PITTSBURGH'S
MONUMENTS TO MOToring
ATLANTIC'S FABULOUS STATIONS

BY KEITH A. SCULLE
PETROLEUM RETAILING took a major step forward between 1915 and 1919 when the Atlantic Refining Company began building and managing its own service stations. Atlantic, which operated in Pennsylvania and Delaware, was not the first petroleum company to sell products at retail locations. By early in the 20th century, several oil companies in the infamous Standard Oil trust were running retail operations. Atlantic, in fact, was one of those companies; it became independent after the trust’s dissolution in 1911.

But Atlantic’s strategy was unique, for it built stations of considerable aesthetic merit. The testing ground for Atlantic’s elegant stations was Pittsburgh, and the company ultimately built more of them there than anywhere else. Unfortunately, none of the buildings survive.

Gasoline retailing evolved rapidly in the last decades of the 19th century, when hardware stores and general stores sold gasoline as an adjunct to their primary business. Slow service, and supplies fouled by careless storage, created consumer demand for a place dedicated to petroleum sales. Many automobile owners stored petroleum at home, so hazards associated with storing the sloppy, smelly, and combustible material also drove demand for retail gasoline stations.

The first station opened in 1905. The small Automobile Gasoline Company in St. Louis sold fuel from an improvised combination of tanks, garden hose, and faucet. The next station was opened in 1907 by Standard Oil of California. Both were jerry-built combinations of gasoline tanks, some above-ground on racks and others below-ground, with sheds for offices and unpaved driveways.

This utilitarian strain persisted through the first networks of stations. The Standard Gas Company of Cleveland began opening stations of concrete block with pyramid roofs in 1913. The same year in Pittsburgh, Gulf Refining Company opened what may have been the first architect-designed service station on Baum Boulevard at St. Clair Street in the East Liberty section of the city. In 1914, Shell Oil began building pre-fabricated stations with a flat roof surmounting an office of glass-paneled “factory sash” and offering customers a canopy in front of the gasoline pumps. But after a decade of advancements, station designs were still informal, if not unsightly. National Petroleum News, the era’s leading petroleum trade journal, described the ungainly appearance of the burgeoning stations: “Scattered throughout most of the larger cities of the United States ... are rising small brick or tin buildings, always just one story high, and always with an extending roof on either one or two sides. Immense, generally glaring signs, bear the inscription, ‘Gasoline, 14 cents today,’ or something similar.”

Pressure began mounting to make stations better looking. The first documented case occurred in St. Louis, where in 1914, the St. Louis Oil Company built a brick station with a tiled gable end roof. The company opened others, each in a different style, but all with the aim of distinguishing the business through architecture enhanced by spotless maintenance. As a 1915 trade article explained, the rationale was “to convince a now skeptical general public that gasoline and oil are clean and can be handled from as clean surroundings as any commodity.”

Pittsburgh was but one of many cities where gasoline stations wallowed in independent distributors’ indifferent service, if not blight. Pittsburgh also had the distinction of being a big Atlantic market plagued by dealers’ poor credit. With its focus on improving finances, the company found it impossible to address complaints such as poor...
EARLY STATIONS WERE INFORMAL AND OFFERED LITTLE MORE THAN FUEL.
quality gasoline due to dirty storage tanks or gasoline blended with kerosene. But though functional abuses were Atlantic's chief concerns, aesthetics became the company's primary solution — what better way to signify the high quality of service to the approaching motorist than by ennobling the humble facility with elegant architecture?

Stimulating interest in the products being sold by making a retail location especially attractive was an old tradition in architecture; one theorist coined the term “programmatic architecture.” The practice was well-suited to America's emerging culture of consumption; the super-abundance of goods and services threatened to glut the marketplace and decrease profits unless producers stimulated demand. Advertising was the chief mechanism; architecture was complementary.

