

Embassy Gulf Service Center  
(Embassy Chevron)  
2200 P St., NW  
Washington  
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-664

HABS  
DC  
WASH  
600-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
EMBASSY GULF SERVICE CENTER  
(Embassy Chevron)

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- Location: 2200 P St., N.W., at the intersection of 22nd and P streets, Washington, D.C.
- Present Owner: Carl Lotto.
- Present Use: Filling station.
- Significance: The Neoclassical design of this filling station respects its location in the neighborhood of embassies and churches at a critical intersection of the city's urban grid and the Rock Creek & Potomac Parkway entrance at P Street. The lot on which it sits is under the jurisdiction of the Shipstead-Luce Act, so the architecture and setting responded to the requirements of this review process; the formality of the building is otherwise uncharacteristic for a service station.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1936-37.
2. Architect: Gulf Refining Company, Engineer and Construction Department, Pittsburgh.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Gulf Refining Company, which later became Gulf Oil Corporation. Lotto has owned this station since 1970. It became a Chevron station in the early 1980s. The previous owner was George Marsh (Interview).
4. Original plans and construction: "Adjacent to the Rock Creek & Potomac Parkway," planting plan, n.d.
5. Alterations and Additions: A 1973 renovation included the addition of new light fixtures, concrete deck, and pumps. The building was sandblasted at this time. According to the owner, the present-day canopies, tanks and pumps were installed ca. 1985.

B. Historical Context:

**Background on Filling Stations**

The filling station was a new twentieth-century building type created to supply automobiles with fuel. A few shops selling gasoline existed by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Gulf Refining Company built the first drive-in filling station in 1913. By 1929, gas was sold at 317,000 locations in the United States. This business, however, curtailed sharply during the Depression, causing station

owners to devise new strategies to bring in customers.<sup>1</sup>

As ownership of automobiles outpaced the number of outlets in the 1910s, demand for gasoline exceeded supply. Station owners no longer needed to project an image to attract customers, and shops took on a uniformly nondescript appearance. Early filling stations were often simple brick buildings or metal sheds.<sup>2</sup> In the late 1910s and early 1920s, prefabricated metal and glass stations became the preferred type because they could be moved from one location to another as roads went into and out of use.<sup>3</sup> The first chain of stations, launched by Standard Oil Corporation in 1914, included thirty-four identical box-shaped structures with uniform signage and colors.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1930s, increased competition for patrons again led gasoline distributors to market themselves. Stations began to offer amenities to customers, such as restrooms and better-trained personnel--often with skills in automobile maintenance--and the sale of auto-related merchandise, in an effort attract and maintain their patronage.<sup>5</sup> Architectural designs were employed by oil companies to promote their stations.<sup>6</sup>

Community controls and building regulations were factors that played a role in the form filling stations took.<sup>7</sup> Aesthetic requirements for commercial structures were especially stringent in the capital city. The Shipstead-Luce Act of 1930, for instance, dictated that development of property in the monumental core "should proceed along the lines of good order, good taste, and due regard to the public interests involved, and a reasonable degree of control should be exercised over the architecture of private or semi-public buildings adjacent to public buildings and grounds of major importance." The Commission of Fine Arts (CFA), set up in 1910 to advise the government on artistic matters, was given the responsibility of reviewing plans for construction in these areas. The Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway was specifically cited in this act as within the jurisdiction of these reviews.

The first classically styled filling stations appeared in the mid 1920s. Inspiration for station design came from Georgian, Tudor and Roman sources.<sup>8</sup> Daniel Vieyra,

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<sup>1</sup> "Planning Techniques For New and Remodelled Buildings: Service Stations I.," *Architectural Forum* 66.2 (1937): 86-95.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Anderson, *Check the Oil* (Lombard, IL: Wallace-Homestead Book Co., 1986), 120.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel I. Vieyra, *"Fill'er Up": An Architectural History of America's Gas Stations* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 7-9.

<sup>4</sup> John A. Jakle, "The American Gasoline Station, 1920 to 1970," *Journal of American Culture* 1 (Spring 1978): 521.

<sup>5</sup> "Planning Techniques For New and Remodelled Buildings," 86.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander G. Guth, "Small Buildings: The Automobile Service Station," *Architectural Forum* 45.1 (1926): 33.

