



## Nelle Peters

December 11, 1884 – Oct. 7, 1974

### History of the "Poets District" and its Architect

The "Poets District" refers to this block west of the Country Club Plaza that is home to several apartment buildings named after prominent literary figures. The apartments in the district were constructed by builder and developer Charles E. Phillips and designed by Kansas City's only woman architect of that time – **Nelle E. Peters**.

Nelle Peters is a well-known name in Kansas City history. She is credited with designing nearly 1,000 buildings during her 60-year career. Nelle Elizabeth (Nichols) Peters was born in a sod house in Niagara, North Dakota in 1884. Due to her fondness for mathematics and her talent for sketching and drawing, her sister suggested she find work in an architect's office. She was hired in 1903 as a \$3-a-week drafts lady by a Sioux City architect who had made a bet with his partner about whether she could make it in the business. A week later she won a \$1-a-week raise.

After establishing her Kansas City practice, Peter's career flourished. "I started with plans for three little houses at \$15 apiece. I numbered the first one No. 25 so it wouldn't look as if I were a novice," she said. Because Peters worked in chauvinistic times, she, like many businesswomen of her day, chose a company name that concealed her gender – N. E. Peters, Architect.

In 1913, she formed a partnership with the Phillips Building Company owned by Charles E. Phillips. During this period, she designed dozens of apartments for Phillips, which included the Carlyle, Lowell, Mark Twain, Longfellow and the Rousseau and Cezanne, all located in the "Poets District" on the west side of the Country Club Plaza.

Her apartment designs were known for their attention to detail and ornate beauty. "I work everything over and over on the floor plans," she told a reporter in 1925. "I want each building to be as perfect, as economical and practical, as if I were building it for myself." Frequent use of terra-cotta ornamentation is a characteristic of her style.

Peters remained active until her retirement in 1965 after which she continued to accept commissions that she could complete without leaving her apartment. She died in 1974 at the age of 90 in a nursing home. There, among her belongings was a notebook that contained photographs and newspaper clippings of all of her buildings.

In recognition of her accomplishments, The Nelle E. Peters Thematic Historic District was established on August 27, 1989, ensuring historic landmark status for her design contributions to the "Poets District."

