain the property of the seller and shall be removed from the property by the seller without cost to the buyer. All rubbish also to removed by seller.” Kate Yeoman ultimately had to tear down her father’s barn.

In the interest of closing gaps and establishing one contiguous community, Nichols paid the rather astonishing sum of $3,125 per acre for four acres at the corner Fifty-first and Main. One could have probably argued at the time that this was not the wisest expenditure of money considering what he paid for other parcels of land during this time. However, Nichols’ plan seems to have been unifying land and establishing an adjoining network of developments with a cultural identity. This was his goal with ridding the area of the brick kiln and the “negro amusement park.” Also in 1909 Nichols purchased 229 acres from Charles W. Armour that lay west of Hugh Ward’s property, property that later became Sunset Hill. Nichols’ and his backers paid just over $300 an acres for this land, land that would become Mission Hills, Kansas.

In 1908 Sunset Hill was the Country Club District’s prized possession. They referred to it as the “finest residence district in Kansas City” with “natural beauty, commanding elevation, large home sites in an area with extensive restrictions that guarantee

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24 Contract between Kate Yeoman and S.L.C. Hasson (an early buyer), March 1, 1909.
permanence.” It reported that there was only one Sunset Hill and that there could never be another. It was developed by renowned landscape architect George Kessler. Kessler had made a name by 1908. After a brief stint studying under Frederick Law Olmstead, Kessler was recommended by his mentor to design and amusement park for the Fort Scott and Gulf Railroad just outside of Kansas City. George Kessler got his start with this project, resulting in Merriam Park, which was dedicated by former President Ulysses S. Grant July 2-3, 1880. He followed this by designing Hyde Park, one of Kansas City’s first fashionable neighborhoods and then he focused on the Kansas City Park and Boulevard System in 1900, specifically Paseo Boulevard. He designed the grounds for the St. Louis World’s Fair from 1900-1904. By the time he arrived at Sunset Hill he had an international reputation as a landscape architect.

In 1912 Nichols wrote a piece for the American Civic Association on the topic of real estate subdivisions in which he argued that more money was to be gained by creating neighborhoods with landscape architects like George Kessler. “You will say this was all possible because we had a large piece of land” he allowed before highlighting that “we began with ten acres, and in smaller way than most of our competitors. We grew to have more than a thousand acres.” He also “wished to make it plain” that his property was “not particularly intended for a $50,000 or a $100,000 home any more than it is for the $3,000 cottage, nor for the cash purchaser more than for the one who is forced to buy on monthly installments.” This egalitarian sentiment was somewhat undermined by the ambition behind places like Sunset Hill and later Mission Hills. There were no $3,000 cottages in Sunset Hill. In fact, the building restrictions required that no home be built costing less than
$10,000. Nichols himself wrote “it is true, the space we set aside in our plants on record for the $3,000 cottage is sufficiently removed from the houses of greater cost to prevent any disparagement in cost and size of homes in their respective neighborhoods.”

Nichols was learning about the business of building homes and reconciling it with his vision of building a better city neighborhood. By 1910, Nichols realized that it was no longer sufficient to simply buy rugged land, rid it of nuisances, build it and leave. He had to stay and protect it and develop it into a community. Not only did this make for good business, but it also fit into his idea of an evolving American frontier and home stability. This led to a new phase in his sense of masculinity—one centered on protection through a paternalistic approach to those he had sold homes to. He was adapting to a new kind of marketplace but still maintaining “a pioneering spirit” that “was inherited from his parents, hardy pioneers of Olathe, Kansas.”
CHAPTER 3

“MR. NEXT-DOOR’S FLOWER BED”:

PROTECTING THE COUNTRY CLUB DISTRICT AESTHETIC

On a Monday afternoon, May 19th 1919 famed American magician Eugene Laurant and his company reported to the north lawn of the Mission Hills Country Club House to entertain the children of the Country Club District. Laurant was billed in the *Country Club District Bulletin* as “America’s greatest magician and entertainer” and he was there to perform “clever tricks of magic” and “big, beautiful, spectacular illusions.” It was a free event for all residents of the district, but especially for the children, and it was paid for by J.C. Nichols. Hosting America’s greatest magician on the lawn of the Mission Hills Country Club not only shows the growth and allure of the Country Club District by 1919, but also the paternalistic role that J.C. Nichols began to assume during this time period. His goal was to foster community development at every turn whether that was in starting a lawn and garden show, providing entertainment, building a community kitchen in the park for all residents or establishing a horse riding club replete with stables, saddles and a minimal membership fee.

Nichols seemed to have a hand in everything that occurred in the district—from construction and sales to the protection of birds and trees to opinions on open garage doors and exposed oil tanks to Monday afternoon entertainment. This chapter focuses on these sorts of extra-curricular involvements of Nichols and his company and argues that the *Country Club District Bulletin*, a monthly neighborhood publication put out by the J.C. Nichols Company starting in 1919, complemented official deed restrictions with a list of
“suggestions” on how to maintain property and behave in a J.C. Nichols subdivision. As his subdivisions closer matched his vision of a paradisiacal Midwestern landscape, the harder he worked to protect it from all forms of blight. This chapter argues that this paternalistic governance was the next phase in J.C. Nichols’s masculinity—tethered to the landscape still—but expressed in a new way. Having already crossed his frontier, he now sought to protect it by sternly guiding homeowners to his way of thinking and acting. It was what he thought of as “planning for permanence” and restriction was a major aspect of that.

Essentially, Nichols absorbed his business practices into his ever-evolving notions of pioneering or the courageous masculinity that seemed to only be exhibited on a frontier. His idea of “planning for permanence,” like every other idea Nichols adopted, was still deeply rooted in frontier narrative and compelled the type of oversight dealt with later in this chapter. This idea that something like deed restrictions was an evolution of pioneer mentality of the century before is an important point to make—especially when referring to J.C. Nichols—as his speeches and personal writing indicate the preeminence of this idea.

“Planning for Permanence” J.C. Nichols told the National Association of Real Estate Boards in November of 1948 “is not a utopian dream.” Nor was it “a doctrinaire proposal of theoretical reformers.” No, it was rather “a basic, serious challenge to the realtors of America.”¹ Underscoring this idea was the importance of community, of laying down roots, investing money and starting families that then started families in that same neighborhood. It was the core of J.C. Nichols philosophy of neighborhood building. And it was, like most of his notions, rooted in the frontier heritage of America. “Americans from time the pilgrims

¹ J.C. Nichols, “Planning For Permanence.” Address to the National Board of Real Estate Boards, (November 18, 1948) New York City.
“landed” he told a ballroom full of real estate men, “have recorded a long history of migration. A vast continent has been heroically spanned by hardworking pioneers.” Yet, pioneers, he conceded, did not build solid homes. Most were made of thatched roof, hand-hewn timber or they were brush covered sod huts or dugouts. They were “meager, hasty places to live, huddled together in protection from Indians and unknown dangers, but always on an advancing frontier.”

These frontiersmen—because the frontier was always moving—gave no thought to a planned residential community that could last the ages. No son or daughter was expected to live in those fleeting villages. “For nearly three centuries” Nichols continued his story “civilization fought its way up and down the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers in ox-drawn covered wagons over the perilous Santa Fe and Oregon trails and up from Mexico in Spanish efforts of conquest.” Nichols must have been on a roll by now. “They braved hostile Indians, conquered endless plains, crossed barren deserts.” They blazed their way through forests, climbed mountains, forded dangerous streams. They scattered very little and built mushroom settlements wherever they were, he dramatically elaborated. Civilization and settlement was precarious at best. “History tells of frantic site promotion schemes by new railroads” Nichols continued his tale. “We know the zealous struggles of slavery and anti-slavery groups and religious groups, to pioneer new settlements, frequently tending to unsound village locations and future losses.”

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2 Nichols, “Planning For Permanence,” 2.
3 Nichols, “Planning For Permanence,” 2.
4 Nichols, “Planning For Permanence,” 2.
Nichols paused for a moment to ensure his audience of realtors that he was not criticizing his founding fathers and that “in no other way could they have conquered a wilderness of forests, mountains, deserts and plains.”\(^5\) It was time, however, to end this trend of American migration by building durable houses in lasting neighborhoods. Realtors had to give assurances to future generations that “children can be born, reared, and still live in the neighborhood of their forefathers” and that the home “the precious possession of life” and the “real heritage of a free people” would have permanent value for many generations. Lasting communities, he noted, rested on low depreciating charges and loan companies well-secured with long-time loans, where homes would grow old graciously. He was arguing that homes needed to be protected from those many uncontrollable variables that forced home prices down in other parts of the country and, most certainly, in his nearby Kansas City.

Most important to this discussion, however, Nichols was showing the maturation of his vision. No longer seeking to emulate frontiersman like his father, he was now confident enough to correct the mistakes of his beloved pioneers and build better homes than they did. In other words, it was no longer sufficient to simply tame the land, clear the undesirable periphery, but it also had to be secured, watched over and nurtured into a long-term enterprise. It was the next step and Nichols took it in the 1920s. This required a new kind of man, not just the rugged trailblazer—although that was required too—but also a businessman, a thinker, a visionary, one with civic power, influence and a well-organized company backed up by Commerce Bank to carry it all out. J.C. Nichols, by the 1920s, had

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\(^5\) Nichols, “Planning For Permanence,” 2.
evolved into just such a man, fusing older world civility with a new generation energy and business sense. He had essentially developed his own reality in the Country Club District and used whatever methods he could to make sure others abided by it. The most effective was the *Country Club District Bulletin*, which got the word of J.C. Nichols out. Whether the Bulletin was addressing behavior that needed to be corrected or plugging Eugene Laurent on the north lawn, the word made it once and sometimes twice a month to every home in the District.

Before delving into the ways Nichols used the *Country Club District Bulletin* as a set of unofficial restrictions, it is necessary to take a look at the role of official deed restrictions in the district as the bulletin came a few years after the widespread acceptance of deed restrictions. These restrictions were part of Nichols long-term goal of providing permanence and they also compelled, I would argue, Nichols more specific campaign, spearheaded by the Bulletin, to keep the District immaculately kempt and its residents well behaved. Buoyed by the success of restrictions in securing loan values and prohibiting the kinds of eye sores that plagued the city, Nichols went further in the Bulletin by suggesting a wide array of other types of behaviors.

Nichols did not originate the idea of the deed restriction, or restrictive covenant, as they were used across the United States as early as the late 19th century, but it could be argued that he used them most effectively. Nichols did, however, originate the idea of having them automatically renew for another 25 years if the homeowner did not appeal in writing to the J.C. Nichols Company, which rarely happened. This meant the restrictions were a permanent feature of the Country Club District. Though historians have written in
general about deed restrictions, few delve into what these restrictions actually said and what kind of real control they exerted over the homeowner.

Mission Hills, for example, had a fairly lengthy set of restrictions. It started with the requirement that no lot could be improved as a separate private residence, the lots were for single families only. Section 4 stated that any residence “erected wholly or partially on any of the lots which are restricted by the terms hereof, shall cost no less than $6,000.00.”\(^6\) It required a significant amount of ground frontage from the street to the residence, typically 65-75 feet. That meant the owner of the land could not erect any structure within 65-75 feet of the street. Even after selling the property, however, “the J.C. Nichols Investment Company shall have and does hereby reserve the right in the sale and conveyance of any of said lots to reduce the required frontage to be used with any residence on any lot, and it may at any time.”\(^7\) No building or residence could be erected that took up more than 60% of the purchased lot. The restrictions also noted that “no signs, advertisements, billboards, or advertising structures of any kind may be erected or maintained on any of the lots hereby restricted without the consent in writing of the J.C. Nichols Investment Company.”\(^8\) There could be no tank for the storage of fuel above the surface of the ground. “Bay, bow, or oriel, dormer and other projecting windows” could not extend more than three feet out from the house. The most controversial restriction, however, was in Section 10 that stated “Ownership by Negroes Prohibited. None of the lots


\(^7\) “Mission Hills Deed Restrictions” Filed 1936, 6.