<sup>7</sup> Vieyra, xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, 120.

author of "Fill'er Up": An Architectural History of America's Gas Stations, describes the 1930s as the era of "respectable designs." Stations built in this decade were often designed with a view toward the civic role that commercial buildings played within the community, and their appearance echoed the important civic buildings in the respective cities.<sup>9</sup> Embassy Gulf (now Embassy Chevron), with its longitudinal cross-plan and Doric temple front, exemplifies such a classical-style filling station. A clock set within the pediment of a filling station facade was a popular device used to make the association between these buildings and respectable civic structures and this motif is found in the front gable of Embassy Gulf.<sup>10</sup>

The use of historical styles for filling stations declined in the 1940s as Modern design for commercial structures gained acceptance in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Thereafter the standardized filling station--built of brick, stucco, glass and steel--became prevalent again.<sup>12</sup>

#### Site History

On January 15, 1936, H. M. Rogers, assistant district sales manager for Gulf Refining Company, addressed the issue of his company's plans for a filling station at this intersection in a letter to the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (NCP&PC). Rogers wrote:

With reference to the proposed acquisition by this company of Lots 800 and 802 in Square 48, and the anticipated development of part of Lot 800 at the intersection of 22nd and P streets N.W., as a service station site by this company, we hereby agree that upon consummation of purchase and necessary approval for service station permit that this company will dedicate in fee simple to the United States for park and parkway purposes all of Lot 802, being a strip approximately 17 x 300 feet lying immediately adjacent to the west line of Lot 800 and bordering Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. It is further understood that this company will cooperate with the governmental authorities in order to obtain acceptable architectural and landscaping plans properly related to the adjoining park property.<sup>13</sup>

John Nolen, Jr., director of planning for NCP&PC, responded to Gulf, confirming that the commission would not oppose the permit to erect a gas station on the property at P and 22nd streets provided that a 17' strip on the westerly side of the property be

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<sup>9</sup> Vieyra, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Vieyra, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Vieyra, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Vieyra, 51.

<sup>13</sup> H. M. Rogers, Assistant District Sales Manager, Gulf Refining Company to the National Capital Park & Planning Commission, 15 January 1936. RG328.

dedicated to the park system as a concession for their acquiescence.<sup>14</sup> The CFA approved the gas station location on the condition that it be "properly designed by an architect with due regard to the Rock Creek Parkway and the Presbyterian Church on the north side of P Street and if the design has the approval of the Commission of Fine Arts."<sup>15</sup> The Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia issued a permit to Gulf on the basis of NCP&PC and CFA approval.

### Landscape History

The NCP&PC and the CFA reviewed the landscape design for this lot in accordance with the agreement made with Gulf. On May 20, 1936, an architectural and landscape plan, including paving and plantings, was sent by Gulf to NCP&PC for advice on whether the scheme agreed with their ideas for the area. Gulf requested that they also take the matter up with the CFA.<sup>16</sup>

In June 1936, C. Marshall Finnan, superintendent of National Capital Parks (the regional National Park Service office), objected to the plan for the land adjoining park property proposed by Gulf. He wrote to Nolen:

This plan is not satisfactory because the choice of plant material is in many instances inappropriate . . . The 100 'assorted shrubs' under Item G on the plan seems to be a poorly chosen assortment. It is doubtful that some of the gardenesque flowering materials included would look appropriate against the woodland background of the park. It is even more doubtful that they would develop successfully in what I recall as a very shaded position next to these woods . . . I would suggest the most straightforward way of handling this problem would be consultation between the man who prepared this plan and one of the Park Service landscape architects.<sup>17</sup>

It seems that Nolen took his advice. In October, Nolen sent a memo to Finnan confirming that this collaboration had occurred. The memo read: "The Gulf Company agreed to follow such plan as Mr. Kirkpatrick would develop and to incorporate it in a contract supplementary to the gas station construction." Thus, planting plans were completed by the office of National Capital Parks for use by Gulf.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John Nolen, Jr., Director of Planning, National Capital Parks & Planning Commission, to Frederick Delano, Chairman, and Arno Cammerer, Executive Officer, 15 January 1936. RG328.

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of the Commission of Fine Arts, 31 January 1936. CFA.

