

District Deco: Then & Again

By Jerry A. McCoy

Although today you would never know it, there once existed, on the west side of Georgia Avenue just south of Eastern Avenue, a remarkable example of commercial Art Deco roadside architecture that provided service to customers for over half a century—the 1937 Gulf Oil Company gas station.



Photo courtesy of Silver Spring Historical Society

Originally referred to as a “branch station,” this structure quickly became a landmark as it was the first gas station that motorists traveling south on Georgia Avenue (Route 29) would encounter as they crossed from Maryland into the District of Columbia. What made this structure remarkable was its unique Zig-Zag Moderne architectural design, featuring multi-colored, polychromed terra-cotta tiles. This design element featured geometric foliage and alternating chevron embellishments.

Running along the uppermost elevation of the building (located under the prominent neon GULF sign as seen in this 1947 *District Deco: Then* image) was a continuous band of chevrons polychromed in an alternating blue and yellow pattern. Over the windows, doors, and the three service bays (conveniently labeled WASHING, TIRES, and LUBRICATION in blue letters) were cream-colored medallions flanked by blue foliage, with each arrangement

separated by differently rendered yellow foliage.

The circular GULF sign, rendered in navy blue letters on an orange background, can be seen just behind the light pole. Overhead are power lines for the Capital Transit streetcars, the terminus of the Georgia Avenue line being just around the corner on Eastern Avenue. In the distance is the Art Deco inspired steeple of the 1938 Northminster Presbyterian Church on nearby Alaska Avenue, NW.

You might wonder how these color schemes can be ascertained from a black and white snapshot. Located in Bedford, PA is the nationally known Dunkle's Gulf, a one service bay version of the Georgia Avenue station, constructed in 1933. Aficionados of roadside architecture have long journeyed to Bedford to marvel at this Art Deco jewel, perhaps one of the last remaining operating gas stations of this design in the United States. Author/photographer John Baeder wrote eloquently of Dunkle's in his landmark paean to roadside architecture, *Gas, Food and Lodging: A Postcard Odyssey, Through the Great American Roadside* (Abbeville Press, New York, 1982), which illustrates the station in color.

By 1937 when the Georgia Avenue station was fully opened for business, Gulf Oil had approximately 26 stations in the District. Business notices appearing in the *Washington Post* during the 1930s mention other Gulf stations in the District featuring polychromed tiles. Designed by P.R.L. Hogner, Gulf's Pittsburgh-based chief architect, Hogner oversaw the plans for the 1936 Embassy Gulf station, located at 22nd and P streets NW. This station, designed in the Neoclassical style to mimic the dignity and stature of courthouses, libraries, and banks, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The first Gulf station was built in Pittsburgh in 1913. Prior to that, gas pumps, which had been around since only 1905, were installed in every conceivable location. They could be found at lumber yards, feed stores, parking lots, fruit stands, and restaurants. Little attempt was made to protectively site pumps or design separate structures that would attract motorists and provide them with facilities and amenities.

Little else is known about the 1937 Gulf station. In a June 19, 1980 front page *Washington Post* article, station owner Art Mitchell lamented the fact that he would probably lose customers when a Dis-

trict gas tax increase would go into effect on August 1st. An Amoco station, located in Silver Spring just across Georgia Avenue (because of the diagonal orientation of Eastern Avenue), would be able to charge four-to-eight cents a gallon less than what he could charge.

Sometime around 1990 the Gulf station closed and was demolished. In 1996 developer Douglas Jemal opened Jemal's Mini Mall on the site. This rather bland brick, gabled structure, seen in the *District Deco: Again* image, is the first thing motorists encounter on this prominent corner location. Comprising seven businesses, customers can now obtain catering, pharmaceuticals, industrial supplies, deli food, and banking services where gas, tires, oil, and lubes were proffered for over five decades.



Photo: Jerry A. McCoy

If you have any photographs or memorabilia of the Georgia Avenue Gulf station (or other stations of this design in the Washington metropolitan area) or have contact information for its owner, Art Mitchell, please contact Jerry A. McCoy at sshistory@yahoo.com, phone 301.565.2519, or write the Silver Spring Historical Society, PO Box 1160, Silver Spring, MD 20910-1160. Our web site is www.sshistory.org. Future historians will thank you!