\(^8\) Nichols, “Planning For Permanence,” 2.
hereby restricted may be conveyed to, used, owned, nor occupied by negroes as owners or tenants.”

These restrictions, ranging from broad restrictions like banning billboards, oil tanks to specifics like bay window projections, to racially charged bans on blacks, exerted a wide measure of control over what a homeowner could do with his property. It meant that J.C. Nichols’s vision would remain intact for 25 years and then indefinitely if the homeowner failed to challenge it. There is no evidence this ever happened. It was with deed restrictions that Nichols found the perfect way to secure what he had worked so hard to establish in neighborhoods like Mission Hills. He is considered to be one of the first to successfully use deed restrictions and he did so at first just for the sake of profitability. He then saw the larger social impact they could have.

Nichols spoke on deed restrictions later in his career and said that “if a sub-divider too closely follows the absorbing power of his market, restricts only very small parts of his subdivisions from time to time, and varies his requirements from year to year to meet immediate market conditions, the result is frequently not in the best interest of the city nor does he create a generally harmonious neighborhood.” He was arguing, as he often did, that the integrity of the neighborhood had to be thought of first and profit second. The market was the market: volatile, progressive, tense. These were not qualities of a permanent neighborhood. Restrictions, he firmly believed, secured rather than gained money and were important. “A good developer” Nichols argued “should ever strive to go as

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9 Nichols, “Planning For Permanence,” 2.

far as practicable beyond the immediate needs and yet not allow his ideals to lead him beyond sound business principle.¹¹ This was a self-reflective J.C. Nichols speaking on the need for restrictions, describing the synchronicity of his vision for a better neighborhood and his practicality in laying it out piece by piece. What was going to protect his life’s work? In his view it would have to be deed restrictions—carefully designed and intuitive deed restrictions.

What Nichols failed to consider was the social cost his thinking had on the communities surrounding the Country Club District. His deed restrictions may have protected the beauty of a mansion overlooking the Mission Hills Country Club, but it also created an entrenched and isolated white, upper class community and a consolidation or bottle-necking of the money and tax dollars that followed. By 1920 it had some of the most notable shops in the city, good schools, impressive residents and stunningly beautiful picturesque landscapes. Yet, it was closed off to a vast majority of Kansas Citians. Indeed, the most beautiful of J.C. Nichols’s work, neighborhoods like Sunset Hill and Mission Hills, were even closed off to other Country Club District residents who could not afford them. The best of Nichols’s visions were for rich white families. Despite having a keen intelligence, solid business sense and almost utopian vision of society, his restrictions and focus on building for the upper echelon of society created an exclusive network of homes that offered no real solutions for the urban milieu of the early twentieth century. In fact, after J.C. Nichols death in 1950, the American city rapidly deteriorated nationwide. Kansas City was no exception.

Perhaps most attached to J.C. Nichols legacy—and rightly so—was the racial divide created by the Country Club District. His developments began to accelerate in a time in which racial restrictions were not a consistent feature of suburban neighborhoods. In Kansas City it seemed it could have gone in different directions. William Worley notes that it in a study of subdivisions in 1929 just less than half had racial restrictions. Roland Park in Baltimore, the closest model Nichols had for Country Club District, had no racial restrictions. All evidence suggests that Nichols view on race was completely subject to social and market trends. Nichols spoke at a meeting in 1917 where he brought up the issue of selling to Jews. It had been his practice to bar them, but he was getting pressure in Kansas City. He noted that he had sold to two or three hand-picked families and was getting pressure from the Jewish community in the city to open it up. His peers encouraged him to resist the temptation to sell to Jews and all evidence suggests he did just that for years afterwards. Nichols, at best, reluctantly sold to Jews and never changed his opinion on sales to blacks.

The need for these kinds of widespread restrictions, in Nichols mind, was probably due to the fact that by 1920 the Country Club District was a far cry from the modest subdivisions like Bismark Place or Rockhill Park, built just 10-15 years earlier, which were unprotected. It was also due to what was considered to be the consequences of a lack of restrictions in Kansas City: the uncontrollable decay, many families cramming into single family residences, the encroachment of industry and an increasing immigrant population. A location like Mission Hills was simply a different reality than his earlier subdivisions or, for that matter, any subdivision in Kansas City or even Kansas City itself. It was built according to the most progressive views of city planners and was the ultimate representation of J.C.
Nichols’s ambition. It was also clearly different from Kansas City, Missouri proper, which was still a bustling metropolis experiencing widespread growth. A growth in industry brought about large populations of immigrants, a proliferation of unprotected housing and an increasingly sinful street life. The district, quite contrarily, housed many of Kansas City’s most well-to-do citizens and was a model for the nation in the fields of landscape architecture and suburban development. It was white, largely protestant, solidly upper middle-class in most areas, exclusively wealthy in others. Blacks were contractually banned from renting there, immigrants and Jews were later.

In Mission Hills and Sunset Hill not only were the houses significantly more expensive, some upwards of $100,000 compared to $5-10,000 in Bismarck Place, but the amenities were strikingly more enhanced. Nichols also worked feverishly to lure business to the area and make it an economically viable place to live. This differed markedly with his aims for his first subdivisions when most of his time was spent ridding the area of undesirable industry. The bulletin announced in 1919 “a group of eight or nine store buildings with public garage in the basement, to be built at Fifty-first and Brookside Boulevard adjoining the Collins and Robinson drug store. A motion picture theatre of classic architecture with a seating capacity of 1,000 is also being considered in the scheme.”

By the 1920s Nichols was replacing these earlier unsightly industries with ones more genteel and in unison with the tastes of his residents. At the same time a new loop had just been completed at Sixty-third Street on the Country Club line of street cars and fifteen new safety

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J.C. Nichols was building bridges over Brush Creek with old barn boards and now an ever-growing network of streetcars took citizens all over the district.

“At present twenty-five cars are operated on each line” the bulletin reported. “This provides a four-minute schedule on the Country Club and a ten-minute service on the Sunset Hill line in the evening. The morning service from Sixty-third street on the Country Club line is five minutes. On the Sunset Hill line it is the same as in the evening. The mid-day service on both lines at that time being ten minutes.”

Far from being a simple train schedule, this announcement showed the remarkable advancements made in the District. Just 15 years before, Nichols was taking old barn wood and building foot bridges across Brush Creek. Now it had a network of street cars, a burgeoning business community and the most sought after tax base in the city.

With this kind of unprecedented and seemingly endless growth and accessibility, the Country Club District became a model not just for Kansas City but for the entire world. The bulletin reported in 1920 that the Japanese were sending real estate developers to the Country Club District to take note. J.C. Nichols was being heralded as the messiah of city planning and the future seemed limitless. This attention likely compelled J.C. Nichols to focus not only on the basic contractual restrictions, but everyday items that he felt marred his landscape that was now being analyzed by the world. Though it would have been nice to have all the garage doors shut in the District, for residents to try and encourage birds to make house in their trees and for each lawn to be filled with flower gardens and healthy

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13 J.C. Nichols Investment Company (June 19, 1920).
trees, how was one to do it? Had a developer entered this kind of thing in the restrictions, he/she would have immediately been deemed a capricious dictator. To do so, however, in a neighborhood bulletin guised in the form of helpful advice was quite revolutionary and somewhat unprecedented at the time. These restrictions-as-suggestions covered a wide range of issues of daily and domestic issues and relentlessly highlighted behavior it found less than the standards of the neighborhood.

The bulletin, for example, urged every citizen to build a bird bath. “Every garden should have one” it reported “when you watch the little birds intent upon a splash, taking their daily plunge, you will feel repaid a thousand fold.”\(^{14}\) It also printed instructions on how to build an attractive and rustic bird bath. All citizens had to do, it reported, was dig a shallow hole that was two feet wide, three feet long and eight inches deep in the center and gradually sloping to the edge. For years it reiterated the need to build bird houses for the yard. It told how to build them, where to buy them, how to get children interested in them, where to put them, what kind of birds would be attracted to them and always focused on animals and other threats to bird eggs. In a snippet entitled “Birds or Cats?” the bulletin weighed in with its opinion. “Insure your lawn and garden by enlisting the birds to keep them free from insects” the bulletin declared. And then, rather dramatically, it noted “you cannot be a friend to both the bird and its enemy, the cat.” Adding a bit more drama to the statement, it noted “it is hard to conceive that any tender-hearted person would harbor a house cat when it will deliberately destroy the little birds.”\(^{15}\)

\(^{14}\) J.C Nichols Investment Company (May 4, 1921) 2.

\(^{15}\) J.C Nichols Investment Company (May 4, 1921) 2.
The bulletin was a way that Nichols single-handedly created a homogenous neighborhood that existed largely in his imagination. It was also a way to further protect his subdivisions by communicating directly with the homeowners, which were essentially tenants of the J.C. Nichols Investment Company. Just as restrictions worked to create this kind of environment, so too did the *Country Club District Bulletin*. If deed restrictions called for a certain amount of frontage or for the care of street trees in front of houses, the bulletin added an emotional context. In August of 1919, for example, it printed “our street trees—more than 10,000 in number, have made a most magnificent growth this year. Do you ever pause get a real vision of the wonderful beauty of the Country Club District with its charming homes and winding drives, when every street becomes arched over with fine old elm trees framing beautiful views and pleasing vistas in every block, each home approached beneath a bower of magnificent trees?”16 This kind of whimsical imagery was a common device in the bulletin, probably meant to appeal to the women of the district who likely first received it and read it more than men. Nichols had a clear sense of gender roles; an idea that women had to be appeased first in the home buying process.

In a speech to the Women’s Community Council of the Country Club District, as quoted in an article written on him for *Ladies Home Journal*, Nichols said “we planned and designed this whole district primarily for women and for children.” He continued with “women are the home buyers and builders and makers. A man selects a home to please his wife, and women are more sentimental and artistic than men. Things of beauty appeal more strongly to women. Women are more in and about the home, more a part of it, and

have more opportunity to see its charms and to form an attachment to them.” According to this speech he knew that “if we can have the women of this district love it and be proud of it as their home neighborhood, the future of the district will be assisted.” The article went on to indicate how successful the J.C. Nichols Company was in getting their message out about protecting birds and maintaining the landscape. It reported that “three hundred housewives of a neighborhood in Kansas City were meeting in their community hall last summer, when one of the women arose and said: ‘I should like to ask our community secretary when the grass and weeds are to be mowed on the vacant lots in the district. The growth is getting rather tall and unsightly.”

The response came from the community secretary, a Miss Louise Hook, who reported that the grass would not be cut “until the young meadowlarks get strong enough to leave their nests and take care of themselves. If we should mow the grass now, many of the young birds would be destroyed.” The article went on to describe a new salesman for the J.C. Nichols Company who grumbled to a friend “I don’t see why they fool so much time and money with birds in the district. What good are birds in a city? When a man is figuring on buying a house in town he’s not thinking of birds.” Within a week, the article claimed, a young couple walked into the office and told the young man that they wanted a house out in the Country Club District where we can have the birds singing around us all summer. A week after that a woman was viewing a home and told the young man she was not interested in it. She then walked outside and said “listen to that brown thrush.” The article


noted that “the song of a thrush in a tree top was a sales argument stronger that any that young man could present.” The moral of the story was that the young salesman discovered “what the head of his company knew all along, that birds and flowers, trees and shrubs, pleasing street vistas, the things which arouse emotion we call ‘sentiment’ have high value; that men and women will pay money for mere beauty of nature.”