<sup>16</sup> Gulf Oil Corporation to National Capital Parks & Planning Commission, 20 May 1936. RG328.

<sup>17</sup> C. Marshall Finnan, Superintendent, National Capital Parks, to John Nolen, Jr., Director of Planning, National Capital Parks & Planning Commission, 11 June 1936. RG328.

<sup>18</sup> John Nolen, Jr., Director of Planning, National Capital Parks & Planning Commission, to C. Marshall Finnan, Superintendent, National Capital Parks, 10 October 1936. RG328.

On January 11, 1937, Nolen wrote to E. G. Kaltenbach of Gulf Refining Company to remind him of the agreement Gulf had made with NCP&PC to carry out this planting plan, and do certain work on the strip of property deeded for park purposes. A note of concern is evident in Nolen's letter: "Since I have had no acknowledgment of my letter and note that the station is being rapidly completed, I am writing to make sure that you have not overlooked this arrangement."<sup>19</sup>

While Gulf worked closely with the Park Service, NCP&PC, and the CFA to secure a permit to build on this lot--which concerned these groups because of the property's proximity to the parkway--it is unclear whether their relationship continued once Gulf was granted a permit. The landscape as originally executed does not survive, so it is impossible to ascertain whether or not the planting plans drawn up by the National Capital Parks office were used.

### Design History

The classical architecture of Washington is evoked in the design of the Embassy Gulf Service Center at 22nd and P streets, N.W. Vieyra identifies this station as, "One of several identical stations built in 1936 in harmony with federal Neoclassical architecture as well as embassies and ecclesiastical structures. . . ." <sup>20</sup> If there were five other identical Gulf stations in Washington, as he suggests, this one was not uniquely designed for this site, adjacent to the parkway. This station is, however, the only one of its kind in the city today, and its form complements not only Washington's formal architecture in general, but specifically the Presbyterian Church of the Pilgrims across the street.

Prepared by:  
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Summer 1992

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Embassy Gulf is an outstanding example of a Neoclassical-style filling station of the 1930s. Arranged on a longitudinal cross plan, the building is faced with Alabama limestone and features a temple-front portico *in antis* with Doric columns and large, arcuated windows. Though the station has modern fuel pumps, its overall form and materials retain their historic integrity.

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<sup>19</sup> John Nolen, Jr., Director of Planning, National Capital Parks & Planning Commission, to E.G. Kaltenbach, Gulf Refining Company, 11 January 1937. RG328.

<sup>20</sup> Vieyra, 82. None of these other stations survive, and this is the only reference to their having ever existed.

2. Condition of the fabric: Excellent, although the exterior was sandblasted.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: One-story, 72' long x 28' wide; cross-arm is 37' wide.
2. Foundations: Wood pilings were used because the soil is unusually moist due to proximity to Rock Creek.
3. Wall construction: Cut stone facing.
4. Structural system, framing: Load-bearing brick.
5. Lighting: Contemporary wall-mounted light fixtures with globes are located between the garage bays and at the corners of each main facade of the cross arms.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Two steel doors to restrooms, and two glazed doors to the office--twelve lights each--are located at the north end of the building; on the north/front gable end and east wall. On the long east facade, heavy wood garage doors to the three service bays are glazed with eighteen lights; each bay is topped by two decorative semicircular fanlights like those over the windows on the front facade. A four-light pedestrian door is located in the center of the central garage-door bay. The west facade has matching doors, but these are inoperable. At one time cars being serviced were driven through the bays.
  - b. Windows: There are two multi-light display windows on the front/north facade, topped by decorative semicircular fanlights: twelve lights on the left side of the door; six lights on the one to the right. The latter is equipped with a cash drawer and microphone used by the night attendant. These windows are not original to the building but they are in keeping with its spirit. Three windows on the rear wall of service-bay section may be original.
7. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: Cross-gable, slate-covered roof with copper flashing.
  - b. Cornice: Limestone entablature.

8. Decorative features: A clock is in the pediment of the north/front facade; it has a decorative surround with swags extending outward to the left and right.