Atlantic had headquarters in Pittsburgh, so the firm was privy to the attempts by civic reformers to make the city's landscape, long dominated by industrial plants, more attractive. (The company also had a headquarters in Philadelphia.) By the early-20th century, Pittsburgh was stigmatized as one of the nation's smelliest cities. Needing two shirts to complete a Pittsburgh day was well-documented, and reformers reported that in 1913, $10 million was spent cleaning up the effects of smoke. A smoke abatement ordinance the following year aimed at the principal emitters — factories and railroad locomotives. By 1916, the Smoke and Dust Abatement League had absolved Pittsburgh of the epithet “Smoke City,” but within months was once again calling for strengthening the smoke abatement ordinance because World War I had increased industrial activity.

Pittsburgh's civic ethos to constrain industrialism's adverse affects could hardly have escaped calculations at Atlantic Refining. Although it had been slow in developing independent policies after the Standard Oil breakup, Atlantic moved rather briskly to add a network of its own service stations to those run by independent dealers carrying its products in the city. The elaborate marketing offensive of today's oil companies, including advertising as well as company-owned and -leased service stations, was all new to the former Standard Oil members. It was perhaps especially puzzling to Atlantic, whose principal role before 1911 had been refining. Dependence on Standard had also left Atlantic bereft of the capital necessary for building stations.

John Wesley Van Dyke, the company's chief executive officer, embarked on a program to make Atlantic a fully integrated oil company. Having earned a reputation as an innovator who had
developed various manufacturing, transportation, and cost-saving measures, Van Dyke was alert to the service station as a new marketing means. As part of a general marketing study in 1912 or 1913, Van Dyke had a company representative conduct an on-site survey of stations throughout Atlantic’s territory. It verified the problems mentioned above.10

Van Dyke was intrigued by the success of the Pierce Oil Company, a member of the former Standard Oil trust in St. Louis. Pierce was garnering attention by opening architecturally attractive stations, which the city’s very competitive retail petroleum market necessitated.11

Atlantic, however, found little worth emulating in arteries known in those days as “automobile row” for its many auto dealerships. (Baum Boulevard, meanwhile, gained added significance that year for becoming part of the new transcontinental Lincoln Highway.)13 An architect was commissioned to design the corner station. Previous design concerns were largely limited to how the station was to function—not how it looked. Simple functionalism would eventually give way to harmonized form and function under the aegis of architects.

According to a company memorandum dated 1935, a “Mr. Ablett,” an otherwise unidentified man, recommended that Joseph F. Kuntz of W. G. Wilkens Company, a Pittsburgh architectural firm, be invited to propose the coveted design.14 Why Kuntz? That cannot be answered with certainty. No other Pittsburgh designers are on record as having been approached.

As was later true with many designs for roadside buildings, a workaday designer eager to take on a new challenge landed the job. Little is known about Kuntz or the Wilkens firm, other than that their work for Atlantic was perhaps their most memorable.15 In 1916, the Wilkens firm designed Atlantic’s new office building at Duquesne Way Corner, 12 stories tall with a facade of face brick and “ornamental terra cotta” for an estimated $200,000. The entree to this lucrative commission may well have

Atlantic began by picking a site in Pittsburgh with considerable traffic. In 1913, the company bought a lot on Baum Boulevard at Melrose Avenue, one of the city’s busiest traffic

![Atlantic Gasoline Station](image_url)
been Atlantic’s satisfaction with Kuntz’s smaller job on the Baum-and-Melrose station completed the year before.

Beaux Arts classicism was architecturally fashionable at the time. Emblematic of the turn-of-the-century values, Beaux Arts design in America celebrated the belief in America’s moral and intellectual supremacy by drawing on motifs from the classical past. A sensitivity that relished the visual in ornament, decoration, scale, and proportion, the Beaux Arts synchronized with the “City Beautiful” movement.16 Cities were accordingly grand tableaux in which individual edifices were designed for broad streets of grand axes unifying an urban ensemble.

