

# UP FRONT



## ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

### Gas Stations, Part I

We complain about gasoline prices and yet many of us still fondly recall jingles from brands popular when uniformed attendants washed the windshield and pumped our gas.

The stations that sold these old brands are rapidly dwindling, but a surprising variety remain in Western Pennsylvania as testament to when gas station architecture was a potent marketing tool and a symbol of mobility. We look back on these buildings nostalgically while historians discuss the fact that each gas

station was carefully designed by either an architect, the company president, or the owner.

The earliest stations were simply attached to carriage houses, blacksmith shops, and general stores—places people regularly visited for supplies and services. The Coolspring General Store opened in 1904 in the small town of that name in Jefferson County. They began selling gasoline from cans filled from a larger tank and probably later from a pump. Although no longer a



Coolspring General Store in Jefferson County still has its Gulf Oil sign out front. All photos Lu Donnelly.



filling station, the store still has a Gulf Oil sign from the 1960s out front.

Gulf Oil managers realized that informal sales outlets blocked customers from entering a store if cars were parked in front for service, so they commissioned architect J.H. Giesey to design a station in 1913 specifically to

dispense “Good Gulf Gasoline” from mechanical pumps on Pittsburgh’s Baum Boulevard. Drive-in stations solved the parking problem and were a step beyond the curbside pumps that allowed cars to simply stop along the road for a fill-up. The curbside variant proved unworkable because of the

resulting long lines and congested roadways.

The former Centerville Atlantic Gas Station on the old National Road (U.S. 40) in Washington County is from the drive-in era, perhaps 1920. Those who study roadside architecture might label this an “artistic station” because of decorative elements like



Centerville Atlantic Gas Station near U.S. 40 in Washington County.



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This Ashland Station is located in Mercer County.



the flared tile roof and brackets to blend with its residential neighbors.

Throughout the 1920s and '30s, gas station design strove to blend into residential neighborhoods, especially upper middle class areas, as that was where consumers wealthy enough to regularly own and operate automobiles lived. At that time, expanding suburbs like Mt. Lebanon rapidly filled with Revival-style houses from Tudor to Spanish

Revivals. Two local stations reflect this era: the Ashland Station in Mercer County and the Art Deco Dunkle's Gulf Service Station in Bedford. The architect of the Ashland station is unknown, but it is welcoming and home-like, with a Bungalow-style front overhang where gas happens to be dispensed.

Dunkle's was designed in 1933 by Cincinnati-born architect Edward Joseph Weber (1877-1968) who trained in Boston and attended the prestigious *Ecole des Beaux*

*Arts* in Paris from 1903 to 1905. Weber moved to Pittsburgh where he designed many Roman Catholic ecclesiastical buildings. A year before the Dunkle's station, he designed Pittsburgh's Art Deco Mifflin School (1932, for Link, Weber, and Bowers. 1290 Mifflin Road) and later worked as an artistic designer for the Pittsburgh Board of Education. Bedford's small station—with a varied roofline, geometric patterns, bright colors, and cream-colored terra-cotta tile—became a



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prototype for other Gulf stations in the 1930s. This Art Deco beauty was designed to attract attention along the busy Lincoln Highway/U.S. 30. The highway eventually bypassed downtown Bedford, but the station continues to attract fans of unique architecture, and a third generation of the Dunkle family still pumps gas. ☀

**Gas Stations Part II** in our Summer 2008 issue will explore how marketing came to dominate the design of gas stations.

**Lu Donnelly** is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*, a forthcoming book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.



Dunkle's Gulf Service Station is a stunning survivor from the Art Deco period.