

**LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT**

**LANDMARK NAME:** Gulf Oil Filling Station  
**OWNERS:** Brookhollow Venture LTD  
**APPLICANT:** Stephen Harrison  
**LOCATION:** 3709 La Branch Street

**AGENDA ITEM:** C.2  
**HPO FILE No.:** 15L307  
**DATE ACCEPTED:** Apr-01-2015  
**HAHC HEARING DATE:** Apr-23-2015

**SITE INFORMATION**

Lots 5 & 6, Block 3, Empire, City of Houston, Harris County, Texas. The site includes a 294 square foot one story commercial building, formerly a gas station.

**TYPE OF APPROVAL REQUESTED:** Landmark Designation

**HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY**

The Gulf Oil Filling Station at 3709 La Branch Street was constructed circa 1926 at a time when the automobile was becoming dominant in American cities. Built for the Gulf Oil Corporation, it is an excellent high-style example of early twentieth century neighborhood filling stations, and is representative of the transition in Gulf filling stations from the residentially-oriented Craftsman house with canopy form of 1910-1930 to the more streamlined, Art Deco influenced oblong box with canopy of the 1930s and 1940s.

For half of a century, the La Branch station served the community of the Third Ward, but in the 1970s it fell into disrepair, as the neighborhood filling station was eclipsed by full-service gas station convenience stores located on major thoroughfares and highways. More recently, the structure has enjoyed a new lease on life as an ever-changing canvas for public art. Even in its vacancy the Gulf Filling Station has remained a neighborhood fixture and hub of activity. The building is currently undergoing rehabilitation for a new commercial use.

The Gulf Oil Filling Station meets Criteria 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 for Landmark designation of Section 33-224 of the Houston Historic Preservation Ordinance.

**HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The Gulf Oil Filling Station is located at the corner of La Branch and Alabama streets. It was built in the 1920s at a time when the mass production of the automobile was beginning to have a profound effect on American life by ushering in a new era of mobility and convenience. To meet the needs of this revolution in transportation, neighborhood fueling stations were constructed throughout the country. This structure is one of only a handful of remaining examples of these early small-scale neighborhood filling stations in Houston.

Although many early oil companies kept to a uniform style of design, Gulf Oil left its design open to the local neighborhood to be flexible with overall exterior style. That allowed this station to have its own distinct character within its specific community. Photos of similar stations show a pair of brick columns rather than this station's single massive column with abstracted capital. As it stands today, the station at 3709 La Branch represents a unique comingling of styles with its clean lines and varied detailing.

A historic photo of the filling station shows customers mingling around an electric refrigerator enjoying cold drinks while they refueled. Refrigerated beverages contributed to the filling station's appeal as a source of novel convenience and modernism. For half of a century, the station served the community of the Third Ward, but in the 1970s it fell into disrepair, as the neighborhood filling station was eclipsed by full-service convenience stores located on major thoroughfares and highways. Tax records show that by 1979 the filling station itself was defunct, though a now demolished non-original garage was still in operation.

More recently, the structure has enjoyed a new lease on life as an ever-changing canvas for public art. As seen in the accompanying pictures, the building has been painted with folk art, Soviet imagery, even styled as an airplane hangar complete with an airplane parked out front. Even in its vacancy the Gulf Filling Station has remained a neighborhood fixture and hub of activity.

### *Gulf Oil Corporation*

The history of the Texas Gulf Coast is inextricably linked to the oil and gas industry, and Gulf Oil, a company that took the region as inspiration for its name, was at the forefront of that industry.

The Gulf Oil Corporation was formed in 1907 as a consolidation of the J. M. Guffey Petroleum Company and the Gulf Refining Company of Texas. Gulf was organized to integrate everything from production of crude oil to refining and retailing under a single brand.

Following a period of significant expansion, the company was hit hard by the Great Depression, operating at a loss in 1931 for the first time in its history. It quickly recovered, and in 1951 built one of the world's largest catalytic cracking units in Port Arthur, Texas. Gulf then merged with the B.F. Goodrich Company to become Gulf-Goodrich Chemicals, Incorporated. In 1956 the new company acquired Warren Petroleum Corporation and increased its interest in British American Oil Company. In the 1950s the Gulf of Mexico became "one of the company's leading domestic producing areas." (Texas Historical Association)

With rapidly declining oil reserves and the nationalization of the company's operations in Kuwait in 1975, the company's stability was threatened. After rebounding in 1983, the Mesa Petroleum Corporation began buying shares of Gulf Oil, prompting the executives to invite outside takeover offers.