Kuntz designed in the Beaux Arts idiom for his Atlantic patrons. Freely interpreted classical allusions festooned Kuntz’s work — on the Baum Boulevard stations, and subsequent ones. The white walls and green barrel-vault roof tiles of the Baum station mimicked contemporary monuments of the City Beautiful movement. As Daniel Vieyra, the first architectural historian to write about these stations, correctly asserted, they aimed to confer respectability on Atlantic’s marketing initiatives.17 These were to be more than sources of private income: they would be civic assets.

The Baum Boulevard station was remarkable. Its cost, including the prime lot it occupied, was a pricey $52,000.18 Perhaps motivated by the considerable effort and expense put into the project, Atlantic felt justified in calling it “the first service station in the east,” although several earlier mentioned examples contradict this bit of hyperbolic publicity.19

The finished building was clad in glazed terra cotta obtained from one of the country’s largest terra cotta manufacturers in New York.20 William J. Patterson, Atlantic’s sales manager for the western district, explained that brick, stucco, and frame service stations seemed to absorb light, whereas terra cotta reflected it brightly.21 Surely for Kuntz, who was designing in the Beaux Arts idiom which employed classical motifs, terra cotta’s highly plastic properties...
World Industry Looks to Pittsburgh

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also permitted a virtually unlimited display of details. Easy to clean, terra cotta may also have been considered especially serviceable in Pittsburgh’s sooty environment.

Wide driveways around all sides of the station building performed a two-fold task. Atlantic boasted that its Baum Boulevard station could refuel 10 to 12 autos simultaneously. Here was speedy service promised to Pittsburgh’s drivers disgruntled with lethargic attention at ordinary stations. Set back deeply from the curb line and surrounded by the spatial void of the driveways, the building really stood out. The result was like raising Atlantic’s premiere monument to motoring on a pedestal.

Other touches clinched the image of refinement that Atlantic hoped would place it above its competitors. Signboards of terra cotta and raised lettering set along the back of the lot helped define the ensemble of station-building and driveways inserted into an essentially 19th-century urban landscape. With cleanliness imperative, exterior and interior terra cotta was regularly scrubbed and copper oil and water cans were burnished. Mahogany office furniture and woodwork distanced Atlantic’s first station from the usually grubby competitors. Attendants in gray uniforms (with Atlantic’s monogram on the breast), gray caps, and black puttees stood waiting to serve approaching motorists.23

**While Kuntz’s designs** arrest attention today for their grand gestures, it was the display of engineering virtuosity that held sway at the time. Atlantic willingly noted that Kuntz collaborated with electrical engineers who created alternatives before selecting the optimum solution for a complex set of requirements. Atlantic’s William J. Patterson explained:

Those stations that were well enough lighted to attract attention did it by means of high power lamps set out in the open where they blinded the motorist as he tried to get an impression of the place rather than showed off its beauties. When the car drove in it was an even chance it would be in a position where it would be between the light and the attendant, who would be working in partial darkness.

We found also that, in lighting a station where gasoline, which is generally believed to be a dangerous liquid, is handled, there was a psychological feature that must be considered. The public has been brought up to believe that all lights should be kept as far away as possible from points where gasoline is handled. Even though it knows full well that there is no danger of the ignition of gasoline vapors from an electric lamp unless the bulb is broken, it is likely that the use of many high power lights around many stations, set out in the open as they are in most cases, sometimes awaken an anxious feeling in the mind of the motorist who is having his car filled in their glare. If you remove those lights from his sight, even tho they are just as close to the gasoline pumps as tho they were out in then open, that feeling of anxiety is not awakened.24

Irrationality was at play in the consumer’s mind here, just as it would be in the assumption that a good-looking station meant good service or good products. The final arrangement of lights concealed in a trough under each building’s cornice managed to hide the fixtures from view, yet still wash the building in light. The green tile
roof was unlighted in the initial design, but Atlantic was dissatisfied with the results after dark. Lights were then re-arranged out of view beneath the cornice, raking upward along the roof’s pitch.24