C. Description of Interior:

1. First floor plan: An office occupies the front of the building, with a large desk at the west end. There is a storage room behind the office and in the center space of the building. Restrooms flank the storage area. Three open bays at the rear of the block are for servicing automobiles.
2. Stairways: According to the owner, metal stairs to an attic were installed in the mid 1970s.
3. Flooring: Concrete.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The office walls are covered with wood panels; the ceiling is dropped asbestos tile with plastic sheathing over fluorescent lights. The brick walls in the service and storage areas are painted.
5. Doorways and doors: Plain surrounds between office and storage space.
6. Lighting fixtures: None of the fixtures are original. Fluorescent overhead lighting has been installed.

D. Site:

1. General Setting: This lot (20' deep x 105' wide) adjacent to P Street Bridge and the access ramp to Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway was formerly occupied by the Washington Hunt Club. Located on the south side of P Street, the station now overlooks a small park (Reservation No. 57D) containing a monument (1964) to Taras Shevchenko, a nineteenth-century Ukrainian poet. Beyond this looms the Presbyterian Church of the Pilgrims.
2. Outbuildings: A small structure built in 1974 to house soft-drink machines is sympathetic to the main building in the use of materials.
3. Landscaping, enclosures: Concrete forecourt with bushes and grass strips at front and east parking. Concrete-block retaining wall runs along west side of lot, and below it a narrow grass lot ends at the curb.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Collections:

Commission of Fine Arts, Washington, D.C.

Record Group 328, National Capital Planning Commission, Planning files, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

B. Primary and unpublished sources:

Finnan, C. Marshall, Superintendent, National Capital Parks, to John Nolen, Jr., Director of Planning, National Capital Parks & Planning Commission. 11 June 1936. RG328.

Gulf Oil Corporation to National Capital Parks & Planning Commission. 20 May 1936. RG328.

Lotto, Carl, owner. Interview by Amy Ross. 18 August 1992. Washington, D.C.

Minutes of the Commission of Fine Arts, 31 January 1936. CFA.

Nolen, John, Jr., Director of Planning, National Capital Parks & Planning Commission, to C. Marshall Finnan, Superintendent, National Capital Parks. 10 October 1936. RG328.

Nolen, John, Jr., Director of Planning, National Capital Parks & Planning Commission, to E. G. Kaltenbach, Gulf Refining Company. 11 January 1937. RG328.

Nolen, John, Jr., Director of Planning, National Capital Parks & Planning Commission, to Frederick Delano, Chairman, and Arno Cammerer, Executive Officer. 15 January 1936. RG328.

Rogers, H. M., Assistant District Sales Manager, Gulf Refining Company to the National Capital Park & Planning Commission. 15 January 1936. RG328.

C. Secondary Sources:

Anderson, Scott. Check the Oil. Lombard, Ill.: Wallace-Homestead Book Co., 1986.

Guth, Alexander G. "Small Buildings: The Automobile Service Station." Architectural Forum 45.1 (1926): 33-56.

Jakle, John A. "The American Gasoline Station, 1920 to 1970." Journal of American Culture 1 (Spring 1978): 520-42.

"Planning Techniques For New and Remodelled Buildings: Service Stations 1." Architectural Forum 66.2 (1937): 86-95.