In 1984 the company was sold to Chevron in "the largest corporate merger to date." (Texas State Historical Association)

### *Station Museum of Contemporary Art*

Located across the street at 1502 Alabama Street, the Station Museum of Contemporary Art emphasizes fine arts that reflect Houston's diversity. The museum stages exhibitions of art produced by local, national and international artists.

Beginning in 2010, the Station Museum has used the Gulf Filling Station as both an outdoor gallery and art canvas in exhibitions. Examples include:

- *Andrei Molodkin / Crude*, 2011-2012, Andrei Molodkin.
- *CALL IT STREET ART, CALL IT FINE ART, CALL IT WHAT YOU KNOW*, 2013, Wiley Robertson & Bryan Cope.

**ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AND RESTORATION HISTORY***Filling Stations*

Filling station design changed throughout the twentieth century and varied between companies. As described by W. Dwayne Jones in *A Field Guide to Gas Stations in Texas*, the Gulf Oil Corporation used the “house and canopy” form in the 1920s and the “oblong box with canopy” in the 1930s. The oblong box with canopy was distinguished by a canopy significantly narrower than the main building. This allowed for additional services to be offered. The filling station at 3709 La Branch represents a transitional form: a box with canopy without the additional service bays of the 1930s.

*Exterior*

The station at 3709 La Branch is a highly ornamented box with canopy in the classical revival style with some Craftsman and Art Deco detailing. It is representative of the transition in Gulf filling stations from the residentially oriented Craftsman house with canopy form of 1910-1930 to the more streamlined, Art Deco influenced oblong box with canopy of the 1930s and 1940s.

The form of the structure is defined by a one story stucco rectangular building with a front canopy of equal width projecting toward La Branch Street. Historic photos show a centrally positioned entrance door flanked by two windows with 2/1 lite patterns and two windows with 4/1 lite patterns. Consistent transoms across the front featured a decorative sunburst lite pattern. The south wall, facing Alabama Street, featured one door and one window with matching transoms. The north wall featured a single window and transom. A decorative metal cornice circumscribes the building and canopy. The canopy is supported at the west end by a single Art Deco-influenced square column with an abstracted capital.

With the exception of frequent repainting, exterior alterations are limited to windows and doors, most of which have been removed and their openings covered with plywood. One small window and transom on the south side and one large window with transom on the west side remain and are covered with plywood. The canopy and cornice are unaltered.

The filling station is currently in the process of being rehabilitated for commercial use.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Harris County Building Assessment Records, 1965. Harris County Archives.

James A. Clark and Mark Odintz, "GULF OIL CORPORATION," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/dog02>), accessed April 06, 2015. Uploaded on June 15, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

Station Museum of Contemporary Art, <http://www.stationmuseum.com>, accessed April 06, 2015.

W. Dwayne Jones, *A Field Guide to Gas Stations in Texas*. Texas Department of Transportation, 2003

*The information and sources provided by the applicant for this application have been reviewed, verified, edited and supplemented with additional research and sources by the Planning and Development Department, City of Houston.*

**APPROVAL CRITERIA FOR LANDMARK DESIGNATION**

**Sec. 33-224. Criteria for designation**

(a) The HAHC, in making recommendations with respect to designation, and the city council, in making a designation, shall consider one or more of the following criteria, as appropriate for the type of designation:

- | S                                   | NA                                  |  |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (1) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area possesses character, interest or value as a visible reminder of the development, heritage, and cultural and ethnic diversity of the city, state, or nation;                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (2) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is the location of a significant local, state or national event;   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (3) Whether the building, structure, object, site or area is identified with a person who, or group or event that, contributed significantly to the cultural or historical development of the city, state, or nation;                    |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (4) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area exemplify a particular architectural style or building type important to the city;  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (5) Whether the building or structure or the buildings or structures within the area are the best remaining examples of an architectural style or building type in a neighborhood;   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>            | (6) Whether the building, structure, object or site or the buildings, structures, objects or sites within the area are identified as the work of a person or group whose work has influenced the heritage of the city, state, or nation; |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (7) Whether specific evidence exists that unique archaeological resources are present;   |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | (8) Whether the building, structure, object or site has value as a significant element of community sentiment or public pride.   |

**AND**

- (9) If less than 50 years old, or proposed historic district containing a majority of buildings, structures, or objects that are less than 50 years old, whether the building, structure, object, site, or area is of extraordinary importance to the city, state or nation for reasons not based on age (Sec. 33-224(b)).