It seems fairly clear that deed restrictions, enforced by male operated homes associations and legal avenues, were designed for men, the actual purchasers of the homes. These restrictions were simultaneously softened and sentimentalized in the Country Club District for the women, who considered more attune to beauty and gentility. Whereas the legally enforceable restrictions restricting how many feet buildings or gardens had to be from the street, the Country Club District Bulletin dealt with the matter in a more delicate fashion. In November of 1919 the bulletin printed “Don’t You Think So Too” which outlined a series of “suggestions.” It began with “that a vegetable garden extended to the front street line is unsightly? That it isn’t fair to a neighbor to use the front of his lot for this purpose?” For speed restrictions, the bulletin went this route: “that the life of a child you might kill when driving too rapidly is worth more than the few minutes gain in arriving home at your destination?” Instead of highlighting the restriction of industry, the bulletin suggested “that everybody in Sunset Hill should thank the Kansas City Railways Company for it co-operation in announcing it will remove the ugly ballast between the rails, Fifty-seventh

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and Fifty-ninth streets, replacing it with earth fill and sod covering?” The “Don’t You Think So Too” bits might have well said you should think so too.

For building restrictions it took a more conversational tone “building a garage under a porch beyond the specified building line violates Country Club District restrictions. This and other violations are, of course, done innocently. But invariably it costs home-owners money to correct mistakes. All building restrictions in the District are based on fairness to neighboring homeowners.” To avoid these kinds of honest mistakes, the bulletin suggested that before building anything, homeowners call the J.C. Nichols office to check the details of building restrictions. This worked to take control away from the resident and put it in the hands of the J.C. Nichols Company even more firmly than the rather extensive deed restrictions called for. Though an individual had purchased one of the most expensive plots of land in Kansas City, his freedom to shape or design it the way he or his wife wanted was severely limited, or completely eroded by restrictions and the social pressure created by the bulletin.

As a supplemental set of restrictions—or suggestions—the bulletin meant to further influence homeowners and remind them they were a part of something much bigger than their front or back yard. In January of 1921 it reminded homeowners to keep the grounds clean, “the district, of course, cannot be as beautiful in winter as in the summer time” it noted “but it can be kept clean and orderly in every season.” It urged women to keep a “hope chest” of home ideas because “there are things to do and things not to do about

22 J.C Nichols Investment Company (November 1, 1919), 2.
23 J.C Nichols Investment Company (November 1, 1919), 2.
placing of lights and of radiators and of water or steam pipes. There are principles of
harmony to be remembered in the selection of rugs, draperies, wall decorations and
furniture.” ²⁴ In May of 1921 the bulletin noted that it was not too late to arrange for porch
and window boxes. Just in case residents were having a hard time figuring out what they
wanted to put in those porch and window boxes, the bulletin read “ferns, geraniums,
foliage plants, daisies, petunias and dwarf nasturtiums are good selections for the window
box.” Also in the May edition, it noted that it was time to spray the rose bushes. If
residents didn’t know how to go about this, the bulletin made it clear by saying if the roses
were blighted or covered in mildew one was to use a Bourdeaux mixture or a lime and
sulphur mixture (in the proportion of one pound to nine gallons of water). If a homeowner
wasn’t quite sure where to buy such a mixture, the bulletin recommended Chandler’s
Flower Shop at Forty-seventh street and Ward Parkway.

What is notable about these instructions is their specificity. The Country Club
District Bulletin and the J.C. Nichols Investment Company were not passive proponents of
flowers and birds, but well prepared evangelists of a cause. And the bulletin always seemed
to have specific instructions on how to solve common matters. However, the bulletin
seems to have been effective in creating a scene of pastoral charm and sophistication by
keeping a close watch on rose vines, flowers, front porches and by giving updated
information on how to attract birds to resident’s gardens. This was something far beyond
the scope of a contractual deed restriction and it all supported an image, an important
image to J.C. Nichols that had to be consistently altered and honed to present the most

²⁴ J.C Nichols Investment Company (May 5, 1921), 2.
perfect landscape possible. It was almost as if the J.C. Nichols Company and the bulletin were trying each day to capture the most magnificent pastoral still-life. He wanted birds flitting about a wide range of healthy trees, about rose gardens and vine covered trellises; children playing in large front yards, garage doors shut, dogs in the kennel and so on.

In March of 1921 it was announced that Ross Crane would visit the Country Club District the week of April 18th. “Mr. J.C. Nichols, with the cooperation of certain merchants of Kansas City, has arranged a series of nine lectures furnished by the Better Homes Institute, under the direction of Mr. rocs Crane, the week of April 18, in the Country Club District Community Hall” at Sixty-third street and Brookside Boulevard. At Sixty-third street and the State Line the J.C. Nichols Investment Company established a community garden. Any resident of the district was able to obtain a free plot by contacting a representative of the company. It was also announced in March of 1921 the intention to “Make A Bird Haven of the District.” The J.C. Nichols Company along with the Reiber Bird Reserve of West Webster, New York, home of the “Bird Man” Edwin H. Reiber, arranged for a survey of bird life in the Country Club District. The “Bird Man” personally took charge of the survey and make recommendations on how to attract more birds to the district. Coincidentally, Chandler’s Flower Shop sold Reiber bird houses and residents were encouraged to go down and pick one out. “The makers of the famous Reiber bird home” the bulletin noted “resent its being called a bird house or bird box because it has been as scientifically planned to suit the needs of the various birds as an architect plans a home to fit the needs of the family which is to occupy it.”


to be a high priority of the district. Mixing that sentimentality with scientific studies by bird experts and intensively designed bird houses helped.

Though the Audubon Society was impacting national thought on birds along with the idea of attracting birds as part of the City Beautiful Movement, the J.C. Nichols Investment Company was using it as a selling point. No doubt potential homeowners probably desired the town-and-country atmosphere where birds flew about the kitchen window and nested in old-growth trees in a big front yard, but it was usually a wish or an image. Nichols felt he could make it happened with a combination of contractual deed restrictions, intensive oversight and a publication he had complete editorial control over. Nichols saw the value of creating a kind of haven for those things not found in the city: birds and healthy, mature trees.

In the July 1922 issue it reprinted a poem by Ella May Arneal entitled “At Sunset” with the opening lines:

> Along the far horizon’s rim tonight, where dark of earth meets sky of deepest Gold, the passing of another day is told
> A little bird trills a song; his heart grows light while multicolored clouds In billows rolled, more brightness than a rainbow seem to hold—
> One loverly star’s soft twinkling greets the sight.

Just below this was an article entitled “The Wren Home on Santa Fe Road.” “What rent do the wrens pay for the little houses you put for them?” is asks. “No man is clever enough to estimate the vast numbers of insects on your place that they destroy,” it continued, “whether hunting for grubs, spiders, or dozens of other insects upon which they feed, they
are always busy in your interest, which is also theirs.”

This was one of the many tales the bulletin weaved in the interest of influencing housewives (who likely then influenced husbands) to look after the friendly birds in the yard. It worked also to apply gender roles to the birds, perhaps to lead women to identify more strongly with them.

“And if you fancy that Jenny wren is a demure, angelic creature” it continued “you have never seen her attack the sparrow, nearly twice her size, that dares to put his impudent head inside her door.” How she flies at him, the bulletin exclaimed, “how she chatters and scolds!” and how “plucky she is! Her piercing, chattering, scolding notes are fairly hissed into his ears until he is thankful enough to escape with his life.” Yet, despite being strong and vocal, “Jenny, too, is a bustling housewife” the bulletin flourished. It reported cheerfully that “neither vermin nor dirt will she tolerate within her well-kempt home, and all her house-keeping tasks are performed with neatness and dispatch, accompanied by the cheeriest of songs.” Obviously, if the housewife could identify with the wren she would be far more inclined to care for it and petition her husband to protect it. Though the bulletin focused closely on the protection of birds and trees, it did not do so exclusively. It was simply an issue of protecting an overall aesthetic—one in which the birds most certainly highlighted. The bulletin was equally concerned over exposed oil tanks as it was with attracting birds.


28 J.C Nichols Investment Company (July 22, 1922), 2.

As many homes used oil for heating, houses required a tank for the fuel. The J.C. Nichols Company strongly suggested they be completely out of sight and buried in the ground. “Shall ugly, exposed oil tanks mar the beauty of the District?” it asked in March of 1923. “It is such a simple matter to enclose these tanks with a trellis, pergola, or some sort of structure to make them harmonize with the residence” it lamented. It concluded by noting “they are so depressingly ugly in their nakedness. And if your oil tank is properly concealed, doesn’t it just make you want to start a crusade each time you look at the exposed tank next door, or across the street?”

Two months later it triumphantly declared “All Hail to the Concealed Oil Tank.” After printing the appeal “a number of residents have advised that they are taking immediately steps to screen their own oil tank, which inspires us with confidence that ultimately there will be no exposed oil tanks in the Country Club District.”

These sorts of campaigns must have had an effect on the homeowner, who would have had two options: openly rebel against the J.C. Nichols Company or bury the oil tank.

This kind of anxiety must have increased with items like “The Bulletin’s Catechism” that outlined a list of things to do and things not to do. It began with items like asking whether or not the resident was leaving for summer vacation and if they were had they scheduled for their lawn to be taken care of. It asked if the resident was sure the premises presented a clean and attractive appearance from the rear. It asked if the resident maintained a trash or rubbish pile that was unscreened. It continued along these lines, “


you own a dog which is a neighborhood pest? Are you maintaining breeding places for mosquitoes, such as weed patches, old cans, stagnant water, etc.? Is your oil tank unscreened? Have you by chance some chickens or a pet rabbit which play havoc with Mr. Next-Door’s flower bed?” It finished by asking “do you have a vicious dog which growls and snaps at innocent folk as they pass along the street?” If a resident felt any of the above questions pertained to them, the bulletin encouraged them to fix it. If they felt none of the above applied to their circumstances, they were encouraged to walk the premises and make certain it was true.

Just below the bulletin’s catechism was a note admonishing residents to always be ready for company. “Not only people from all part of Kansas City” the bulletin stated “but visitors from around the world are daily driving over the Country Club District. Will not every owner make sure his place is one of the places to which our guides will point with pride?”

By 1923 the Country Club District was almost completely controlled by the J.C. Nichols Company and it governed as gently as possible, but firmly expressed its wishes for homeowners. The company seemed to know everything about the area; it seemed to spot what it deemed “unsightliness” on a daily basis. Places like Sunset Hill and Mission Hills, the penultimate representatives of posh suburban living, were almost orchestrations of some premeditated J.C. Nichols reality. Indeed, he was reported to have driven the area in its entirety each Sunday with a black notepad jotting down particular offenses. These were not necessarily deed restriction violations, but simple issues like whether or not the garage door was open or the lawn was mowed to his satisfaction. It was much less the behavior of

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the CEO of a development company and far more in line with the behavior of a well-intentioned if terribly meddlesome father figure. As such, the bulletin was the way he got his message out and a prime example of how J.C. Nichols served as a patriarchal figure over a network of homeowners that heeded his word.

