



Planning for Permanence: the Speeches of J.C. Nichols
[Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City](#)

J.C. Nichols School's
First Graduating Class Commencement
June 4, 1929

You are the first graduating class of this school. It is always an honor and distinction to be the first one that does any splendid thing, whether it may be the first one to fly an airplane, the first one to pioneer a new community, or the first one to graduate in a new school. This school may stand here for one hundred years or more and through all these years future groups of children graduating each year will always think back and look back to the first class that graduated in the J.C. Nichols School.

As children graduate from this school they become the members of an organization called an alumni association. Tonight you form the beginning of a great alumni association. You are the founders of a great organization that will grow in numbers every year. Ten, twenty, thirty years from now reunions will be held of the children of the men and women who have graduated from this school, and in these reunions you will always be known as the members of the first class that graduated from this school.

A big responsibility rests with the first child or man or woman who does anything and does it well. You have passed your grades, you have been loyal to this school, and now the reputation of the kind of work that is carried on in this school will be reflected in what you accomplish in your high school, in your college and in your future life. It is not a question so much of what you have learned in this school, but how you use what you have learned; how useful you make yourself to the community where you may live. It is not a question so much of how much money you make in life as to how much service you give your community and your city, your family and your country. It is a question of how well you will be able to think your way through the many decisions that you will have to make.

I like to think of your future as a long ladder and every step or rung of that ladder will be a step upward and that through all the future years of your life you will never step down on the ladder but will always, with the training you have received in this school, under your splendid corps of teachers, be able to step upward in the things that you are able to accomplish in your life and the good things which you will be able to do for your country.

I hope that you will keep three great things in mind; first, that it is always important to be loyal to the J. C. Nichols School, be loyal to your church, your community where you live, your city and your country. Be loyal to your business and be loyal to your work. Loyalty in my mind is one of the most important results from

education. Second; I want you to always be enthusiastic. I don't want you to be an indifferent member of any group. I hope there is no child in this class that will be a "don't care" child. I want you always to be one of those who takes a great interest in everything about you or that you undertake. I don't want you to be the kind of man or woman that somebody else has to arouse and get you to do things, but I want you to be one of the leaders who gets everybody around you really to do things, and, third, I want every boy and girl in this class to be the type of boy or girl who is willing to assume responsibility; who has a feeling of obligation to do things; who never shirks his share of every job and whatever may come up I want you to take your full share of the responsibility and never allow, if you can help it, anything to fail with which you are associated.

You are all young. You have the spirit of youth. Your whole life lies in front of you. If you are loyal, enthusiastic, and assume an obligation of responsibility, opportunities will come to you through your lives in various activities, perhaps scattered in various parts of the world, to do things of which this school can be proud.

You must be courageous men and women! You must be daring! You must not be afraid to try, even though you may fail, and I hope you all have lots of imagination. I want you to dream of the things that you can do! I want you in your minds to plan, and think of the things that are different, and whether it be in business, at home – or wherever it may be – do not be afraid to dream a dream, and then set out to make it happen!

Then, too, boys and girls, I want you to get lots of joy out of life. I want you to learn to appreciate the beautiful! I want you to see the beauty of a wonderful sunset – I want you to see the beauty of the flowers – the shrubbery and trees! I want you to appreciate good architecture in buildings! I want you to see the beauty of a view across a lake or ocean! I want you to see the beauty of a clean yard – a clean home! I want you, if you should some time run a factory, to see the beauty that comes from everything being in order and well arranged!

Then, I want you to get the joy of knowing and loving people. I want you to realize that there is a good side to every man, every woman, and every child! I want you to make an effort always to see the good side of your friends, and of every stranger that you meet, thus getting all the joy and happiness possible out of your association with the people you meet in your life.

Then, I want you to be interested in the events and the things that happen around you. I want you to be interested in the things that Kansas City is doing. I want you to be interested in the things that the State of Missouri does and that our great United States does. I want you to be interested in the things you read every day in the newspapers. I want you to get a thrill out of new inventions, because in the next ten or fifteen years things unknown to us today will be accomplished. You are graduating tonight just at the infancy of travel in the air. It is a wonderful thing to picture the things that you will see accomplished in the next few years of people traveling in the air. It is great for you to graduate tonight, realizing that in the next ten or fifteen years you not only will be hearing music over the radio, but will be able to see pictures over the radio. In the next few years science will develop many new ways of making food, of making power, of improving transportation, of doing things of which we do not dream today. In all of this,

the boy or girl who studied hard in school, and who has trained his mind, not only will understand the advances being made, but will be able to be a part of them, and help people get more pleasure and joy out of living than they ever have in the past.