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommend to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Gulf Oil Filling Station at 3709 La Branch Street.

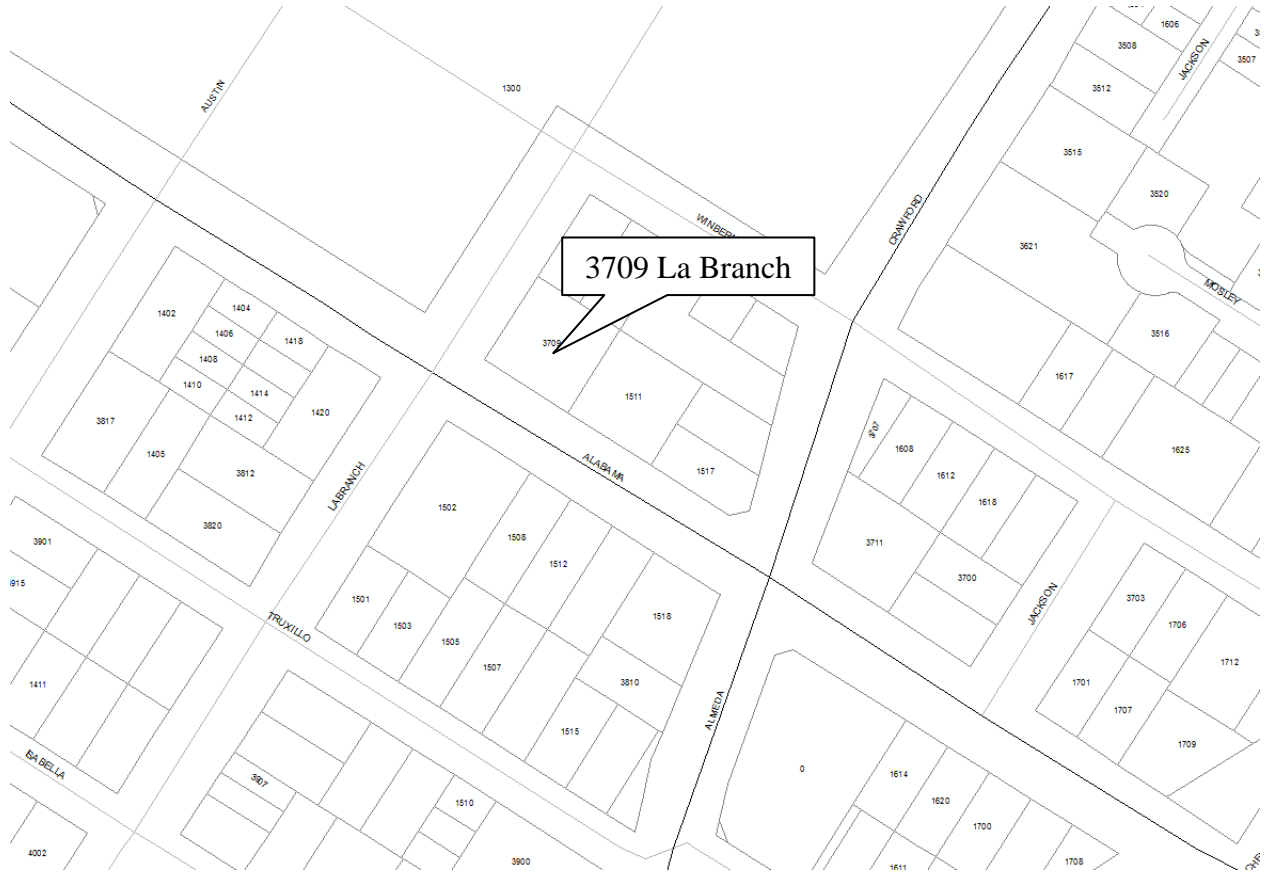
**HAHC RECOMMENDATION**

The Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission recommends to City Council the Landmark Designation of the Gulf Oil Filling Station at 3709 La Branch Street.

