



The Kessler System of Indianapolis

The City Beautiful

During the last half of the 1800s, overcrowding and pollution led to the belief that American cities were unhealthy environments. A movement known as City Beautiful emerged at the turn of the century as a remedy to these urban problems.

The City Beautiful movement was comprised of a range of beautification efforts including park and boulevard planning, the establishment of civic centers, tree and flower planting, factory smoke pollution regulation, and billboard and trash removal.

In Indianapolis, as in numerous other American cities during this time, various civic and business leaders recognized the need for a concerted effort toward city clean-ups and park establishment.

A Plan for Indianapolis

In 1908, the city's Park Board enlisted the help of George Kessler. As one of the preeminent landscape architects in the nation, Kessler was a leading figure of the City Beautiful movement.

Kessler spent a year researching Indianapolis' parks, waterways, and transportation system. In 1909, he submitted his Indianapolis Park and Boulevard Plan (known today as the Kessler Plan) as part of the Board of Park Commissioner's Annual Report. Kessler identified the key natural features of the city and built his plan around these features. To encompass all areas of the city, Kessler identified six waterways as the cornerstone of his plan. Along these waterways would be landscaped boulevards linking the park system together.

These boulevards served a practical purpose as well, providing flood control and routes into the downtown business district. In addition, ornamental bridges would connect portions of the boulevards and serve as landmarks for the city.

After World War I, Kessler expanded his plan in response to city growth. He added a northern boulevard that was later named Kessler Boulevard in his honor. After Kessler's death in 1923, landscape architect Lawrence Sheridan extended the plan further to include all of Marion County.

A Lasting Legacy

Kessler's work in Indianapolis was a catalyst for the City Beautiful movement throughout Indiana. Kessler designed park and boulevard systems in Fort Wayne, South Bend, and Terre Haute, Indiana. Kessler also advised on projects in Anderson, Evansville, Marion, and Peru, Indiana and influenced the campus landscapes of Indiana University in Bloomington, Butler University in Indianapolis, and Rose Polytechnic in Terre Haute. In Indianapolis, the Kessler Plan continues to serve as the basis of the city's park system and the framework for the city's extensive greenway network.



Garfield Park, including the sunken gardens, was designed by George Kessler and opened to the public in 1923.



George E. Kessler, born in Germany in 1862, moved to the United States at the age of three. He returned to Germany as a young man for instruction in botany, forestry, landscape design, civic design, and civil engineering. In 1882, at the age of 20, Kessler returned to the United States to begin his career. He first gained national attention with the development of a park and boulevard system for Kansas City, Missouri, in 1893. Eleven years later, he provided the landscape design for the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, and later adopted St. Louis as his home city. During his 40-year career, Kessler prepared plans for 26 communities, 26 park and boulevard systems, 49 parks, 46 estates & residences, and 26 schools. His projects can be found in 100 cities in 23 states, Mexico, and China.



Fall Creek Flooding
A flood devastates Indianapolis in 1913 (left), killing 200 people. Kessler designed concrete floodwalls (above) and earthen levees in the City Beautiful style to control water levels.

Bess Photo Collection
Indiana Historical Society



Fall Creek Parkway
Bess Photo Collection
Indiana Historical Society

Indianapolis Historic Park and Boulevard System



1893

Kansas City Park and Boulevard System designed by George Kessler (1885-1892)

1894

Park Board established by the Commissioned City, a precursor to the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce

1898

Board of Parks acquires land for Riverside Park

1904

Kessler commissioned to landscape design World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri
Irving Circle opened in the Planned Community of Irvington in Indianapolis

1905

The Indianapolis Board of Park Commissioners learned of George Kessler and his excellent work on Kansas City Park and Boulevard System

1907

Wilard Park opens
George Kessler designed the McCowan Residence in Indianapolis' Greenwood Subdivision

1908

George Kessler was hired as a consulting Landscape Architect and secretary of the Indianapolis Park Board

1909

Kessler submitted the Indianapolis Park and Boulevard Plan as part of the Board of Park Commissioner's Annual Report

1909

Indiana Legislature passed Kessler's recommended park law which allowed for establishment of park districts for the purpose of zoning

1910

Citizens of the Indianapolis east district filed a suit to test the legality of the park law which stopped work in east and south districts

1910

Kessler produced a "city plan" for Dallas, Texas that employed a comprehensive assessment of industrial needs, traffic patterns, and railroad considerations

1911

Tax withstands lawsuit by court ruling in favor of city Park Board
Lawrence Sheridan is hired by the Indianapolis Park Board

1912

Pleasant Run Parkway established

1913

Berkhof Parkway and Rhodes Park opened to the Public

1913

Flooding devastates Indianapolis

1914

Fall Creek Parkway established

National Register of Historic Places

The National Register Listing, over 3,400 acres of public land, is for the entire surviving network or "system" of parkways, boulevards, and parks that were planned and designed by nationally known landscape architect George E. Kessler from 1908 through 1923. This entire interconnected system includes 12 parks, six parkways and two boulevards, which encompass numerous historic features such as parkway alignments, landscape composition, walks, bridges, buildings, statuary and fountains. The Kessler System is the largest Park and Boulevard listing in the country bringing prestige, attention and resources to the historic and award winning plan for the City of Indianapolis.