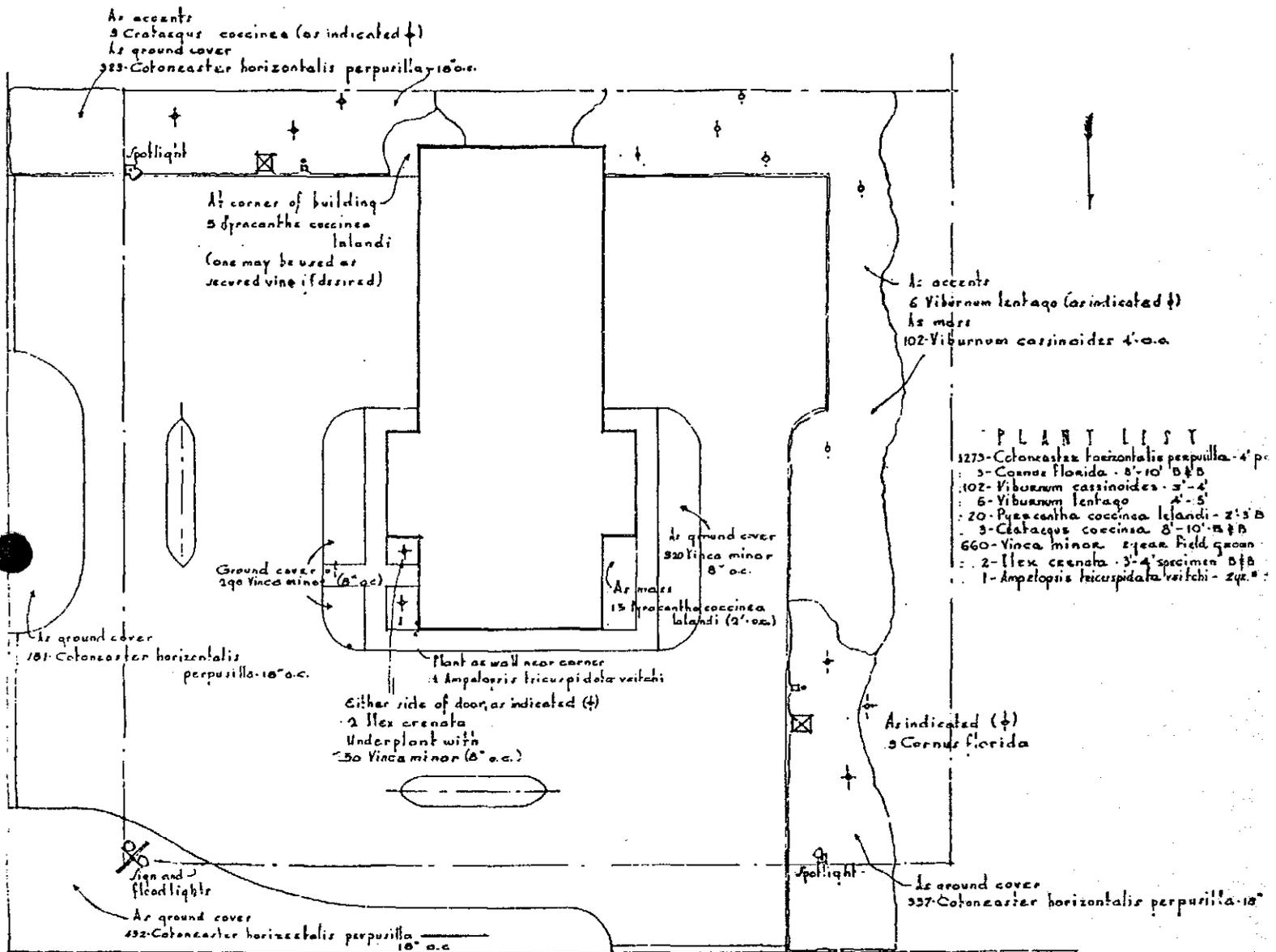
"Preserving a Vintage Service Station." Orange Disc 21.7 (1974): 30-32.

Vieyra, Daniel I. "Fill'er Up": An Architectural History of America's Gas Stations.  
New York: Macmillan, 1979.

#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway was undertaken as a two-year pilot project to help establish standards and guidelines for recording the structures and landscape features of park roads and parkways. This project was a joint effort of the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a combined division of the National Park Service, Robert Kapsch, chief. The project was sponsored by the Park Roads and Bridges Program of the National Park Service, John Gingles, deputy chief, Engineering and Safety Services Division. The project supervisor was Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian.

The Washington-based summer 1992 documentation team was headed by landscape architect Robert Harvey (Iowa State University-Department of Landscape Architecture) who served as field supervisor; the landscape architects were Deborah Warshaw (University of Virginia) and Dorota Pape-Siliwonczuk (US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Palaces and Gardens Restoration); the architects were Evan Miller (University of Colorado-Boulder), Steven Nose (University of Maryland), and Tony Arcaro (Catholic University). The historians were Tim Davis (University of Texas) and Amy Ross (University of Virginia). Jack E. Boucher made the large-format photographs; Air Survey Corporation of Sterling, Virginia, produced the aerial photography and digital mapping from which the site-plan delineations were made.



National Capital Parks, "Gulf Oil Corporation Adjacent to Rock Creek & Potomac Parkway," 22nd & P Streets. Original is 1" = 10'. No date. 844/80553 (91.3-212) National Archives.