**EXHIBIT A**  
**CURRENT PHOTO**  
GULF FILLING STATION  
3709 LA BRANCH STREET



**EXHIBIT B**  
**SITE MAP**  
GULF FILLING STATION  
3709 LA BRANCH STREET





**EXHIBIT C**  
**ART INSTALLATION PHOTOS**  
GULF FILLING STATION  
3709 LA BRANCH STREET



Photo courtesy of The Station Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011





**EXHIBIT D**  
**HISTORIC PHOTOS**  
GULF FILLING STATION  
3709 LA BRANCH STREET

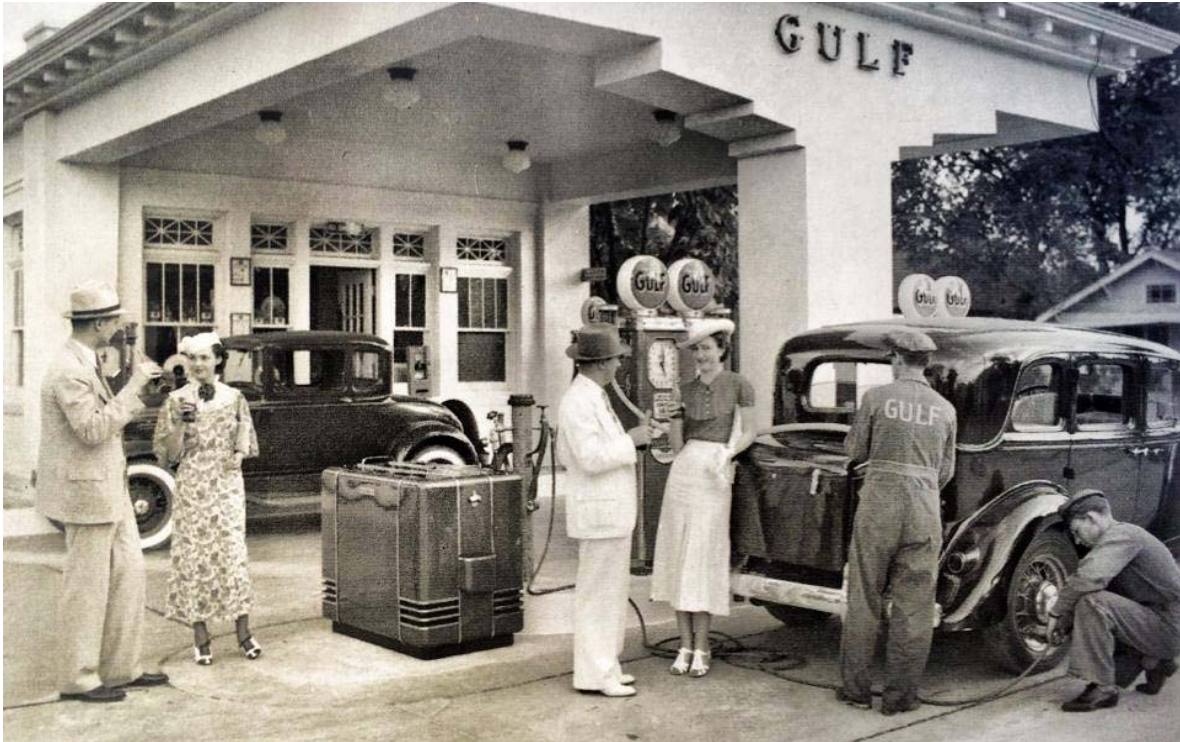
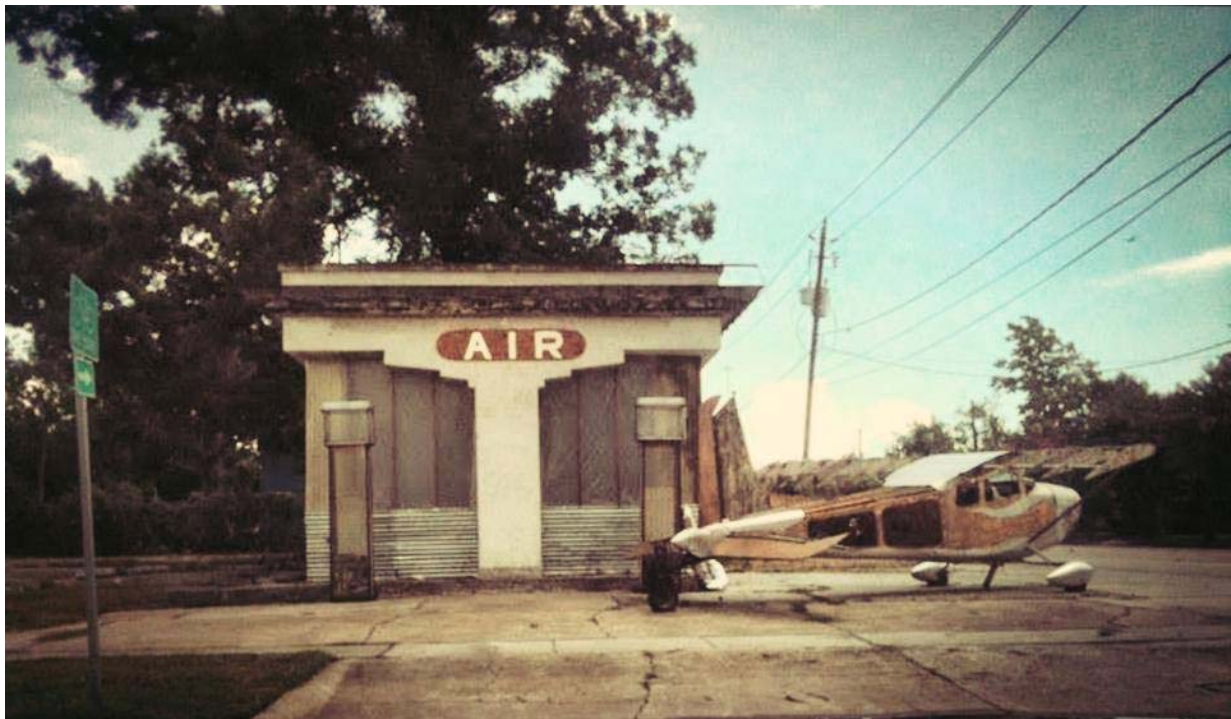