The Baum Boulevard station was first advertised in the *Pittsburgh Post* on July 3, 1915; the ad noted its day and night service, 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily.25 The station quickly exceeded Atlantic’s expectations: drawn by its novelty, motorists bought 3,000 gallons of gasoline daily. The resulting favorable publicity even galvanized Atlantic’s other dealers, who instead of switching to other suppliers as Atlantic feared, improved their services and consequently their gallonage from Atlantic.26

With the success of the prototype, Atlantic pushed its Pittsburgh service station campaign to completion within four years. Kuntz designed five more stations, four of them on eastern approaches to the city. All were sheathed in terra cotta, but each station was designed to the peculiarities of its site. They were probably built in the following sequence: Wilkinsburg (1916), Friendship (1916), Downtown (1916), South Hills (1917), and East Liberty (1919).27

The individualization of each design for its site is well-documented in several cases. Wilkinsburg, a rapidly developing borough astride the new trans-continental Lincoln Highway, had signboards reaching out on either side as if to embrace approaching customers.28 The Downtown Atlantic station, in a tighter setting, had to also serve its below-grade Chatham Street side. The station was made with two levels; Atlantic encouraged truckers to use the lower level, which had stairways to the station above.29 In the more residential South Hills, the station was mostly a spacious driveway and wall training the approaching motorists’ attention on a tiny station building at one end of the ensemble.30 East Liberty received the last of Pittsburgh’s terra cotta service stations. It cost $21,750, a huge sum then and equivalent to a quarter-million dollars today. According to a description in *National Petroleum News*, its garden wall and landscaping were mobilized to “hide from the view of the motorist-customer the more prosaic and sometimes unlovely buildings of an earlier age that stand nearby.”31 Because it too was on the forward-looking Lincoln Highway, the East
There is an American city with a rich history of Firsts.

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Liberty site appears to have been a potential embarrassment to Atlantic's pretensions.

By the time the East Liberty facility opened, Atlantic's objectives for its service station program had been achieved. Although 21 other company-supplied stations served motorists in Pittsburgh, the terra cotta examples functioned like corporate flags. They, along with several similar stations in Lancaster, Wilkes Barre, and Philadelphia, garnered praise in both the petroleum trade and municipal government circles. And some suppliers of materials for the stations advertised through association, implying their own high quality by referencing the stations in their advertisements.

Gulf Refining Company's decidedly innovative stations, which emphasized function over looks, may have spurred Atlantic to its heights; but Gulf was a silent contributor at best, for neither do Atlantic's records mention the rivalry, nor did the trade literature praise Gulf's policy as it did Atlantic's. Perhaps Atlantic's aim to replace the negative image of gasoline stations and to upgrade services stimulated the better reputation. Gulf began slowly incorporating aesthetic considerations in its search for a standard station style, drawing on the architectural training of C. A. Petersen, who was hired originally as cartographic draftsman. In early 1919, Gulf paid $56,000 ($600,000 today) for a lot in Pittsburgh at the busy intersection of Liberty Avenue and Water Street. There, on December 1, 1919, Gulf opened the fifth station in its Pittsburgh chain, its curved facade with columns and cornice embodying a grace absent in the company's previous stations.

By the close of the 1910s, petroleum marketers came to accept well-designed service stations as a requirement. Atlantic's stunningly successful experiments had contributed to that assumption, one which had been widely challenged only a few years earlier.

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THE ATLANTIC ON FRIENDSHIP AVENUE OCCUPIED A TINY TRAFFIC ISLAND. MUCH GRANDER WAS THE EAST LIBERTY STATION, BELOW OPPOSITE, TODAY THE SITE OF A MCDONALD'S AND A SHOPPING PLAZA.