Then, I want you to be inquisitive. I don't want you to be the type of boy or girl, or man or woman, who simply lives like a sponge. I don't want you simply to soak up the things that other people do, but I want your minds always to be inquiring into things and learning why things can be done in a different way; or how things can be done in a better way. I don't know of any results that will be more valuable from your schoolwork in this school than development of an inquisitive frame of mind. I mean by this, that you will always be wanting to ask questions. You will always want to know why a thing is this way, or that; or how it can be done in a different way, and in this manner you become an adventurer. You can become a pioneer. You can carry out the traditions under which this school was established as a pioneer school in a new section of the city, and in a way you will be at the head of a procession or a group that will be doing better things in life, and making your city and your country more powerful.

In the years to come, the names and pictures of the graduates of this school will be hung upon these walls. Names and pictures of boys and girls who have gone out into life; become men and women, and accomplished big things. I hope that many of you in this first graduating class of this school, will do things that will cause your pictures, and your names to be hung upon the walls of this school, and honored all through the years. Nothing could make me happier than to see each of you do something in future years that will make the principal, teachers, and pupils of this school want to see your picture hanging upon these walls.

On the other hand, it is my earnest hope that there will never be a member of this class do a thing in their future lives that will cause any future child in this school to be ashamed of the fact that you were a member of the first graduating class.

I hope every one of you will go on and have a high school education. Perhaps some of you may go to college, others may not. Some of you may go into business, or become mothers in the homes and accomplish just as much by not going to college. Those of you who do choose to go on to college, must work just as hard to do only things that will make your college proud of you, as you will work to make this school proud of you.

This school is new. It has no established reputation or traditions. You are the first class that has been graduated here. Your record in your future life will be more important to this school than the record of any future graduating class. Many of your fathers and mothers have worked hard to save the money to send you to school. Your success in life means more to them than anything else. By all these years of study you have made yourself able to do more and better things after you have finished this school. This building has been placed on a high hill overlooking a beautiful valley below. On these same lands battles of the Civil War were fought, and long before that the Indians roamed over these hills. At one time, as the United States moved westward it was the border of civilization. Perhaps some day there will be a building here three or four times the size of this building. In time to come there will be thousands of children who have graduated from this school, and if some of you live to be 75 or 80 years of age, perhaps

your own grandchildren may attend this school. It is a beautiful privilege, and a fine thing to feel that you were a member of its first graduating class!

The eyes of this whole section of the city will be turned upon you to see what you accomplish in life. One day, perhaps one of you boys may be the mayor of this city – or the president of our great country. Some of you may become missionaries and go to far places of the world. Some of you may become business leaders! All of you should be good fathers and mothers in happy homes. But, wherever you are, and whatever you do, I want you to be enthusiastic, and always take your full share of responsibility for every opportunity that comes your way. I want you always to be interested, and help those less fortunate than yourselves. Remember it is important to be honest and do the right things all through your lives. I get a great deal of satisfaction out of thinking of you as a little band of pioneers who have worked together in this school! Some of you will go on to other schools and still be together, but through the years, you will be separated and scattered to different parts of the world, but I am sure you will never forget the love you have for each other as classmates; and that you will ever remember that the good or evil things you may do in life will cast their shadow upon the remaining members of your class.

I know you will always be loyal to the name of the 1929 graduating class of this school. I know that you will never forget the love and affection that the teachers of this school have shown you. I know that in years to come, you will make them proud of you, just the same as you will make your fathers and mothers proud of you.

Also, I want you to remember, that getting an education by going to school is of no value to you at all, unless you make use of it in a manner to benefit yourselves, and credit to those around you.

I believe you children in the next twenty years will have many great and new opportunities to do new things, and to become leaders in new movements. Some of you may go to South America and help develop new nations – some may go to other foreign lands – some may remain right here in Kansas City and become its most powerful citizens. But whatever you do, wherever you go, may you never forget your responsibility to the first graduating class of this school is my sincere hope.

