

SINCLAIR SERVICE STATION
Southeast corner of intersection of
Natchez St. (State Hwy. 15) and
Pine St.
Wisner
Franklin Parish
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1269

HABS
LA
21-WIS,
2-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
Southeast Region
Department of the Interior
Atlanta, Georgia 30303

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY
SINCLAIR SERVICE STATION

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Location: Southeast corner of the intersection of Natchez Street (La. Hwy. 15) with Pine street, in the town of Wisner, Franklin Parish, Louisiana.

U.S.G.S. Wisner 7.5' Quadrangle

Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:

Northing: 3538977.633

Easting: 627128.008

Present Occupant: None

Present Use: Vacant

Significance: The Sinclair Service Station is significant as an intact example of standardized retail outlets constructed in association with large oil companies. Built in 1938, the building exhibits all of the architectural elements originally found on Sinclair Service Stations throughout the country. In addition, the building's history reflects general trends in the development of the oil industry and its effects on the local community.

Part I. PHYSICAL HISTORY

The Sinclair Service Station, generally constructed from standardized plans and materials, became noted landmarks along America's highways. The qualities of this station were seen in hundreds of stations like it throughout the country. Sinclair customers found a familiarity in the green tile and stucco that became, along with the dinosaur, the company's trademark.

The Sinclair Service Station in Wisner, Louisiana is located at the corner of Natchez Street (Highway 15) and Old Pine Street, adjacent to railroad tracks. The L-shaped service station plan, known as a house with canopy, furnished covered access to the pumps in front, and space for mechanical repairs to the side (Jakle, 141). The structure is made of concrete block and covered with paint chosen to resemble stucco. The roof is generally flat, with sloping sections covered with green Spanish tile present along all wall lines except for the rear. This effect is purely decorative. The canopy roofs to the south and west of the house, are supported by squared columns that extend upward beyond the roofline and are capped with smaller rectangular blocks. Narrow, arched, green tile decorations are inlaid in the upper portion of the supporting columns.

The facade of the building is made up of the west facing canopy, which protects the area where the gas pumps are located. The pumps are spaced between the columns on a low concrete slab. Oblong light fixtures are present on the sides of the columns. They contain narrow, vertically placed bulbs with decorative metal end caps. Between the columns is the "faux" arch above which the "SINCLAIR" company name was painted in bold letters. The "faux" arch is created with decorative concrete bracketing. Six green tile diamonds and a plain triangular parapet are present above the company name. The details along the roofline are common to all three sides of the western canopy.

The house portion of the structure has a short concrete stoop running the full length of its west wall. The form of the columns on the canopy are echoed in the corner "pilasters" made from extending the side walls forward from the front of the building. These "pilasters" contain the same oblong light fixtures, or ghosts of missing ones, present on the canopy. The main portion of the west wall contains a wooden framed picture window with two four-lighted transoms above. Directly south of this window is a wooden door with twelve rectangular panes of glass, that served as the main entrance to the structure. As with the picture window, there is a four light transom above the door.

In the eastern portion of the south wall of the house structure, is a wooden doorway which leads inward from the maintenance bay. There are singly placed, twelve paned windows on either side of this doorway, which provide light to the interior of the structure. There is a small, squared vent in the wall above each of the windows.

The eastern wall of the house structure contains two windows and the utility connections for the service station. The southern portion of the wall contains a twelve paned window, while the northern portion contains a narrower six paned window. The roof over this wall does not possess a sloping portion covered with green tiles. There is a small overhang that aids in roof drainage.

The northern wall of the house structure contains much of the decorative items present on the front of the canopy. There are "pilasters" at either end of the wall with the same green tile inlays that echo the design of the canopy. The eastern portion of the wall contains a two paneled wooden door with a four-lighted transom above. Towards the center of the wall is a narrow six-paned window. In the western portion of the wall is a large picture window with two four-lighted transoms above.

The interior of the house structure is divided into four separate spaces. Room No.1 is located in the western portion of the building. The west wall of Room No.1 contains a picture window to the north with a four-lighted transom above. The inward swinging doorway is located to the south. It contains a wooden door with six lights and a four-lighted transom above. The southern wall contains a single twelve-paned window that faces onto the maintenance bay. The east wall contains a doorway in its southern portion which leads to Room No.2. The northern portion of the wall contains a doorway which leads to Room No.4. The northern wall of Room No.1 contains a large picture window with two four-lighted transoms above. The floors, walls, and ceilings are painted concrete.