No matter how small the issue, the bulletin covered it and did so quite dramatically. “No Good Citizen Will Do It” reported that it was not only poor citizenship, but completely thoughtless to allow newspapers or other loose paper to blow around the district littering the streets. It was during this time period—in the mid 20s—that a great measure of control over the daily aesthetics of the area was exerted by the bulletin and the J.C. Nichols Investment Company. It was treated almost like a still-life painting that was being constantly disrupted by the imperfection of home owners. This was clear in a piece entitled “Care of the Lawn” that read “a good lawn is the background against which the landscape artist’s picture is painted in plant materials and structures.”

The J.C. Nichols Company would go to almost any extent to present an image of a pastoral promised land, however forged that image was. In Mission Hills, for example, sheep were brought in to graze on the hillside, no doubt adding to the area’s image. Shortly afterwards, the bulletin published an article entitled “The Sheep Don’t Like to Have Their Pictures Taken Either.” It began with this: “the pastoral beauty of the southern section of Mission Hills is made more delightful by the two thousand sheep which are to be found grazing up and down the hillsides and in and out among the trees.” It noted that they remained peaceful and offered an invaluable service through their grazing. However, a

cameraman stopped and tried to take a picture of them and “it struck as being a poor time to face the camera” and when they caught sight of the cameraman they bolted.

“And it took the frantic efforts of two shepherd dogs, the shepherd and a few volunteers to get them rounded up.” It finished by saying that the children love the sheep and a drive through Mission hills “is likely to present to you this pleasing summer scene.”

It was a striking example of how meticulously orchestrated the wealthier parts of the Country Club District actually were. For a brief moment on a weekday morning, the imported sheep got startled and scattered, momentarily disrupting the aesthetics of the neighborhood. And it was immediately corrected.

There is no real evidence to suggest residents balked at what seems a major intrusion in the way they chose to run their households. In fact, the bulletin suggests that people called them on a frequent basis to report neighbors to the J.C. Nichols Company. In 1923 a resident of the Country Club District, one Enos A. Mills, wrote the publication with a piece entitled “A Little Tree’s Life.” If Mr. Mills piece is any indication of how other homeowners felt, it is safe to conclude that they very much appreciated J.C. Nichols efforts to keep the District orderly and pastoral.

I never see a little tree bursting from the earth, peeping confidingly up among the Withered leaves without wondering how long it will lie and what trials and triumphs It will have. It will better and beautify the earth; love the blue sky and the white Clouds passing by and ever join merrily in the movement and music of the element dances

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With the winds. It will welcome the flower-opening days of spring, when comes the Golden peace of autumn days. I trust it will be ready with ripened fruit for the life to Come. I never fail to hope that if this tree is cut down it may be used for a flag-pole to Keep our glorious banner in the breeze, or be built into a cottage where love will abide; Or, if it must be burnt, that it will blaze on the hearthstone in a home where children Play in the firelight on the floor.\textsuperscript{35}

In the same issue the bulletin suggested “By All Means Plant All You Can This Fall” and asked “don’t you remember how it is, every year, when spring seems to come over night, and one is so dreadfully busy that frequently planting is neglected or not done at all?” The result it reported was that shrubs start to grow before they can be transplanted and “resent being disturbed.” Because of this resentment “they act sulky all summer, in spite of everything you can do.”\textsuperscript{36} The bulletin also began to focus on issues it had not dealt with in the past. One of its concerns was the selection of street numbers. It suggested that “one should carefully study the design before placing street numbers. The good appearance of the house can be marred by clashing colors, poor design or the incongruous location of street numbers.” It would appear that the taste of the homeowner was severely limited by the J.C. Nichols Company and that any sort of spur-of-the-moment home idea that may have been a bit off the wall must have been instinctively resisted.

On the other hand, it used more space to celebrate some of its victories. The bird houses that had been built and placed in yards by residents were paying off and the district

\textsuperscript{35} J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 5, 1923), 2.

\textsuperscript{36} J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 5, 1923), 2.
had seen “most splendid results in making the Country Club District a veritable bird sanctuary.” Residents had even abandoned their desire to have cats as pets. “The common enemy of the birds, the household cat, has practically disappeared in the District” the bulletin noted and “the red squirrel alone remains as a destroyer of bird eggs and baby birds.” There were few accomplishments, it noted, “in which we take more pride than the great increase of bird life through the parks, homes and lawns of the Country Club District.” The District at this time was also receiving nationwide praise. Charles W. Moore, Chairman of the National Committee of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C. said “I always say to the people that the Country Club District of Kansas City has solved for the American city the problem of combining utility with beauty.” Despite the widespread acclaim and evidence of important victories for the bulletin, there were still problems.

One recurring problem it could not seem to eradicate was the open garage door. “If We Could Only Have Trained Garage Doors” it lamented in 1924, a solid five years after it first brought up the issue. “Every time the bulletin takes a drive over the District ‘it’ thinks what a nice thing ‘twould be if garage doors could only be trained to close themselves!” it mused. Then “mayhap there would not be so many garage doors standing wide open, displaying a motley array of what-nots inside the garage.” The open garage door was a major issue for J.C. Nichols as it showed a side of the house he would have preferred not be

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38 J.C Nichols Investment Company (February 4, 1924), 2.
40 J.C Nichols Investment Company (February 4, 1924), 2.
shown. “So often an otherwise spick and span home is marred by such a view—and what a pity” it continued “because after all it takes only a few seconds to alight from the car and close the garage door.” Victory over the open garage door would take many more suggestions on the part of the bulletin.

Another sign that the Bulletin was not completely getting its philosophy of good citizenship and neighborliness across came in December of 1924. Someone stole the rails from the fence surrounding the picnic ovens in Indian hills and used them for firewood. The bulletin quickly responded with a snippet entitled “They Are Not Good Citizens.” “Society would stand aghast if told of guests in a home who stole the forks” it began before speaking of how disappointed and discouraged it was that “efforts to beautify and provide pleasures for folks should be so ruthlessly treated by those taking advantage of an opportunity to despoil and destroy.” In February of 1925 the bulletin addressed the clothes line. “The Family Wash Should Not Intrude” it commented before noting that it certainly did not wish to interfere with the weekly wash day. It ceded that washing clothes was an important day in the household as old as civilization itself. “And yet with all respect and reverence for the day itself” it continued “we cannot but decry the too promiscuous flaunting of the family wash before the neighbor’s eyes.” It allowed that not all houses could be equipped with electric driers and that it was necessary to sometimes dry clothes outside. “But the neighbor one likes best” it assured “is the one who is most considerate in all things—even to the hanging out of the family wash.” “Many a hostess” it reported “has been chagrined

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by the cavorting of the neighbor’s weekly wash, when guests were tripping up the steps to
her party.”

The family dog remained under attack as well. “Where Is Your Wandering Dog?” the
bulletin asked in the spring of 1925. It first acknowledged that there was nothing “more
interesting or lovable” than a “well trained dog” before flipping it to say “likewise, nothing is
more of a nuisance or an abomination than a dog which roams at large over the neighbor’s
lawns and flower gardens.” It ended by saying that if a neighbor wanted a dog, the
neighbor would go get a dog. In November of 1925 it revisited the issue again getting more
specific it highlighted “dogs that bark at night; dogs that howl when shut up in the
basement; dogs that chase automobiles; vicious dogs; dogs that chase cats; that kill birds;
that tear up flower beds; that won’t stay home; dogs that travel in gangs, and a lot of other
kinds of dogs.” The bulletin reported that dogs were, as of 1925, the most unpopular
resident of the Country Club District Bulletin. A close second it noted in its article entitled
“They’re Both Unpopular” were trash burners. “If there is a single outdoor wire trash
burner in the Country Club District that has a friend, that friend hasn’t called the bulletin.”

In addition to trash burners, there seemed to be a bit of hunting taking place within the
Country Club District. There were reports of either residents or individuals from outside
entering the district and hunting quail, squirrel, birds and other “furry animals.” Referred to

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43 J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 5, 1924), 2.
44 J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 5, 1924), 2.
45 J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 5, 1924), 4.
as “malicious marauders” the bulletin encouraged anyone that witnessed such as act to call the J.C. Nichols Company immediately so that person could be arrested on the spot.

The bulletin did not spend all of its time focusing on these issues. In fact, it did what it could to correct behavior it did not like. In 1926 it reported that after the success of the first J.C. Nichols Lawn Contest in 1925, that it would be back for a new year. “The purpose of this annual lawn contest is to encourage better lawns and more attractive surroundings of the homes in the Country Club District.” 46 Every home in the District’s eleven home associations was automatically a contestant. The judging was done secretly by committees of other home associations. The winner got the J.C. Nichols Trophy Cup for the best lawn. This came right after the bulletin noticed after “careful observance” of the conditions of Country Club District lawns “that most people mow too frequently and keep the grass cut too short.” Blue grass, it informed, being a shallow grass, suffered severely from this type of mowing. Though it was fine to mow it frequently and short in cool, moist weather, when the dry weather hit the mower needed to change his mowing schedule. “Lawn mowers at this season of the year should be adjusted to mow at their maximum height” it told residents and “the grass clippings should not be removed from the lawn.” 47

In 1925 J.C. Nichols began to purchase statuary from around the world and placing them in locations throughout the District. In 1927 the bulletin printed a piece entitled “What Price Beauty?” and reported that “every time the editor of Bulletin hears of a broken or destroyed piece of sculpture or garden ornament in the district, she feels almost as

though there had been a death in the family. Civilization has progressed in so many ways—alas, that there still should be human beings whose recreation is to destroy and mutilate!"\(^{48}\)
The editor then wondered if there was a punishment that could be adequate enough to compensate for such a senseless waste.

It then noted that it was time to clean bird houses in the District as it “is not fair to birds to expect them to return to homes that are not freshly cleaned.”\(^{49}\) It was a mistake, said the bulletin, to wait too long to clean the houses because “many birds are kept away by our own carelessness.”\(^{50}\) Being March, it was also time for residents to start sodding, sowing and planting. Late planting resulted in the loss of much good sod and shrubbery. In addition to that, it was also time for a spring cleaning. That meant each resident needed to walk his/her grounds and make sure that all debris or ashes were removed because “the whole effect of general orderliness will add immeasurably to the beauty of the district. Frequently one thoughtless owner can mar an entire block of otherwise well-kempt premises.”\(^{51}\)

In the next issue, April of 1927, the bulletin informed residents that it was now time to “Swat Flies.” The early spring, before they had time to multiply, was an ideal time “to start eradicating this disgusting pest. The Bulletin urges fighting flies—with the

\(^{48}\) J.C Nichols Investment Company (April 1927), 2.

\(^{49}\) J.C Nichols Investment Company (April 1927), 3.

\(^{50}\) J.C Nichols Investment Company (April 1927), 3.

\(^{51}\) J.C Nichols Investment Company (April 1937), 3.
determination to keep the Country Club District free from flies.”[^52] The area had reached a “stage of development and cleanliness” the Bulletin argued “that the fly nuisance should be eliminated—which is only possible by everybody doing their part in the fight against flies.”[^53]

It asked in the same issue “Who Will Organize a Model Ship Club?” Why doesn’t someone organize a Model Ship club composed of boys and girls who own boats of the kind that would be suitable to enter in an annual show featuring races between evenly matched boats? The bulletin asked, with a firm idea of what needed to be done. It seemed by 1927 that being a resident of the Country Club District could have easily become a full-time job. These suggestions of behavior and cleanliness were repeated in each edition until some evidence was given the Bulletin that the problem had been remedied.