Another thing – wherever you may be, don't forget the habit of writing letters to each other – keep alive the friendships you have made in this fine class! Too, whenever you can come back and attend future graduating exercises, do so. Keep up your old friendships – they will mean more and more to you as you go through life.

Perhaps in future years some of you may be financially able to make lovely gifts to this school – a nice drinking fountain on its campus – a lovely statue on its grounds – beautiful pictures for its walls – things that will give happiness to the children who will follow you as students in this school.

Boys and girls – don't be afraid to work as you go through life. It is my honest belief that hard work is the most important thing that we learn at school. I have tried all my life to work hard – when I was in school I worked in the evenings and on Saturdays. During vacations in the summertime, I worked at any jobs I could get to do. The money I was able to earn sent me to school the following year, and gave me spending money, but

what was more important the work I did taught me that work is the most important thing in life, and that no one should ever be ashamed to do any honest work.

One summer, while I was still in school, I went to Utah and Montana and sold maps from door to door – slept in haystacks, or any place I could find at night – and if I didn't sell enough maps during the day I went without food but I learned how to do business, and I learned never to give up once I started to do something. I hope there will never be a child in this school who will give up or turn back, but will never fail to succeed in the things that they set out to do.

One year, I worked my way to Europe on a cattle ship. I went on a freight train from here to New York – taking care of the cattle on the train. All the way across the ocean I fed the cattle, and took care of them to get my passage! After I got to Europe, I rode a bicycle all over the various countries, learning as I went. Sometimes I went hungry because I did not earn enough money to buy food, but I never was hungry for learning, because I learned and learned as I went! I couldn't give up – I was a stranger in a strange land, and I didn't give up – that was a lesson I shall never forget.

When we first started to build the Country Club District, we had many discouragements, and it took a lot of years to get started, but I was loyal to my dream – I was enthusiastic – I felt responsible – and determined to make it a success. So, after years of hard work it began to grow. I dreamed of what I wanted it to be – and my dreams kept growing year by year – I planned for its future – I thought of the fine schools we would have – I dreamed of the graduating classes that would go out and work together after they had worked together through the years in our schools and had bade farewell to their classrooms and set out to accomplish things worthwhile in life – and many of my dreams have come true!

I want you to realize – you boys and girls – that you can accomplish more in life than a similar group of men or women who are older. You have your whole life before you. You have probably fifty years on an average in which to live and do things and you may be called upon to defend your country in war, or you may be called upon to explore uncivilized countries. Some of you may visit the North Pole, or the South Pole – some of you may do things in science unknown to the world today. But, always remember that honest, hard work, and absolutely unselfish loyalty in whatever cause you undertake, will make your lives a success.

I want you to be interested in music. I want you to learn to appreciate beautiful music – to love beautiful pictures – become fond of reading good books. I want you to appreciate beautiful buildings. In years to come, some of you may travel around the world, and in every city you visit there will be a great number of beautiful things to see. Away down in the interior of Africa, which seems like such a mysterious place to most of you, a year ago I went to a little Moorish town, and out under a palm tree on the desert I saw a group of children sitting on the sand listening to the words of their teacher. These children were all reciting aloud – all speaking at the same time – they did not have any books, but were merely repeating the things the teacher told them, and yet all were listening to what the teacher said, and their eyes were looking directly at the teacher – and you could see that these little children in ragged clothes – far from any large city, with no automobiles, no radio, no pianos, no toys, or any of the other things which every

one of you here in this room has enjoyed all your life – were trying to learn. Their eyes were full of wonder, and their hearts were yearning for information. Try to compare in your minds the advantages each of you has, and remember the things you have learned in this school – certainly each and every one of you should be able to accomplish a great deal more than these little Moorish children in far-off Africa.

Who knows? Possibly one of these days one or more of you may be missionaries to that country. Certainly any one of you with the splendid opportunities of home life and education could go there to teach them, and help relieve them of some of their misery, and thus bring much joy into their lives.

Even in this great country of ours, in our very large cities there are thousands and thousands of children who do not have enough good, nourishing food – thousands who do not have fine warm clothes – thousands who never get a chance to go to school and learn – thousands who do not have good homes, and many of them, no homes at all.