Room No.2 is located in the southeastern portion of the house structure. There is a doorway in the southern portion of the west wall which leads to Room No.1. The southern wall contains an exterior door in its western portion which leads to the maintenance bay. In the eastern portion is a large twelve-paned window. The east wall of Room No.2 contains one twelve-paned window in the center. The north wall is featureless.

Room No.3 can only be entered from the exterior of the building, through the doorway located in the eastern portion of the north wall. Room No.3 served as the customer restroom. The western and southern walls are featureless. The eastern wall contains a rectangular, six-paned window. The interior walls to the height of the window sills, as well as the floors, are of tile.

Room No.4 can be entered through an inward opening doorway in the southern portion of the west wall. The north wall contains a six-paned, centrally located window. The west and south walls are featureless. The floors and walls, to the height of the window sill, are covered with tile.

Part II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Sinclair Service Station located on Natchez Street (State Highway 15), in Wisner, Louisiana was built in 1938 and can be classified as a traditional gasoline station. In contrast to today's convenience stores, traditional gasoline stations were meant to provide only fuel and basic mechanical services. In addition, this station's history is exemplary of general trends in the oil industry and throughout the nation.

The traditional station has its beginning in 1909. The American Gasoline Company of St. Louis built the first "drive-in" station, away from main plant facilities, to make their product more accessible to the consumer. After the construction of this first facility, it became readily apparent that easy availability was the key to commercial success. Soon many companies began to develop marketing campaigns based around their own service stations. It was Gulf Oil that built the first architect-designed station in Pittsburgh in 1913. This attention to design marks the first time that the utility of the facility was not the primary concern. An esthetically pleasing service station presented an image to the customer of the quality and reliability of their product (Jakle, 141).

Gasoline station design was a critical element in a company's quest for visibility. The standardized station was a most important advertising device by which companies sought to develop sales territories. Standard of California launched its chain of look-alike gasoline stations in 1914, largely in response to competition from Shell. All thirty-four stations were nearly identical: small houses with attached canopies, each building was uniformly painted and identified by common signs. This eventually became typical of service stations from all of the major oil companies.

To aid in this process, Standard Oil of Ohio pioneered a prefabricated house with a canopy in 1916 (Jakle 141). This allowed for the proliferation of traditional gas stations in typical company styles. Increases in sales territories became dramatic. The growth in these major companies however, was eventually curtailed by those concerned with the development of monopolies. By 1930 most companies had leased their stations to dealers in the face of legislation in Iowa and other states heavily taxing chain-store profits. Standardization of building types and uniform color schemes and signage continued through lease agreement. This is the environment in which the Sinclair Service Station in Wisner, Louisiana was built.

Gilbert Oil Company, a local franchiser, built the station according to Sinclair Oil's standardized service station plans. The analogous Sinclair Stations were depicted on the covers of large road maps printed by the company (Margolies, 43). Gilbert Oil held true to the plans and used Sinclair's reputation for quality products as a marketing tool. Within a few years however, Gilbert Oil changed corporate affiliation from Sinclair to Skelly Oil Company. Later for unknown reasons, Gilbert Oil company became a corporate distributor for Texaco. This relationship was maintained for many years to come.

Texaco's strategy of having widely dispersed stations, but having them in every state allowed them to gain about ten percent of the market over just a few short years. (Jakle 114). This strategy was successful until the oil crisis of the Mid-1970s. The small service station in Wisner, owned by Gilbert Oil, was not able to survive the crisis. Gilbert Oil sold the service station to Wilson Oil in 1979. Unfortunately this local company was not able to overcome the troubles begun in the 1970s, eventually leading to the station's closure in the early 1980s.

Between 1920 and 1970 traditional stations accounted for approximately 40 percent of the total gasoline sales outlets in the nation. But even though they comprised a minority of the total outlets, they produced a majority of the sales and the image of the gasoline station dominated the American public's conceptualization of gasoline retailing accordingly. These stations now number fewer than 100,000 in the United States which is down from 236,000 as late as 1969. The traditional gasoline stations that possess the integrity to identify their original corporate affiliation, are icons of the past.