After eight years of reporting, the bulletin printed a November 1927 piece entitled “Do You? Won’t You? Please Don’t!” where it revisited many of the issues it had been dealing with for the past decade. It began with the one it couldn’t seem to get a firm handle on: “do you leave your garage door open toward the street? Please Don’t!” It went on to ask if residents threw trash or grass cuttings on adjoining or vacant property or if they parked their car in the grass next to the street or allowed loose papers to blow from their premises. It asked residents if they were providing enough water for the bird and if they were teaching their children to appreciate the area’s ornaments. It asked residents to ask anyone working on their homes to burn their lunch papers so it didn’t litter the area. It asked “are you planning your flower garden for entries in the annual Flower Show next

[^52]: J.C Nichols Investment Company (November 11, 1927), 3.

spring? Do you get acquainted with your neighbors? Do you forward to the Nichols Company suggestions to make the Country Club District more beautiful and a greater asset to Kansas City?" And then it printed a picture of Lawrence P. Engel’s house at 1815 W. Fiftieth Street in Westwood Hills. His garage doors were firmly shut.

This was one of the last suggestions of the *Country Club District Bulletin*, which officially ended October of 1930, presumably due to the depression. It ended dutifully attempting to elevate the Country Club District to a state of perfection, where civilized neighbors lived, where the garage doors were shut, birds flourished, oil tanks were concealed, the family cat left the bird eggs alone, the dog was confined, the car was not parked with one wheel in the street grass and there were no flies. Whereas deed restrictions worked to provide stability in the housing market of the Country Club District and to keep it fundamentally true to its original form, the *Country Club District Bulletin* was a way for the J.C. Nichols Company to experiment with creating a utopian settlement on the outskirts of Kansas City. The approach of the J.C. Nichols Company was to adopt a paternalistic approach with its residents, correcting their mistakes, encouraging better behavior in the future, highlighting rebellion and rewarding compliance.

In New York City in 1948 as J.C. Nichols laid out his ideas concerning “planning for permanence” he said “I venture a lot of you are thinking this is a fine, haywire dream of a fanatic.” He urged them that this was not the case, that planning the perfect, harmonious city was quite possible. “I deny the charge that the home building industry is not progressive” Nichols said “since the days of cave dwellers continuous progress has been made.” The old-fashioned 25 foot lot was a thing of the past, he gleefully reported. It was
now 60 feet or more in most areas. “Today you may ride along pleasing, curving streets with stately trees, enjoy the lawns, shrubbery, and flowers, and be proud of your town. It is a thrill to see homeowners—father, mother and children—happily working to make their grounds more attractive.”\textsuperscript{54} He continued by saying “here are the real heartbeats and sunbeams of urban life. Don’t tell me we can’t plan and control these home loving neighborhoods.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{54} J.C Nichols Investment Company (May 25, 1927), 3.

\textsuperscript{55} J.C Nichols Investment Company (May 25, 1927), 3.
“Jesse Clyde Nichols was a visionary thinker. He could see things that escaped others and were almost prophetic in nature,” reported the Missouri Magazine in the fall of 1997. “When others saw the automobile as only a passing fad for the wealthy, J.C. Nichols saw a mode of transportation for the masses,” it continued. “As others saw business districts filled with utilitarian buildings, J.C. Nichols saw the aesthetic advantages of architecture, landscaping and design.” The magazine also revisited the J.C. Nichols Country Club District origination tale: “in the early 1900s he had one of his most significant visions standing on a hillside overlooking the Brush Creek Valley of Kansas City” it began. “A hog farm and brickyard were the only businesses that had bothered to make use of the swampy land dotted with stagnant pools of water. Rundown shacks had given way to a dumping ground.” As most men saw weeds and waste “J.C. Nichols saw a shopping district, and the concept for the Country Club Plaza was born.”¹

This chapter argues that J.C. Nichols’s vision was driven by his desire to be on the forefront of his industry, to create a kind of suburban city on a hill that would be looked at for generations to come as the best possible solution for American community living. The restless and rugged landscape of the Country Club District circa 1905 served as a frontier for J.C. Nichols to wrestle. By the mid-1920s, this chapter argues, that frontier was reimagined.

to be in the arena of innovation in landscape design, the development of shopping centers, automobile accessibility and in new ways to protect communities from the threats of the nearby urban milieu. It was an elaboration of J.C. Nichols’s earlier thoughts on the role of the frontier in an age of technological advancement and rapid social change, that it was a kind of social evolution. Nichols seemed to firmly believe that a plastics factory or a munitions facility was but a modern-day reproduction of the first lumber-yard or general store in an emerging town on the western frontier. His “vision,” mysteriously pontificated upon by local publications, was, this chapter argues, just a continuation of his deep need to be on the edge of his industry. He endlessly studied the American city (and Kansas City) obsessively. He knew where the threshold was and desired to cross it and create something new—a new space in a new time or a grand elaboration of those basic pioneer tales told him by his mother and father.

At the J.C. Nichols School Commencement on June 7, 1939, Nichols told the class of middle-school children that “men and women of the future cannot trust to luck or chance the opening of new land frontiers. They must go out and do battle for their place in the sun in order to create happy families and succeed in whatever business they choose.”2 The fact that land frontiers were, by the time of this speech, a thing of the past did not bother J.C. Nichols. He seemed to understand completely that change, development, elaboration and reinvention were essential to American progress. The creation of new frontiers was the manner in which he processed this notion. He told the children “a new telescope being developed will be set up next year and bring the moon—which is more than 200,000 miles

2 Jesse Clyde Nichols “Middle School Commencement.” Speech given at the J.C. Nichols School, May 27, 1926.)
away from the earth—within a vision of 22 miles—imagine the startling disclosures to be brought about.”

He asked the children to imagine how unbelievable airplanes, moving pictures and color photography would have seemed to their forefathers just a few years ago. This was certainly not something to be afraid of, but it was to be embraced and eventually elaborated upon. “We live in a time of rapidly changing scenes when events move across the screen of life so fast that it is difficult to realize what is happening to us.” This generation of change needed leaders of high courage, he told the children. And then he told them “you have all been raised in comfortable, luxurious homes compared to the pioneers of this valley. You have opportunities of education undreamed of forty years ago.” That led him to a very important question: “will you weaken and become useless members of society? Or are you going to be men and women of great strength who will go out and struggle and fight for success in life?”

In a speech to an earlier graduating class Nichols approached the podium with just a list of ideas that he would elaborate upon throughout his speech. Though they are snippets, these snippets offer a portrait of what was on Nichols’ mind and what knowledge he thought most important to impart upon the youth graduating from his namesake school. “This school is a pioneer—frontier founders” read the first line. The next: “your home a

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3 Nichols “Middle School Commencement,” 2.
4 Nichols, “Middle School Commencement,” 2.
5 Nichols, “Middle School Commencement,” 2.
6 Nichols, “Middle School Commencement,” 2.
“Yes, many near frontiers” he continued later in the speech “for the J.C. Nichols class of 1936.” This included becoming a physician and “giving to the world great wonders of surgical achievement, and prolonging the lives of the human race.” The list continued to psychology where one was able to divine and direct the thoughts of the human mind. There were new wonders in the field of science like the “cooling of homes and insulating them from the cold of winter.” Artificial ventilation, he claimed, was bringing new health to the human race. Television, of course, was making it possible for a person to sit in his or her own home and watch events happening throughout the world. Colored photography was making it possible to see the far corners of the earth.

“Yes” Nichols said “you have been told in your program of the Herculian achievement of the American pioneers, and yet, you are graduating tonight at the dawn of a new era of achievement, and the opportunity to claim new frontiers of achievement far beyond the Pacific frontier which at one time was the goal of the pioneers of this country.” Nichols then triumphantly exclaimed “it is great to live in this age!” Nichols firmly believed this. He was passing to the children his sense of the world and his sense of history; these pioneer narratives were not just employed for the sake of romantic nostalgia, but as his philosophy of life and success. He firmly believed that his role in the Country Club District was to elaborate upon what the pioneers had done a century before. The rough-hewn landscape spotted with decaying farm gave way to the Country Club District, which would

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7 Jesse Clyde Nichols “School Commencement.” Speech given at the J.C. Nichols School (May 26, 1936).
likely give way to an elaboration upon itself. “You have the advantage of all the hard-won knowledge; the accumulated wealth of the generations that who have gone before you” he told the children. “Now, it’s up to you to use this great heritage to make your lives more useful, in making this world a better place in which to live.”

Any industry that served Nichols’s perception of what constituted a better society was a frontier. For Nichols himself the frontier was ever-changing but always centered on one central idea: the Country Club District needed to be in the service of Kansas City as a whole, to provide culture, beauty and order to his Midwestern city. “Kansas City is inspiring,” Nichols opened a speech entitled “Creating a Cultural Center Second To None.” “From the time of our great park and boulevard system began to emerge from the dreams of those who conceived it, the imagination of Kansas City people was aroused to the possibilities of a city orderly, clean and inviting.” Nichols had a unique ability to balance the idealistic—sometimes the impossible—with a practical breakdown of how to implement it on land. When lying out any new development he had an overall picture of how it should integrate with the existing layout of the Country Club District and Kansas City, but also “its constituent parts.” He thought of proper ratios of private property and public property. He thought of how traffic arteries complemented or detracted from his plan. He thought of sanitation, sewage and the “underground utilities and supplementary agencies that concern public health and welfare.”

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8 Nichols “School Commencement,” (May 26, 1936).

9 Jesse Clyde Nichols, “Creating a Cultural Center Second to None.” A speech of unknown origins., 1942.

Nichols could simultaneously make clear decisions concerning sewage while serving on the board and purchasing art for the Nelson Adkins Art Museum, an institution of which he was a relentless advocate. While luring practical industry to the Country Club District, Nichols could focus on securing a university for Kansas City, on land donated by William Volker, integrated into the Country Club District. “Youth will come to Kansas City” Nichols imagined “to learn what men have thought and said, done and felt.” He had a seemingly boundless imagination balanced by a strategic sense of business and a keen attention to detail. This kind of thinking brought about an innovation he is best known for: the shopping district known as the Country Club Plaza.

Nichols gave a speech later in his career on the origination of the Country Club Plaza and, much like his first piece of land that became Bismark Place, Nichols infused the narrative with pioneer spirit. “More than 100 houses were moved from the plaza district” Nichols noted and “we demolished a brickyard for apartments south of the Plaza.” A greenhouse occupied the sight of Villa Serena Apartments (now the Raphael Hotel) and it too was removed. “Negro houses were on a 30-foot cliff on Main south of Ward Parkway” Nichols remembered. They were removed. A 20-feet deep swamp was “at the present Wolferman store.” “Little houses were along central street” he continued. “The Nichols building now occupies what was formerly the bed of Brush Creek and along the north bank was one of the most unsightly dumps of rubbish in Kansas City.”

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11 Nichols, “Creating a Cultural Center Second to None.”

12 Nichols, Jesse Clyde “Country Club Plaza.” A speech given to employees. (January 1942), 1.
In addition to the above, 17 houses were removed from Alameda, Pennsylvania and Jefferson. 11 more houses from surrounding areas were removed to make room for Nichols’s shopping center. “46th Street and Brush Creek Boulevard apartments East of Main and North of 47th are in an old cow pasture.” Nichols continued to paint a portrait of a ramshackle collection of dirty, unpleasant situations that could now be called The Country Club District Plaza. “An old lumberyard and cement building occupied Mill Street Parkway” he went on, “47th Street was a narrow, impassible dirt road.” Like he did just across the creek, Nichols took some of infrastructure development into his own hands. “We built the first 16 foot paving along Mill Creek because the city said it would never have any use” he noted before pointing out that it was now the second busiest intersection in the city (according to a 24-hour automobile count). “No streets were here 10 years ago” he pointed out and noted that “little shacks were torn down from St. Lukes to the Suydam building.”