The author thanks Martin Aurand, Carnegie Mellon University Architecture Archives; Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh; Sarah B. Clark, Staten Island Historical Library; Dominic La Cava, Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh; Lorri Maloney-Roberts, ARCO Photographic Collection, Los Angeles; Edna W. Paulson, Library, American Petroleum Institute, Washington, D.C.; and Douglas A. Yorke, Jr.

NOTES
1Photographs of some stations in this article (but not business correspondence or architectural records) survive in the Atlantic Richfield Company (hereinafter cited as ARCO) archives, Los Angeles, as per a letter to the author from Lorri Maloney-Roberts, manager, ARCO Photography Collection, Nov. 4, 1994.
4"What's Required to Operate a Filling Station," National Petroleum News (Sept. 1914), 34.
5"Quite The Niftiest Thing in All St. Louis," National Petroleum News (Oct. 1914), 56.
13Butko, 273; Pittsburgh Post, May 23, 1915, 2.
14McLean and Haigh, 269.

continued on page 168
ATLANTIC'S SIX MONUMENTS TO MOTORING IN PITTSBURGH

SHADYSIDE: Baum Boulevard at Melwood Street

WILKINSBURG: Penn Avenue at Pennwood

FRIENDSHIP: Friendship Avenue at Edmond Street

DOWNTOWN: Grant (later Bigelow) Boulevard at Chatham Street

SOUTH HILLS: Brownsville Road at Arlington Avenue

EAST LIBERTY: Penn Avenue at Station Street
"Neither manuscripts nor drawings survive from the W. G. Wilkens Company, according to eminent Pittsburgh architectural historians, Walter C. Kidney (interview with the author, Mar. 31, 1994) and Martin Aurand (interview with the author, Mar. 31, 1994).


For a discussion of Beaux Arts classicism as high-style material culture, see The American Renaissance: 1876-1917 (Pantheon Books, 1979).


"McLean and Haigh, 269.

"Bingham Company, 8.

"Information about the Staten Island terra cotta maker (Atlantic Terra Cotta Company) being Kunz's supplier is found with the photograph of Atlantic's South Hills station on deposit at the American Petroleum Institute. For a history of the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company, see Charles L. Sachs, Made on Staten Island: Agriculture, Industry, and Suburban Living in the City (Staten Island Historical Society, 1988).


McLean and Haigh, 269.


Ibid., 19.

Ibid., 20.

Pittsburgh Post, July 3, 1915, 14.

McLean and Haigh, 269; Bingham Company, 8.


Despite the building moratorium during World War I, the South Hills station was complete by August 1917, the acquisition of its lot and building materials probably complete before scarcity set in. Although the lot for the East Liberty station was bought in 1916 and the construction contract was arranged in early 1918, the station was not built until after World War I. See McLean and Haigh, 269.

"For example, see: Pittsburgh Post, May 2, 1916, 1; June 5, 1916, 9; June 4, 1917, sec. 2, 5.


"For example, see: Pittsburgh Post, Mar. 19, 1916, 8; Mar. 26, 1916, sec. 4, 8.


"For example, see an advertisement for Ceresi Waterproofing Co., American Carpenter and Builder (Nov. 1915), 130; advertisement, Metal Hose & Tubing Co., National Petroleum News (Sept. 17, 1945).

"Regarding C. A. Petersen, see Keith A. Scalle, "C. A. Petersen: Pioneer Gas Station Architect," Historic Illinois, 2:1 (June 1979), 11-13. Gulf's purchase of the lot at Liberty Avenue and Water Street was reported in the Pittsburgh Post, Feb. 20, 1919, 14. During Gulf's week-long grand opening at Liberty Avenue and Water Street, free motor oil was offered to every motorists buying five or more gallons of gasoline. See Pittsburgh Post, Nov. 30, 1919, sec. 6, 10; Dec. 1, 1919, 10; Dec. 2, 1919, 20; Dec. 3, 1919, 10; Dec. 5, 1919, 19; and Dec. 6, 1919, 4.


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