Photo courtesy of The Sloane Gallery, [www.sloanegallery.com](http://www.sloanegallery.com)





**EXHIBIT D**  
**HISTORIC PHOTOS**  
GULF FILLING STATION  
3709 LA BRANCH STREET

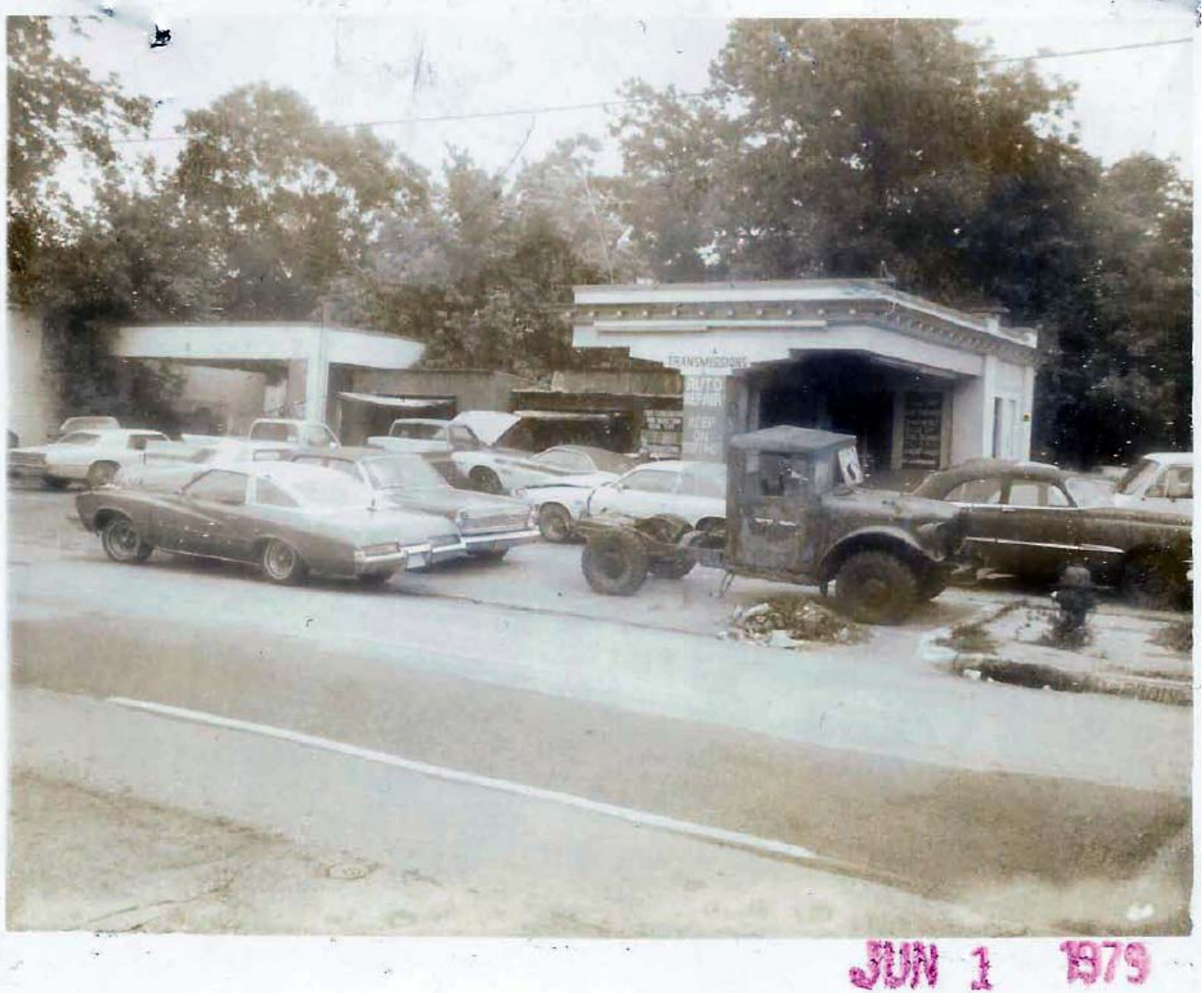
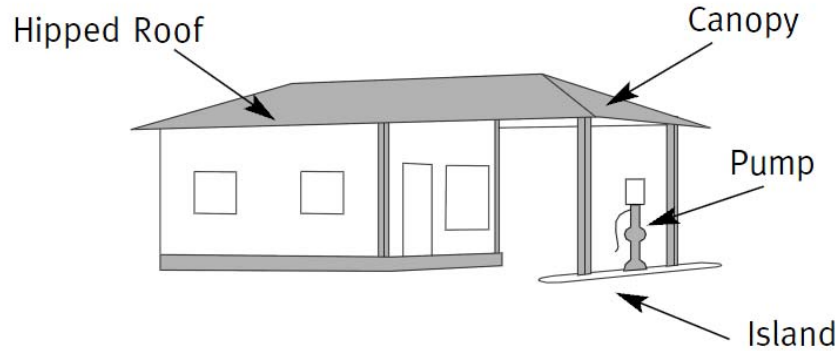
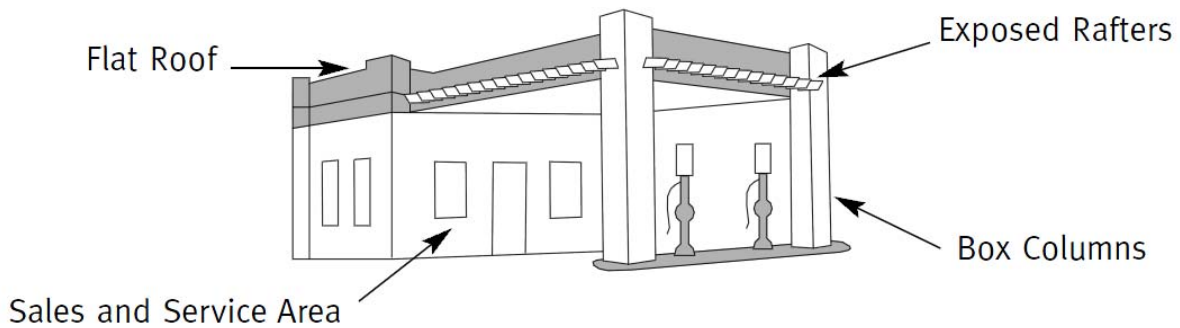


Photo sourced from Harris County Archives

**EXHIBIT E**  
**EXCERPTS FROM A FIELDGUIDE TO GAS STATIONS IN TEXAS**  
GULF FILLING STATION  
3709 LA BRANCH STREET



*Gas Station 1910-1930 – House with Canopy*



*Gas Station 1920-1940 – Box with Canopy*

**EXHIBIT E**  
**EXCERPTS FROM A FIELDGUIDE TO GAS STATIONS IN TEXAS**  
**GULF FILLING STATION**  
**3709 LA BRANCH STREET**



1920-1930

GULF

Early Gulf Refining Company stations rarely followed any set design or standardized form. The early hexagonal shaped station may have been interpreted in similar shapes through the 1920s in some locations. Signage may be the most distinctive element of this period of Gulf stations. A round sign containing the words "That Good Gulf Gasoline" often sat on a single light standard along the street. The station itself appeared as a box without canopy, often featuring landscape features that helped it blend into the neighborhood. In other examples, Gulf dealers operated from the former location of another company occupying a house with canopy form.