No account is given on the families that lived in all these homes torn down or the businesses destroyed to make room for the Plaza, much like the historical record concerning the inhabitants dislocated by the Country Club District subdivisions.

Much like he imagined his dealings across the creek, the Plaza became the new site upon which to superimpose his pioneer narrative. The removal of unappealing (working class) businesses, black housing and housing for the working poor came first. Then Nichols hired the building of modern roads and laid out a plan to lure goods and services. The

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development of his plan came next. This served, like it did with his neighborhood building
in the Country Club District, as the settlement phase of his narrative. Next was the
protection of his development and the Plaza was no different. Nichols foresaw the
emergence of the automobile as a major cultural force and many of his most notable
innovations were in automobile accessibility. For instance, he kept the height of buildings
at two stories to prevent traffic congestion. He paved streets that were at least 60 feet
wide to allow for diagonal parking. Two parking garages were built at the cost of $30,000
and were “the finest in America.” Overhead poles and wires were moved underground at
the cost of $28,000 to prevent dreaded “unsightliness.” Buildings in the Plaza burned oil
instead of coal to avoid the inevitable coal dust that circulated through the air when used.
Nichols noted a nice detail in his account “prevailing breeze comes from the Southwest over
open lawns and golf courses making it 5 to 6 degrees cooler.”

To avoid trash heaps like
the ones he worked so hard to get rid of, each building was installed with an incinerator to
burn rubbish.

“There are no billboards or any screaming or clashing signs” Nichols relished “no
overhead signs; no board signs on buildings or awnings, no disorderliness; no
uncleanliness.” There were no “unsightly trash dumps, no clashing colors, no refuse.” All
buildings, he proudly noted, were in “pleasing harmony of design and color.” Another
Nichols’ innovation was his attention to detail like the aesthetics of a filling station. They
were to be artistic and beautiful along with everything else. “The filling stations in the Plaza


are beautiful and clean” he said “surpassing any group in America.” And the “picturesque towers on the Tower, Wolferman and Balcony buildings are designed to eventually sing in unison and gradually build up to a high, dominating tower with chimes.”\textsuperscript{18} It was the culmination of a style of architecture selected specifically by J.C. Nichols, reminding him of his earlier trip to Europe. Spanish architecture was selected because of “beauty of design, use of color, its pleasing adaptations to broken roof lines, its towered skyline and the fact that it is on the Santa Fe Trail leading into the Great Southwest, once controlled by the Spaniards.”\textsuperscript{19}

The Plaza was certainly in innovation in neighborhood shopping. It is generally considered to be the first shopping mall in the United States. Its architectural style was, at the time, completely unprecedented. The architects and designers, specifically the renowned George Kessler, laboriously studied Spanish style. Nichols proudly noted that “the unsymmetrical size and random placement of windows; the broken, receding roof lines, the old world ornamental iron grills, balconies, beautiful tile, carved stone, are true to Spanish precedent.”\textsuperscript{20} Nichols wanted shoppers to be constantly faced with grass, flowers, trees and shrubbery while being always exposed to fresh air.

Nichols spared no expense. This was not a cheap knock-off of a Spanish village. In fact, he urged folks to “note the exterior antique iron grills on the dominating theatre stage loft. They are hand wrought, 300 to 500 years old, from various cities in Spain, and listed as

\textsuperscript{18} Nichols, “Creating a Cultural Center Second to None,” 4.

\textsuperscript{19} Nichols, “Creating a Cultural Center Second to None,” 5.

\textsuperscript{20} Nichols, “Creating a Cultural Center Second to None,” 3.
works of art by the Spanish government.” According to Nichols, these purely ornamental concerns were important, as Nichols had a clear sense of how the Plaza—the perfect harmony of business and art—would make money. First, Nichols was certain that automobiles would dominate the future and that the success of retail would be in providing accessibility and space for them. This was a hunch that paid very well for Nichols. He made sure that 46% of the Plaza was dedicated to streets (and diagonal parking). The rest of Kansas City hovered around 25%. He strategically placed stoplights at certain intersections to expedite pedestrian traffic. He also oversaw the widening of Wornall bridge, the opening of Wornall hill and the widening of Main Street Bridge, which provided greater accessibility, but also made the Plaza the focal point of automobile traffic. “The building of Brush Creek Parkway, extending from the E.C. White School across Oak and Troost to the Paseo” also added accessibility to a wider set of Kansas City residents. But, as the Plaza was designed primarily for Country Club District residents, Nichols made sure that “the curving streets throughout the Country Club District lead into the Plaza as the branches of a tree lead to its trunk.” Nichols idea was to view the Plaza as he viewed the Country Club District, an entity where every component part helps every other component part.

Being on the cutting edge of shopping districts was extremely important to J.C. Nichols, especially after the stock market crashed in 1929 and much of his revenue came from rent in the Plaza. Before then, however, after accomplishing great heights in neighborhood building, Nichols began to gravitate towards issues affecting the American
shopping center. One area in which J.C. Nichols was, in fact, a visionary thinker was that of parking and generally accommodating the automobile in everything he built. As early as the 1920s, as America still feverishly built skyscrapers and other multi-level downtown complexes, Nichols saw them as a thing of the past. “Our downtown business centers” he noted “were built before our automobile congestion of today” and “skyscraper buildings, piling up immense traffic needs and creating colossal problems in street widening and provisions of new traffic ways.” He noted that in the past several years there had been an immense shove towards outlying areas. Nichols attributed this to these areas being more hospitable towards automobile traffic. He was also convinced that in these newer areas restrictions could be initiated and the problems facing the city prevented. For shopping centers, Nichols main idea was all streets should be at least one hundred feet wide so as to allow for diagonal parking. Buildings in the shopping district should never rise above two stories to alleviate traffic congestion and all alleyways should be wide enough to take deliveries and remove such vehicles from the front of the store. Nichols was also very much ahead of his time in suggesting that shopping centers be made up of contiguous blocks, radiating from a central focal point as opposed to the “string” business street type he saw emerging outside of American cities—we know them now as the dreaded strip mall. Nichols called for zoning so as to keep these businesses confined to designated areas. He believed this not only kept the real estate values high, but also limited the possibility of an

23 Jesse Clyde Nichols. Land for New Outlying Shopping Centers. A speech given at the National Conference of City Planning (May 20, 1929).
oversaturated marketplace. Nichols had achieved all of these goals with the Country Club Plaza.

Not only had he created one of the nation’s most progressive shopping districts, he also worked to shape the shopping experience in order to generate repeat business. In the December 1923 edition of the *Country Club Bulletin* it read “In reminiscing over the various trips you have taken, isn’t it pleasant to recall your visits to the interesting little shops of some delightful New England village?” It asked the reader to think back to the relationships that were developed with storekeepers that “were made more agreeable by the personal contact with the proprietors who, while your wants were being supplied, told you many interesting things about the village and the people in it.”  

It spoke to those residents who had spent their childhoods in a small town or village and cherished their trips to “the store.” It asked the reader, “don’t you remember how you stood before the glass case full of goodies, in a fever of indecision as to what to buy with your nickel or your penny?” It asked readers to remember when they used to go by the grocery store with big red apples and a “mysterious bakery near by” just to get a whiff of the delicious cakes it produced.

“And sometimes haven’t you regretted that living in a large city makes it impossible for your children to learn the simple first lessons of family shopping?” It noted that in large cities the tendency “is quite naturally away from these wholesome, simple ways of life.” Everyone, it reported, was in a mad rush to everlastingly beat time itself. Not only this, but traffic congestion in the city was “destroying the delightful sense of leisure you desire in selecting little things for your home and family.” Every good housewife, it continued,

enjoyed selecting cuts of choice meats and fresh vegetables. Every father wished for his child to develop discretion and wisdom in how to buy things for the home. “And everyone, man or woman, like to have their regular merchants” it noted “who, having learned the patron’s tastes and ideas, take a personal pleasure in supplying things to please.” All of the above would be remedied by the Country Club Plaza.

In design and culture, the Country Club Plaza was revolutionary. “In the creation of and development of the Country Club District it has been the purpose to eventually provide—in addition to numerous small neighborhood shopping centers for local needs—one large, comprehensive residential shopping center, to supply every general want large or small, of every family in the Country Club District.”25 Like everything else in the District, The Plaza would be a J.C. Nichols approved organization and would cater to his vision of the ultimate shopping experience. Nichols, in addition to his endless responsibilities elsewhere, gave his time and thought to the Plaza Association to write a list of don’ts for the salespeople throughout the center. “One dark show window” Nichols said in a speech to the Plaza Association “is as unsightly as a missing front tooth in the mouth of a beautiful woman.” A dark room bred despair, he told them, while light bred cheerfulness and success.

In this piece, circulated to all tenants throughout the Country Club Plaza, Nichols wrote that it was not appropriate to say “something looks ‘darling’ or ‘heavenly’ on her” or “run the risk of offending a customer by calling her ‘honey, dearie or girlie.’” Don’t gush, he urged salespeople. He urged the women not to “wear too much jewelry...too much paint”

and asked “why look like a night club hostess?” He urged salespeople not to “get high hat,” which was especially important in exclusive shops.” It was not appropriate to slouch while standing, to “rattle money in your pocket...drum on the showcase...distract your customer’s mind” or to under rate the customer as “a chauffeur or maid may influence a good many buyers.”

This is another example of Nichols agility of mind, his ability to focus on his vision in a holistic manner that took in all of the detail. He firmly believed that a salesperson offending a customer could undermine the functioning and economic viability of his shopping center.

Along with parking and influencing the manner in which customer service was delivered, Nichols was also able to ensure his shopping center was built according to the image he had in his mind. “A building whose design betrays the influence of ancient Spain” the November 1922 edition of the Bulletin reported of the Plaza, “with the roof of tile in tones of apricot and Indian red.” It continued to describe the aesthetics of the area “arches with designs of mosaic tile set in buff-colored stucco; a broad horizontal band at the second floor level, ornamented by glazed terra cotta in tones of blue, gray, green and yellow; an overhanging roof, gay with brilliant colors—these are the highlights in the first structure that will be a part of the Country Club District Plaza.”

It was to be, the Bulletin noted, the achievement of the first step in the J.C. Nichols Company’s goal of creating a “thoroughly artistic business and shopping center.”

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place would ultimately look like required a certain level of imagination it told readers “for
the Country Club Plaza strikes a new note in the development of residential trade centers in
American cities.”

This was not Petticoat Lane in downtown Kansas City, the area’s premier fashion
district, but something far more grand and modern. It was on the cutting edge of almost
everything pertaining to neighborhood shopping. In fact, it lured many shopkeepers from
downtown to the Plaza. One of them, a Miss Reineke, who owned a photography studio on
the second floor of the Lu-Frances Shop (specializing in infant wear) at 4638 Mill Creek
Boulevard, had moved from her downtown studio at Walnut Street. “How much less
wearing” the Bulletin printed “for both juveniles and grownups, to go over to Miss
Reineke’s at Forty-seventh and Mill Creek, than to have to go all the way downtown.”
Because “if one has no chauffeur” it continued, then by the time that person reached
downtown, found a parking space and walked to her studio, that person was in no mood to
have his or her picture taken. Though sporadic outlying shopping districts certainly existed
in 1922 and 1923, J.C. Nichols had created something that brought the appeal and
sophistication of locales like Petticoat Lane to the perimeter of the city. This added validity,
style and grace to the Country Club District and to J.C. Nichols’s abilities as a community
builder. It further strengthened his overall plan of settling and gentrifying what began at
Bismark Place.