Part III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Jakle, John A. and Keith A. Sculle, The Gas Station in America. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

Margolies, John. Pump and Circumstance: Glory Days of the Gas Station. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1993.

Brochure, "Wisner, Louisiana", (Sponsored in part by Gilbert Oil Co., Inc., Texaco Distributors), circa 1960's.

Interview with Mrs. Faye Calhoun (local historian), 8/13/97, at Wisner, La.

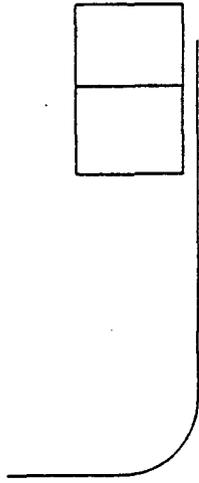
Documents from the Franklin Parish Clerk of Courts:

Act of Sale from Gilbert Oil Co. to Wilson Oil Co., dated July 29, 1979, and recorded at COB 205/806--204721.

Certificate of Dissolution for Gilbert Oil, 1980, recorded at COB 208/361.

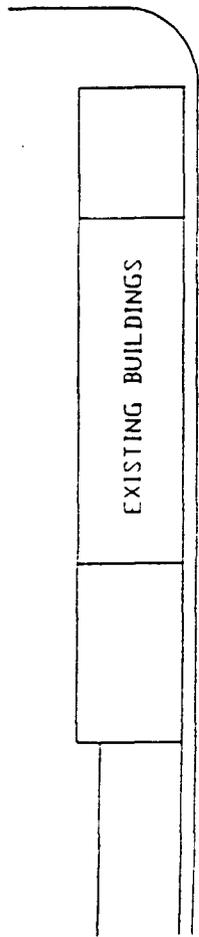
Part IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project is a mitigative recording effort required by a Memorandum of Agreement between the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Officer, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the Louisiana Department of Transportation (LDOT). Mr. Vincent Pizzolato of LDOT tasked Woodward-Clyde Consultants with the completion of the appropriate documentation. Mark Killan served as project manager. Ernest Eastley (Historian), collected much of the historical information in August of 1997, and Sally Kistler (Senior Staff Scientist) was enlisted as project coordinator and report author. The documentation was completed in December of 1997.



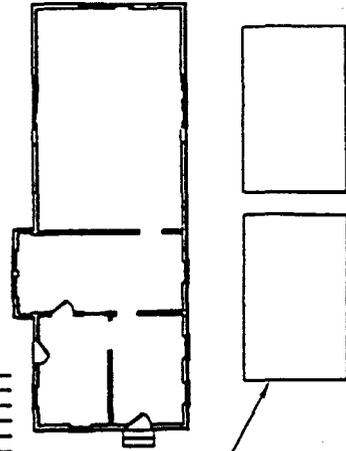
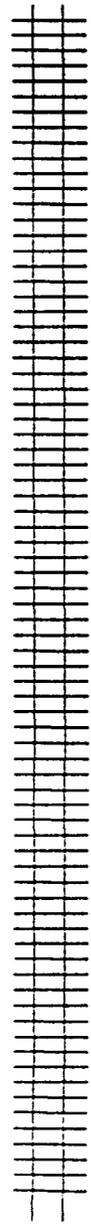
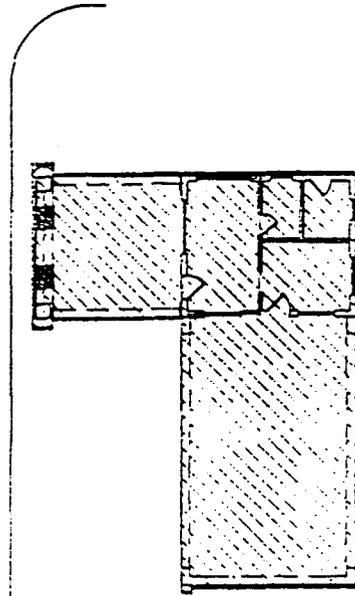
PINE ST.