**Identifying Features:**

- Signage would be the best indicator of the company.
- Bungalow/Craftsman and Colonial Revival.

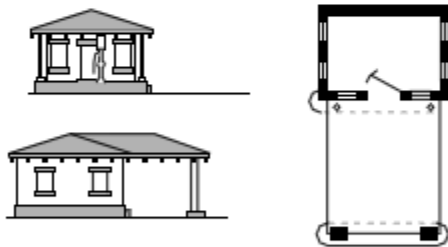


Figure 28: This example of a 1920s Gulf station shows the prominent signage common to these early locations.

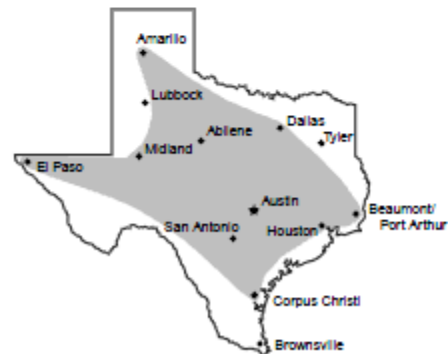
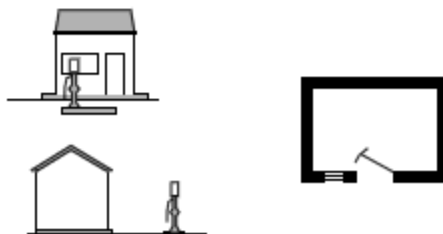


Figure 29: The above Gulf Refining Company station, located in Grapevine, is an example of the house with canopy form.

**Form: House with Canopy**



**Form: Box**



Distribution of Gulf in the 1920s.

**EXHIBIT E**  
**EXCERPTS FROM A FIELDGUIDE TO GAS STATIONS IN TEXAS**  
**GULF FILLING STATION**  
**3709 LA BRANCH STREET**

*GULF*

1930-1940



*Figure 46:* During the 1930s, Gulf gas stations were typically an oblong box with a flat roof, demonstrating an Art Deco influence.

In the 1930s, Gulf successfully extended its market throughout the Southeast, Midwest, and Northeast states. The company stations during this period were typically the oblong box form. These gas stations adopted a handsome Art Deco style with exaggerated pilasters and a smooth stucco exterior. Gulf became one of the largest companies operating in Texas during this era, located in most of the state's large cities.

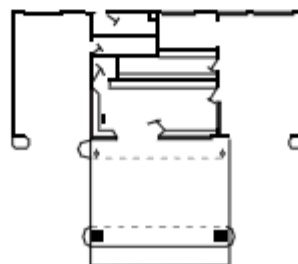
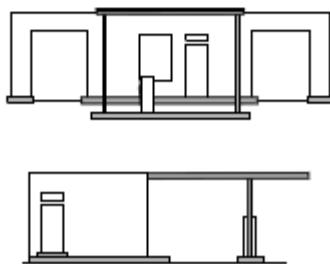


Distribution of Gulf during the 1930s.

*Identifying Features:*

- Flat roof.
- Exaggerated pilasters, clean Art Deco lines.
- Tile bases on columns and display area.
- Multiple service bays.
- Attached canopies.
- Art Deco.

*Form: Oblong Box With Canopy*





**EXHIBIT F**  
**EXAMPLES OF SIMILAR FILLING STATIONS IN TEXAS**  
GULF FILLING STATION  
3709 LA BRANCH STREET



Corner of Westheimer Rd. and Yupon St. <http://www.city-data.com/forum/houston/242028-i-remember-montrose-westheimer-1970s-22.html>. Accessed April 22, 2105.



Fayetteville, TX. [http://www.fayettevillexchamber.org/site\\_page.php?page\\_id=A7](http://www.fayettevillexchamber.org/site_page.php?page_id=A7). Accessed April 22, 2015