A shopper of the Country Club Plaza could save, according to calculations made by
the J.C. Nichols Company, an average of 10 to 12 miles travel round-trip by not going to the

downtown business section. There was also, it noted, a tremendous savings of time in handling of the automobile and in struggles parking. “Revolutionary as it is” the Bulletin reported, “almost one-half of the lands will be set aside for street areas, interior loading courts and motor parking space.” The Plaza was also one of the first centers—if not the first—to deliberately group closely related shops together for the convenience of the shopper. “Utilitarian shops” that were essential for any complete shopping center would “be segregated to themselves, avoiding the economic hazard that proves so frequently injurious to shops of more refined character.” In addition to these rather practical innovations, the Plaza would also have an amusement center, including a state of the art movie theater, cafes, club rooms, music and dance studios “and every feature important to create an interesting night life” for those that were “pleasure bent.” Unlike other shopping facilities, the Plaza would have a bank, a Post Office, telegraph office and several taxi stands.

And unlike any other shopping facility in the United States it had the direct backing of a company like the J.C. Nichols Company (housed on site), responsible for creating, selling, promoting, protecting and monitoring the subdivisions that housed the 50,000 or so residents that would be the primary shoppers of the Plaza. It also had an entrenched tool of promotion in the Country Club District Bulletin, which gave suggestions each month on which shops to visit. It, for example, would highlight stores like Chandler’s Landscape and Floral Company, which provided the Country Club District with all of its landscaping needs.

30 J.C Nichols Investment Company (March 15, 1925), 3.
31 J.C Nichols Investment Company (Marcy 15, 1925), 2.
“It is interesting, too, to know that Chandler’s was the very first firm in Country Club Plaza” it recorded “having ‘pioneered’ out to Forty-Seventh Street in the early twenties.” When it interviewed Mr. Chandler for the piece it found him in a reminiscent mood who wished to talk of “days before.” “And with the hustle and bustle of the rapidly growing Country Club Plaza before our eyes as he talked, we felt a bit like Alice, beloved of our fairy-tale days.”

These kinds of stories highlighted the progressive nature of the Country Club District. It seemed that nothing was ordinary there. Everything from toilets to gas stations, stop signs to the placement of street trees, was designed with an eye towards the cutting edge. Even a drug store was a remarkable phenomenon in the District and on the Plaza. The Bulletin asked readers if they were aware that Hunter’s Brothers newest drug store was on the Plaza at forty-seventh and Mill Creek Parkway. “It really is the ‘last word’ in drug stores” it announced. Then it reported that it had searched its pocket dictionaries “to find a synonym for up-to-date” so to describe Hunter’s Drug Store. The writers of the Bulletin had lunch and conversation with “the affable young man in a spick and span white suit” who told them that after lunch he would show them through the luncheonette. They looked about but could see no luncheonette. Maybe it was in the basement, they thought, or somewhere else far off. “But wrong again” it gleefully noted “it was right before us!” but “concealed by an unobtrusive little booth.” Then they took a look at the soda fountain with its complete Lippman Refrigeration plant.

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As they looked around they realized that all of its technological innovation did not detract from its sense of style. “This is a beautiful drug store” it noted and reported that it was decorated in the loveliest, softest shade “a French green—the Spanish Coat of Arms furnishing the bright splashes of color.” The writers for the Bulletin visited with Mr. Kittredge, the manager in charge of the store, who told them that they began motor car and motorcycle delivery service that would promptly deliver orders to the homes of the Country Club residents. It had cozy restrooms for the ladies “and passing motorists” it noted “will find this a delightful place to stop away from the congestion of downtown streets.” Mr. Hunter assured residents that the Plaza location offered the same prices as his two stores downtown.

This is quite a write-up for a drug store and shows the extent to which the J.C. Nichols Company not only adopted innovative styles of building, but sold that innovation to a skeptical public. The Plaza initially was called “Nichols Folly” by his competitors because of the audacity of its design and how markedly it contrasted to anything being built at the time. This was J.C. Nichols ultimate goal and what he thought being in the real estate business was all about. Just like his pioneering ancestors, he imagined they were settling land, but this time protecting it and harmoniously fitting it in an ever-changing society. To keep up with rapid progress, one had to not only be on the cutting edge in his time, but able to anticipate future trends so that those future trends did not negate past

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accomplishments. “Reflect on the inventions and progress which has taken place during the lifetime of our older members, and then forecast the surroundings, methods of transacting business and modes of living twenty years from today!”\textsuperscript{36} J.C. Nichols proselytized amid a speech on why he was in the real estate business.

“The automobile revolutionized the fundamental affecting our wares” he said “just as tomorrow the aeroplane and the trailer may do. Traffic congestion, coupled with outlying picture shows; the building of suburban apartments; the change of much traffic from railways to incoming highways, can quickly shift a part of the downtown retail trade to outlying shopping centers”\textsuperscript{37} he continued. A successful developer had to accurately anticipate these sorts of trends and make sure that the outlying centers were well-planned and restricted. There was no greater challenge to the realtor, Nichols believed, than “more scientific study of retail structures.”\textsuperscript{38} In a time where most developers simply built and walked away, Nichols stuck around and dealt with “questions of refrigeration, modern fronts, and improved lighting and sales value of color offers an immense field of leadership.”\textsuperscript{39} This was the forefront of commercial development and Nichols, just as he always had, desired to be on the cusp of it.

In the late 1920s Nichols believed that the greatest challenge in America was how to manage the proliferation of outlying shopping and living quarters. He had effectively

\textsuperscript{36} Nichols, Jesse Clyde. “A Speech to A&G Drugstore,” (May 5, 1929).

\textsuperscript{37} Nichols, “A Speech to A&G Drugstore,” 3.

\textsuperscript{38} Nichols, “A Speech to A&G Drugstore,” 3.
foresaw that the city and the downtown shopping facilities were not dealing with problems of congestion, overcrowding and anachronistic developing with no eye on the future. The Plaza was his answer—with all the integrity of a Petticoat Lane shopping district—merged with the latest in technology and design. Yet, he was one of the few that sought to be on the frontier of suburban planning. Nichols was dealing with the ugly byproduct of suburbanization long before others. In 1937, while others worried about merely surviving the Depression, Nichols was dealing with the effects of suburbanization that would not be seen until twenty or thirty years later. “Throughout America the once beautiful landscape just beyond the towns and cities is being woefully desecrated by the erection of a conglomerate mass of hideous roadside buildings” he said in a speech on the real estate business. With no additional cost and a little care he noted, “these wayside inns, barbeque stands and filling stations can be made an asset to the neighborhood rather than a sacrilege.”

Nichols shared with the audience one of his favorite things to say “cities are handmade—whether physically good or physically bad is our responsibility.”

Real estate had to be more than the simple bartering and selling of land and if it remained that way, it had no right to be referred to as a profession. He saw it as a far more important occupation than that and argued that “realogy” should be a part of every college and university in America. And he turned, as he usually did, to history. “The venturesome spirit of our forefathers conquered a wilderness of prairie and plain to give us this great agricultural

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40 Nichols, J.C. “Cities are Handmade.” A speech given to the National Board of Realtors, Kansas City. (June 1923), 1.
empire” he said before noting that technology in machinery constantly limited the amount of farmers needed to work the land. That meant an undoubted increase in individuals moving to the city and looking for property, which was another factor that the real estate developer had to anticipate. “We cannot go forward on static conditions” he told them “we must be interested in dynamic progress. We must look for new frontiers, new fields for our creative genius.” For J.C. Nichols there were too many frontiers to count and they all seemed to greatly animate him.

Nichols was fascinated with progress and constantly searched for ways to incorporate progress into his subdivisions. “Thousands of acres of our land” he informed the room of realtors “taking in free nitrogen from the air, can grow a bean which transformed by the wand of the chemical engineer can bring many new industries to our town.” He noted that dry ice and ammonia, lacquers, ingredients for safety glass and more than 100 other items could be made from corn. “In Atchison a new corn alcohol plant has been started, in St. Joseph a building board on cornstalks and oat straw!” he exuberantly exclaimed. “Do you not see” he asked the room “that the end of the furrow leads to the smokestacks of the town?” Getting to the point of his speech he asked “why am I in the real estate business?” It was because he loved “Its romance and unlimited horizon” and he told his audience that “ours is a calling which challenges the souls of red blooded men. It calls for backbone and stamina.” In short, it was a truly masculine occupation, but only if a man went to the threshold, to the frontier. For Nichols, time, progress and confidence had consistently reshaped his idea of where the frontier was. In 1905 it was an actual frontier
on the rough side of a slow running creek. By the time of this speech it was in innovation, in finding new fields to creatively alter.\footnote{J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 1923), 4.}

Another innovative approach Nichols took was in importing statues to be placed throughout the Country Club District. Though other subdivisions throughout the country ornamented their subdivisions, Nichols went to Europe and brought back authentic statuary. This June 1923 \textit{Country Club District Bulletin} wrote that “tourists in Europe make long journeys and spend months to see the best that European civilization has produced in painting, sculpture, architecture and landscape art.”\footnote{J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 1923), 3.} It continued by suggesting that many residents may have taken guided tours throughout Europe to view innumerable monuments, statues and fountains. “History and the aspirations of certain generations in one city may have been recorded in the inspired carving of beautiful fountains—expressing the very instincts and emotions of the race”\footnote{J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 1923), 3.} it read. Religious zeal, perhaps, was embodied in every stroke of the chiseler’s hammer, the Bulletin pontificated. “The little square in which the old fountain has stood through the centuries may have become the rallying ground for the crystallization of the zeal and enthusiasm that sent the Crusaders forth in their great journeys, or the meeting place that inspired the exploration of unknown parts of the world” it further suggested.\footnote{I J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 1923), 4.}
In other cities the statuary may have represented something entirely different, the Bulletin went on with it cover story. “Influenced by very different motives and world contact” it read “the peoples may have expressed their upward trend in life or reverence for the things that have gone before, in the design of elaborate well-heads, informally placed in palace grounds or public squares or cathedral courts.” Emotions guiding the forefathers of these artists, it suggested, may have been retold in sculptured design in rare marble. These statues then became “historical records.” America, it went on, had been too busy to give thought of creating something that would compare to these old world charms. This was, however, the repetition of all nations. First there was independence gained by military revolution or foreign conquest. Next was the building of wealth and “finally the expression of the finer sentiments of life in various objects of art.” This was where Nichols considered the Country Club District to be in the mid-1920s. He had purchased it, rid it of undesirable residents, buildings and industries, and settled it with middle class and upper-class neighborhoods that had brought him great wealth. Now it was time for the expression of finer sentiments. Nichols also bought the sculptures to teach lessons to the good Americans in his subdivisions. “Good pieces of sculpture” the Bulletin noted, “should be as intimate and afford as keen every-day enjoyment in American cities as good paintings in our homes.”45 The J.C. Nichols Company sought to teach beauty to its residents. “Everyone, young and old” the Bulletin reported “should be taught to appreciate and read the beauty, the thrill of action, the expression of emotion and the spiritual uplift and historical

45 Nichols, “Creating a Cultural Center Second to None,” 3.
significance as expressed in good sculpture, just as plainly as it may be written in the books they read.”