HWY. 15 (NORTH TO VINNSBORO)



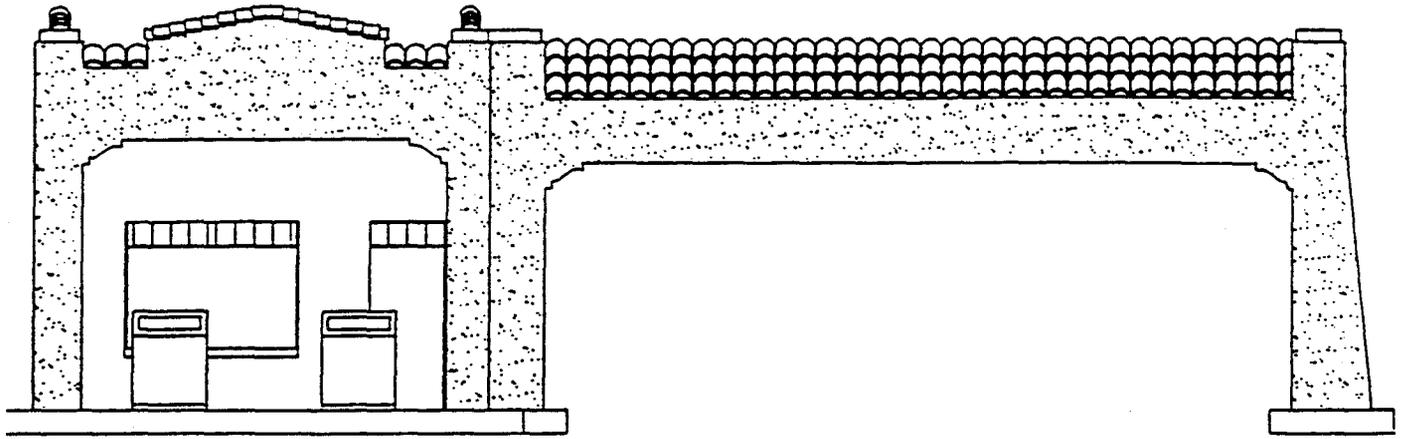
HWY. 15 (SOUTH TO SICILY ISLAND)