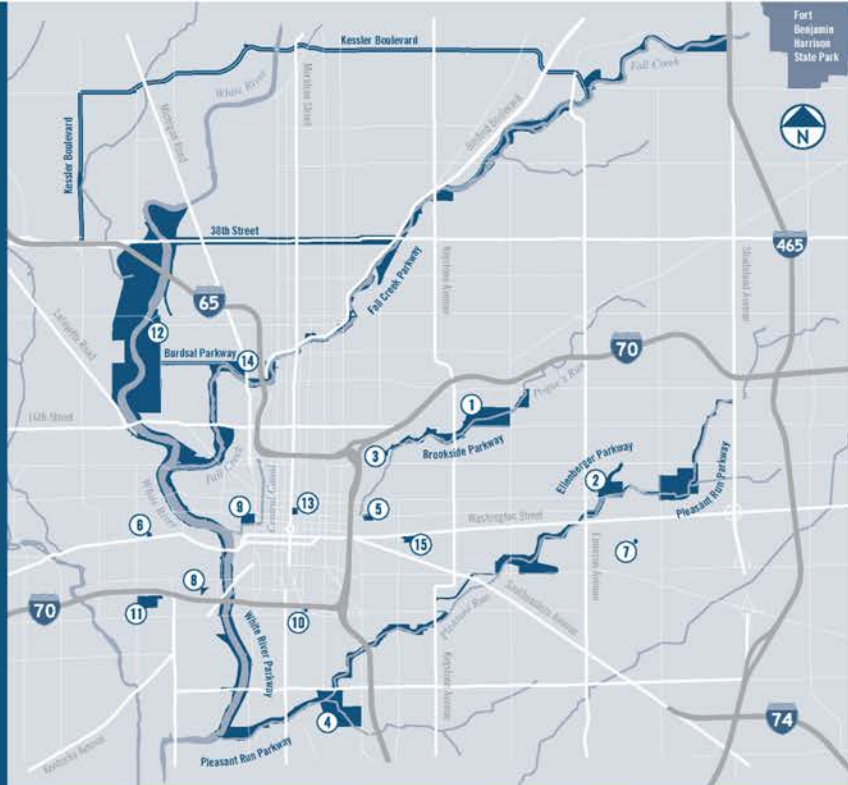
Kessler System Identity

The spiral sunburst is a detail extracted from a shepherd's hook gas light fixture for the Indianapolis Park and Boulevard System documented in the Kessler Archives at Ball State University and through historic photographs at the Indiana Historical Society. The form is believed to be unique to Indianapolis and conveys a form much like that of his historic Park and Boulevard System. The main stream and contributing tributaries are akin to the White River with the tributaries of Fall Creek, Pogues Run and Pleasant Run around which he planned the system. This form has been chosen as the symbol to identify the Kessler System.



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2008 Indy Parks



Bart Peterson, Mayor
City of Indianapolis

Joseph Wynns, Director
Indy Parks and Recreation

Parks

- 1 Brookside Park
- 2 Ellenberger Park
- 3 Fletcher Place Triangle
- 4 Garfield Park
- 5 Highland Park
- 6 Indiana Park
- 7 Irving Circle
- 8 McCarty Triangle
- 9 Military Park
- 10 Noble Place
- 11 Rhodius Park
- 12 Riverside Park
- 13 University Square
- 14 Watkins Park
- 15 Willard Park

Parkways

Brookside Parkway
Burdal Parkway
Ellenberger Parkway
Fall Creek Parkway
Pleasant Run Parkway
White River Parkway

Boulevards

Kessler Boulevard
Maple Road (38th Street)

Historic Bridges

Crooked Creek Bridge
Capitol Avenue, Fall Creek Parkway
Illinois Street, Fall Creek Parkway
Meridian Street, Fall Creek Parkway
Senate Avenue, Fall Creek Parkway
Spades Park Pedestrian Bridge

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Riverside Park Shelter
Bass Photo Co Collection
Indiana Historical Society

1915	1921	1922	1923	1928	1930s	1931	1957	1963	1970	1972	1991	1994	1999	2001	2003
Stetten Gardens and Overlook opened in Garfield Park	Lawrence Sheridan refers to Indianapolis to serve as the executive secretary of the City Plan Commission	Garfield Park open to the Public	Kessler dies unexpectedly in Indianapolis	Sheridan completes the "Comprehensive Plan of Park Development for Indianapolis and Marion County, 1928"	Sheridan is the Landscape Architect for Crown Hill Cemetery and Lockefield Gardens Apartments	Tappan Memorial in Riverside Park constructed by architect C. McCullough	The American Institute of Planners awarded Sheridan their distinguished service award, honoring his work in over 100 communities.	State legislation obtained which permitted creation of a county-wide park district	The Metropolitan Park Board was incorporated into the Consolidated City of Indianapolis, as the Department of Parks and Recreation	Sheridan dies in Indianapolis and is buried in Crown Hill Cemetery	The Indianapolis Parks Foundation, a private citizen-funded group, founded	Implementation of the Greenways Plan to regain the 1908 Kessler authored plan for Indianapolis which preserved 15 miles of parkland as parkways and open space	Indiana Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects chose Kessler's Park and Boulevard Plan for one of the Millennium awards in the state	Indianapolis Business Journal's Milestones 2000: a 20th Century retrospective recognized Kessler's Park and Boulevard System as a milestone in Indy's history	The Kessler System, including 12 parks, six parkways and two boulevards, totaling 3,400 acres is placed on the National Register of Historic Places