To accomplish this goal, J.C. Nichols personally travelled to Europe and spent many months under the advice of European authorities in the selection of garden ornaments that would be appropriate for Kansas City. He brought back a Sixteenth Century Italian fountain that was carved from Carrara marble. Along with it was an antique Venetian well-head “of exquisite Etruscan marble.” They were both placed at State Line and Brookwood Roads (Sixty-first street). The same responsibility, the Bulletin informed readers, “has been felt in initiating this development in civic art as was felt in establishing new methods of restricting and protecting property, or in our method of subdivision development, the encouragement of good design in suburban shops and the creation of neighborhood and community activities.” It was an evolution of these ideas. Subdivision development was, to the J.C. Nichols Company, a community building endeavor and this kind of refinement was the last stage of settlement.

Nichols also introduced a “high note of an interesting little parklet, at the intersection of Sixty-second and Sixty-third Streets, immediately east of State Line Road.” It was an antique Watering Trough that was imported from Florence, Italy. It was apparently an “ancient vessel” that had given several centuries of service as it stood in of Florence’s public squares. In March of 1923, the Bulletin reported that J.C. Nichols had just returned with six more statues from Europe. It highlighted one fountain that had been handcrafted, again from Carerra Marble, and purchased in London. It had previously stood on the

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grounds of an Italian villa. “It is the plan” the bulletin informed its readers, “wherever possible, to construct a pool of proper proportions to form the base of these fountains.” In then noted that most European cities, especially Munich, made great use of water in its parks and public places as well “as in the open spaces of their residential districts.”

One of the most notable statues in Kansas City was erected in 1925, the Meyer Circle Fountain, or what is commonly referred to as simply “Seahorse Fountain.” J.C. Nichols saw the fountain in Florence, Italy, bought it and had it shipped to Kansas City. He then gave the task of incorporating it in the Country Club District to Edward Delk, resident architect for the area. Delk took the 17 century fountain and incorporated it into a larger fountain that was placed within a circle drive at Meyer and Ward Parkway in 1925. The end result was a fountain that consisted of a two-tiered bowl held up by three cherubs, a dolphin and three seahorses. A child and dolphin top the bowl made of Italian marble. The fountain stands about sixteen feet high.

The Country Club District also had a sort of poet laureate by the mid-1920s by the name of Alberta G. McMahon, later Alberta McMahon Sherman. In July of 1926 the Bulletin published her poem *The Sea Horse Fountain*.

Rosy flush of sunshine falls, misty gleams of opal m oon,
Irridescent luster glistens, O’er the sprays in they lagoon.
Crystal water tinkling makes, music soft as harps attune,
Cooling zephyrs lightly linger o’er thy fount at night or noon.
Dolphins carved in marble stone, rocks of graying age maroon.

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47 J.C. Nichols Investment Company (June 1923), 3.
Sirens call: awaken, waken, brave again the wild typhoon.

Do the hearts of marble throb as the gods again commune?

Reverie beholds Poseidon wreathing reins in gay festoon.

Dreams departing, bring us back from the themes of ancient rune

As of old the nymphs still worship at your shrine ‘neat the summer moon.⁴⁸

She composed several poems in the mid to late-1920s describing life in the Country Club District. She wrote of the Verona Columns placed in southern Mission Hills in 1925.

“Verona Columns, loved by trysting fauns, and fountain, with the mocking bird in tune, how we are haunted as your beauty we adore, by sunny vistas of your native shore.”

Verona Columns consisted of eight columns imported from Venice by the J.C. Nichols Company and placed in a park at the intersection of Shawnee Lane, Ensley Lane and Mission Drive. They were purchased by S. Herbert Hare, a landscape architect commissioned by the JCN Company to find and purchase ornaments to be sent back to the Country Club District. With a topographical map of the District, he toured Europe in search of fitting ornaments. The most notable result was Verona Columns. “The valley and the surrounding hillsides” the Bulletin reported “so recently untouched by man—somehow seem to have been awaiting an opportunity to give themselves to provide a background and a setting for just such a dignified and beautiful conception.”⁴⁹ Verona Columns were the central feature in what essentially became a park. In Rome, Hare found a Carrara marble fountain made up of swans. It was placed in an oblong pool. To the north of it was a

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⁴⁸ J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 1923), 4.
⁴⁹ J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 1923), 4.
reflecting pool. To the south of the oblong pool with the swan fountain arose steps of native stone—sixty feet in width—that led to a semi-circular terrace. “Along the central portion of this terrace” the Bulletin described “symmetrically flanking each side of the rear of the terrace—the high note in this symphony of beauty, rise before us eight lovely antique Verona marble columns from Venice—each standing twelve feet in height.” The columns were of a twisted design. In the middle of the “double quartet” of columns was a white Carrara marble vase that was several hundred years old and also imported from Italy.50

These kinds of endeavors were the final touches on J.C. Nichols’s masterpiece, his life’s work: the Country Club District. What he really intended for the District was to be an example in harmonious urban living—not just for Kansas City—but for the entire world. The Country Club District, as evidenced by grand installations like Verona Columns, was completely and utterly under the control of J.C. Nichols and his company. It had been settled, tamed, protected and then perfected. It was by the mid-1920s a work of art and Nichols was crowning his achievement with European charm. “Verona Columns” the Bulletin informed its readers “is but another step in a definite plan of the Nichols Companies to cooperate to make Kansas City not only one of the world’s most beautiful cities, but to make it abound with distinctive works of art, wonderful residential areas, artistic landscape development, happy blending of rural and urban scenes—drawing travellers not alone from the United States, but from all the world, to visit and enjoy a

50 J.C Nichols Investment Company (June 1923), 3.
thriving commercial city of the West, where the hearts of the people love and revere the beautiful and the more worth-while things in life.”

These more worth-while things in life were really the next stage in the evolution of Nichols’s boundless vision and drive to implement them in space. Nichols spent his entire career on the precipice of neighborhood building. Though garden ornaments were commonplace throughout the United States, no one imported them from Italian villas or commissioned sculptures to be carved for certain areas of his neighborhoods. Though shopping centers were sprouting throughout the nation during this time, Nichols was not only the first, but the most elaborately designed, grouped, controlled and maintained. Whether it was a filling station, a doughnut stand, a post office, an exclusive shop or a sprawling Ward Parkway mansion, Nichols integrated it into his overall plan, one that was cutting edge for its time. The Bulletin reported in 1925 that “It is hoped that just as the pioneering of J.C. Nichols Companies in the control of designs, planting and signs on filling stations has largely revolutionized filling station architecture and surroundings throughout the country, that ultimately its leadership in control of design, color and placing of business enterprises in carefully studied groups, will influence the building of shopping centers throughout the United States.”

In his speech on why he was in the real estate business, Nichols concluded by saying “let us know—let us do—our success depends on the extent to which we take advantage of the changes and opportunities of our time.” It depended on their “courage and


52 J.C Nichols Investment Company (July 1923), 4.
determination to explore new fields” and their willingness to “devote our time to go forward—and on—and on—in absolute confidence in our section of the greatest country on earth.”\textsuperscript{53} And he finished by quoting Napoleon on how circumstances are made and opportunities created. This is how he had lived his life and his philosophy of almost everything was rooted in the pioneer spirit he perceived as the very definition of American history. An ever-changing notion of a “frontier” served as the arena where J.C. Nichols tested his sense of self, his sense of masculinity. Whether it was, in the early days, an actual rugged landscape that he reined in or, later in his career, the development of a cutting edge shopping facility, it was always a frontier, a space on the edge of possibility and it was where he thrived.

\textsuperscript{53} J.C. Nichols Investment Company (July 1923), 2.
In 1937 J.C. Nichols became ill and it was generally considered to be caused by stress and the strains of his lifestyle. His company was in trouble and feeling the effects of the Depression’s assault on real estate. Nichols retreated to his home for a month and his doctors encouraged him to take an extended period of time away from his life in Kansas City. His first grandchild, an infant daughter was born to his daughter Eleanor during this time period, but died after living only a day. Nichols decided it was time to get away and planned a trip for all of them with the help of his son Miller. They would sail down the west coast of South America. While on this trip to escape the misfortune Kansas City had recently bestowed upon him, he received an urgent call in Buenos Aires from John Taylor, employee and partner in the J.C. Nichols Company since its inception. William T. Kemper, a friend of J.C. Nichols and resident of the Country Club District, had sent Commerce Trust officer George Dillon to visit the offices of the J.C. Nichols Company while Nichols was out of town with a request to go over the books. Kemper was worried about the long-term prospects of the J.C. Nichols Company, a company it had financed for years.

Taylor had refused to permit a review of the financial records and Nichols commended him for it. Nichols told Taylor “tell them when I am returning and that I will be in to see Mr. Kemper.” The story goes that when Nichols returned to Kansas City he went into Kemper’s office “his arms loaded with Nichols Company ledgers.” He surprised the “startled banker” and asked him “have you ever considered going into the real estate
“business?” No, Kemper supposedly responded. “Well, give it some thought” Nichols told Kemper dropping the books onto his desk along with a set of keys “you’re welcome to the J.C. Nichols Company if you think you can run it better than I can.” Nichols turned to walk out and Kemper apparently rushed to the door bewildered by the thought of managing the holdings of the company. He allotted more time for Nichols to pay his bills. Miller Nichols remembered that the company was faced with bankruptcy and the only reason it avoided such a fate was because Nichols worked with the bankers to reduce the interest rates and stick with him long term. Armour Hill Gardens, built in 1930, was the last major subdivision built by the J.C. Nichols Company from 1930-1937

By the end of the 1930s, J.C. Nichols’s limits were becoming clear. Even he could not combat the Great Depression. Though he continued building neighborhoods, they were mostly additions to Mission Hills, like Fairway, or other smaller in scope enterprises. The building of the 1920s was a thing of the past. In order to survive the Depression, Nichols focused almost exclusively on the Plaza. As home sales stalled and then became nearly non-existent, he focused on rental agreements with tenants on the Plaza. With his innovative rent based on a percentage of the sales, Nichols was able to help businesses cope with contractions in the market while maintaining a steady flow of cash. Pearson and Pearson note that filling stations leases particularly helped stabilize the company. After all, people still drove their cars and “filling stations were the least likely to go broke due to their affiliation with sound national petroleum companies.”

Nichols apartment complexes surrounding the Plaza added much needed foot traffic to the area. The Plaza Association, another Nichols innovation, initiated a “Buy on the
Plaza” campaign that featured style shows in the Plaza Theater, bridge lessons and a cooking school. Nichols also worked to single-handedly keep the Plaza afloat, much like he had with the Country Club District. One of his salespeople remembered that he would not hesitate to walk up to an employee and open his suit jacket. If it hadn’t come from Jack Henry or some other Plaza shop, he would “straighten us out in no uncertain terms.”

According to his wife, he made her shop every Plaza merchant every month. He also drove around the Plaza, like he had the Country Club District, making notes. He checked for trash, dirty handprints on doors or windows and, apparently, once he counted the flies on the sill of a shop window. He notated all of it in his notebook and followed up the next day with a letter. His son Clyde remembered that some of the family would accompany him on his drives to the Plaza where he would count the parked cars in order to gauge business. Clyde said that one night he counted 14 cars and nearly cried. These were the actions of a man desperately working to stay afloat.
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Vita

Clinton D. Lawson was born in Mexico, Missouri in 1980 and grew up in a farming community in northeastern Missouri. His first aspiration was to be a pig farmer; his second to be president of the United States. He attended the University of Missouri-Kansas City for many years and learned a lot of things. After attending graduate school in history for three years, Mr. Lawson became a meat cutter and a father. He currently resides in a transitional place, somewhere in the ethers between here and Missoula, Montana.