HWY. 15

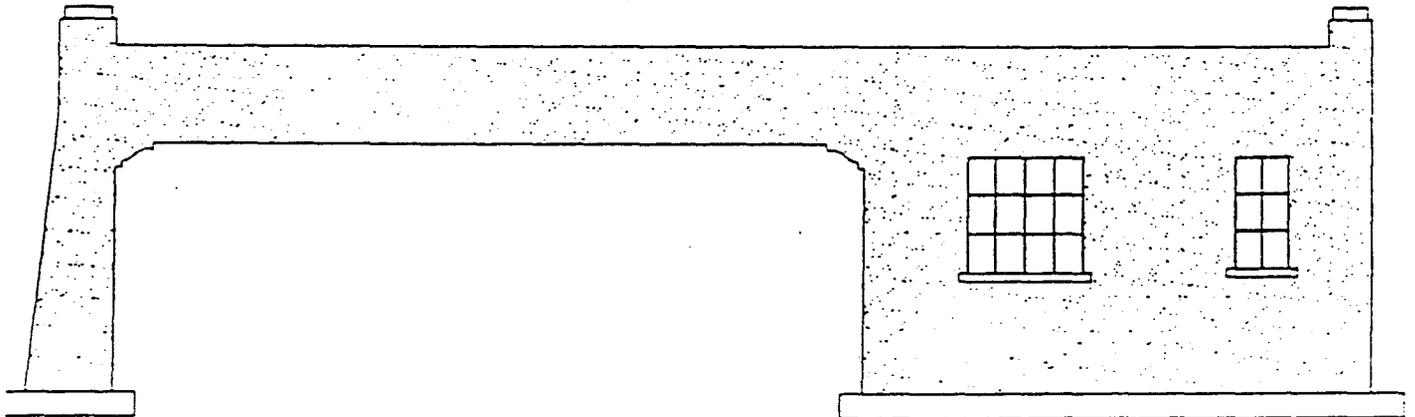


EXISTING BUILDINGS

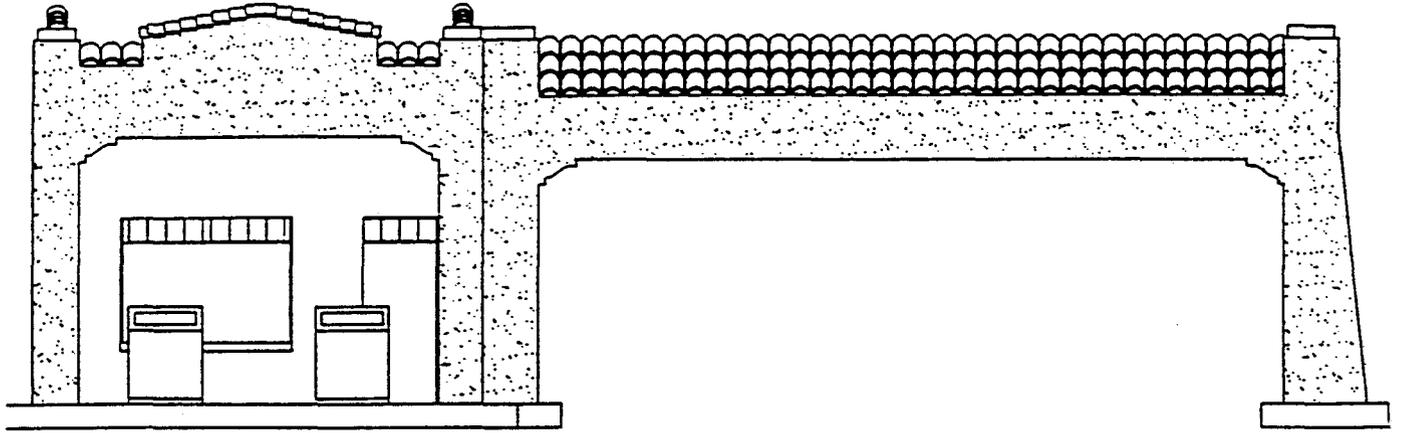




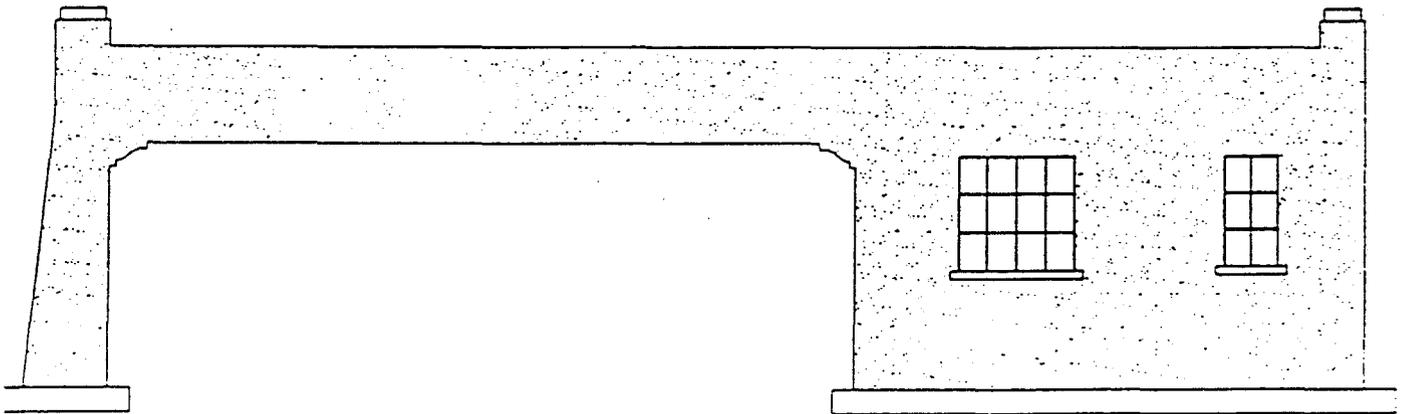
WESTERN ELEVATION



EASTERN ELEVATION



WESTERN ELEVATION



EASTERN ELEVATION