

Houston's Historic Oil Buildings

By Betty Chapman

Historic oil company buildings

Historic structures not only reflect exceptional architectural styling, but they also play a role in capturing a city's heritage. Houston was profoundly affected by the discovery of oil in southeast Texas in 1901.

This new industry immediately recognized the importance of Houston as a location in which to focus much of its activity. As a result, Houston became the energy capital of the surrounding area and beyond.

Today our city occupies that same status world-wide. We are fortunate to still have buildings associated with that period of Houston's ascendancy in the oil industry.

Texas Company Building

The oldest of these existing structures is the Texas Company Building, which opened in 1915 at the corner of San Jacinto Street and Rusk Avenue. The 13-story building was entirely occupied by Texas Co. employees—an indication of the fast-growing industry in the Houston area. It was designed by the New York architectural firm of Warren and Wetmore, the creator of New York's Grand Central Station, as well as Houston's Union Station (1910).

The building's architectural style is described as modern Italian Renaissance, although it also displays elements of the Beaux Arts styling. Bedford limestone, terra cotta and brick were the primary materials used in the construction. Perhaps the most unique aspect of the building is the arcade covering the sidewalks on both San Jacinto and Rusk. Tuscan columns of limestone on granite bases support the arcade, vaulted with Guastavino tiles. Each column has a bronze bumper guard bearing what would become known as the "Texaco star." Between 1936 and 1975, three additions were built to expand operations.

The company, officially renamed Texaco in 1959, occupied the building until the 1980s when it relocated to another downtown building. Recent reports indicate that the stately, but long-vacant, structure is slated to become a residential complex.

"A fragment of midtown Manhattan dropped onto the coastal plain"

Humble Oil and Refining Company soon followed the lead of the Texas Company. The company, founded in the Humble oil field north of Houston in 1910, placed its headquarters in Houston a year later.

In 1919, it began construction of a 9-story building that would signify the success the company was enjoying. It occupied a half-block extending from Main to Travis and fronting on Polk Avenue. Clinton and Russell, an architectural firm well known for its New York skyscrapers, designed the

Humble building in an adaptation of the Italian Renaissance style. Completed in May 1921 at an approximate cost of \$1.2 million, it contained 196,000 square feet of floor space, making it the largest office building in Houston at that time.

Architectural historian Stephen Fox has noted that "it must have looked like a fragment of midtown Manhattan dropped onto the coastal plain." The company continued to grow and in 1936 completed an adjacent 17-story structure designed by John F. Staub and Kenneth Franzheim. Its distinctive penthouse lantern contained the building's central air conditioning system, a welcome relief from Houston's warm weather.



The Humble Oil and Refining Company building

Other additions were made to the structure in 1940 and 1947. Humble Oil and Refining Co. remained in the building until 1963 when its new home (today's ExxonMobil Building) was erected a few blocks away on Bell Avenue. The original Humble complex has been readapted as a Marriott Courtyards hotel along with residential units.

Mayan influences on the Petroleum Building

Houstonians were quick to capitalize on the opportunities offered by the "black gold" present in the ground in unbelievable quantities. Houston not only became surrounded by oil-producing land, but it also became the headquarters for numerous companies.

With the opening of the Houston Ship Channel in 1914, it became a major refining center. In 1927, Joseph S. Cullinan, founder of the Texas Company, erected the Petroleum Building at 1314 Texas Avenue. It was intended to house a variety of oil companies rather than one major tenant.

The 22-story building, designed by architects Alfred C. Blossom of New York and Maurice Sullivan of Houston, was inspired by the Mayan pyramids of Central America. Its limestone base and brown brick-faced shaft were typical of Houston's 1920 skyscrapers, yet it introduced a new feature—stepped-back styling, which would be refined in the Gulf Building. The design also features Mayan relief figures, which

are characteristic of Art Deco exotic design motif according to Jim Parsons and David Bush in *Houston Deco: Modernistic Architecture of the Texas Coast*. The Petroleum Building was occupied primarily by oil companies, although the most famous occupant for many years was the exclusive Tejas Club. The building, now known as the Great Southwest Building, houses a ground-floor restaurant and a variety of offices on the floors above.