I want you children always to get into things. If there is a tug-of-war on the athletic field don't stand on the side and let the other fellow tug. Do your share, and enjoy it. If there is a parade going down the street, be enthusiastic about it – if there is a war, be a soldier in the ranks – or work hard and perhaps become an officer. If there is some big campaign to raise money for your church; a new school building, or some city improvements, get out and work for it – have your heart in it, and you will enjoy it.

Nothing in your future years will give you more happiness than to look back on the things you have helped to build or create. With your education you will be able to decide which are the things to work for, and which are the bad things. You must make up your mind yourself, what are the worthwhile things to do, and then throw yourself into them with all your heart and soul and be willing to work. I like to see the man or woman who is willing to give up personal pleasures – willing to work until tired out – willing to go without sleep – without food, and without social pleasures – if all this is necessary, to help make something a success, and some way or other I have a feeling that this has been, and will continue to be the spirit of the J. C. Nichols School.

Unfortunately, our school being so new you have not had a fine gymnasium; a swimming pool, or a well-equipped playground, but I know you are all proud of this school and love it. You have taken part in all school exercises. I know that your hearts beat fast when you raised the flag above this fine new building – I know you are proud of your teachers and their fine, efforts to teach you the things you should know – and I know you are proud of the record this school has already made, just the same as you take pride in looking forward to what it shall one day become.

We recognize that it is not the finest school building in Kansas City. Certainly it is not the largest. But you all love it just as much as if were the finest building, and largest school in the world – because it is yours. You have worked hard, and have become the first graduating class, you have been loyal, enthusiastic, and I am trying now to tell you that through your life you must continue to be loyal, enthusiastic and willing to work hard wherever you may go, or whatever you may do – even if you get discouraged sometimes (and you will) – whether you find yourselves in Africa, at the North Pole or the South Pole, or on the deserts of the west – I know that you will be doing your best to do your job and in the years to come, if you will do that I am sure that every father and

mother of every child in this room, or in Kansas City as a whole, will be proud of the boys and girls who tonight end their school work.

Like a sailor who sets out to sea, you are tonight setting out on new paths, going into new fields, but you cannot ever forget the lessons you have learned, and through the years will carry the memory of your class; of your principal; your teachers, and your parents and we will all share in whatever glory may come to you.

I am proud of every one of you. I consider it one of the greatest honors that has ever come to me, or can come to me in the future, that this fine school should be named for me. I feel that I have a deep responsibility to this school – I must be loyal to it – I want to be enthusiastic about it – I am very proud of it – and I know that I must accomplish many things in my life so that my name may be a credit to this school. I am honored, and at the same time very humble, and I promise you here this night that I shall never let our school down.

You and I are partners in the future good name of this school. I am sure you will continue to do your best, and I give you my word that I shall do mine so that in the years to come we can all be proud that we had a part in the building and the making of a new school, and we shall never forget this night when this school had the proud honor of graduating its first class in the year 1929.

Will it not be interesting in years to come when our city has grown and been built up around this school in all directions, and all the land which is now vacant is covered with homes – this school many times its present size with at least 1,000 students – thousands of graduates having passed through its doors, and many of them occupying prominent places in the business world – to remember this night when this small class became the beginning of an alumni organization and placed in it the responsibility of making a new tradition, and giving a glorious name to the work of this institution of which our city can be proud?

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN071

Arguably Jesse Clyde Nichols (1880-1950) was the single most influential individual to the development of metropolitan Kansas City. Moreover his work, ideas, and philosophy of city planning and development had far-reaching impact nationally – so much so that the Urban Land Institute has established the J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionary Urban Development to recognize a person or a person representing an institution whose career demonstrates a commitment to the highest standards of responsible development.

Nichols' objective was to "develop whole residential neighborhoods that would attract an element of people who desired a better way of life, a nicer place to live and would be willing to work in order to keep it better." The Company under Nichols and his son, Miller Nichols (1911-), undertook such ventures as rental housing, industrial parks, hotels, and shopping centers. Perhaps the most widely recognized Nichols Company developments are the Country Club District and the Country Club Plaza Shopping Center, reportedly the first shopping area in the United States planned to serve those arriving by automobile rather than trolley car.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) contains both personal and business files concerning J.C. Nichols' private and business life. Included are personal correspondence, family related material, and speeches and articles written by him. Business and financial files pertain to actions of the Company, including information about different developments and the securing of art objects; and printed materials produced by and about the Company.