Houston skyline reaches new heights

The best known of the oil industry structures is likely the Gulf Building (now JPMorgan Chase Bank Building). In 1927, Jesse H. Jones began planning a new structure for the National Bank of Commerce, which he served as president. At this same time, the Gulf Oil Company was seeking new and larger offices. Jones determined that two needs could be met in one building and he laid out certain requirements.

The building was to be strikingly modern and daring in architectural design to compete in beauty with other famed structures in the world. And it was to be the tallest building west of the Mississippi River. The architects, Alfred C. Finn of Houston and Kenneth Franzheim of New York, complied with Jones' request.

The style chosen was Art Deco Moderne. The structure, clad in limestone and light brown tapestry bricks, displays a stepped tower ending in a two-story parapet. For many years, a light beacon atop the tower guided pilots to Houston's earliest airport. Not only is the exterior of the 36-story skyscraper striking, but the interior is one of the city's most impressive spaces. The 3-story banking hall is sheathed in limestone and covered by an elaborate plaster ceiling surfaced with gold-leaf ornamentation. Polished Benedict nickel is used in intricately detailed metalwork. The National Bank of Commerce was the main ground-floor tenant while Sakowitz Bros. store occupied space on the first five floors.

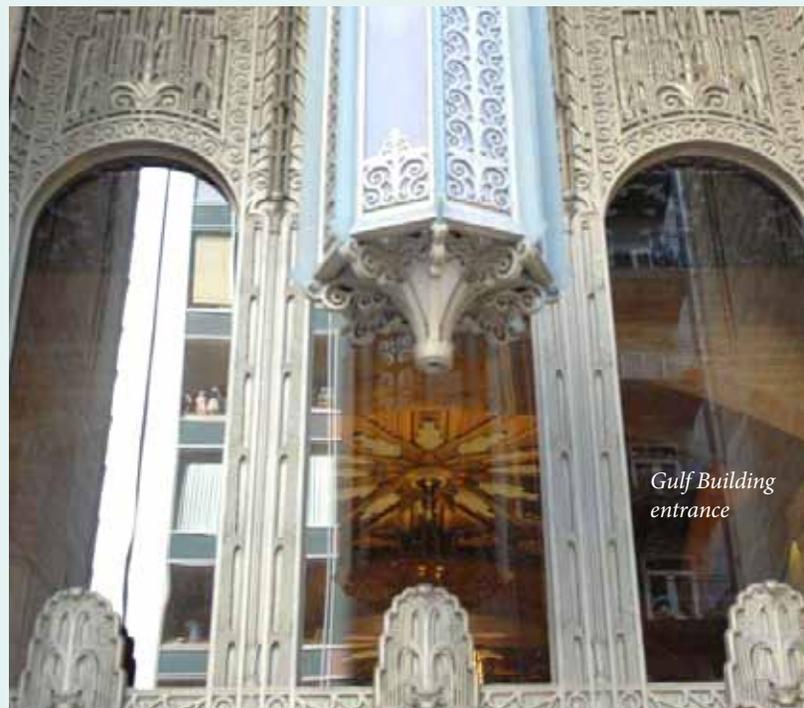
Gulf Oil moved a large work force into the building; hence, the structure is named the Gulf Building following Jones' practice of naming his buildings for their primary tenant. In the early 1980s Texas Commerce Bank (successor to National Bank of Commerce) initiated the largest restoration project ever undertaken in the country with private funds, totaling \$50 million. And, for the record, the Gulf Building was briefly the tallest building west of the Mississippi and crowned the Houston skyline until it was replaced by another oil company building, Exxon, in 1963. Chase Bank occupies much of the building today.

Architecturally significant buildings have continued to grace the skyline while housing oil companies. Among them are Exxon Building (1963), Tennessee Building (1963), One Shell Plaza (1971), Pennzoil Plaza (1976), Chevron Tower (1982) and Texaco Heritage Plaza (1982).

While these structures have not yet reached the age of 50 to be deemed historic, preservationists fervently hope they will eventually become Historic Landmarks in our city. What better way is there to tell Houston's important role in the evolving oil industry than through the buildings that housed "the business of oil?"



Petroleum Building at 1314 Texas Avenue.



Gulf Building entrance