

Higgins Service Station
(Watergate Exxon)
2708 Virginia Ave., NW
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-665

HABS
DC
WASH
607-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
HIGGINS SERVICE STATION
(Watergate Exxon)

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Location: Higgins Service Station at 2708 Virginia Ave., N.W., stands at the southeast corner of the intersection of this avenue and Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway in Washington, D.C.

Present Owner: Leon Miranian.

Present Use: Filling station.

Significance: Built in the Domestic style, using rustic materials, Higgins Service Station was designed to complement the adjacent Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. Though this part of the parkway has lost some of its scenic quality, this filling station--one of the few building types permitted on such a road--reflects how these utilitarian structures were designed to blend with a natural setting; it is also one of the few rustic commercial structures in Washington, D.C.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: ca. 1932.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: L. P. Higgins was the original proprietor. It was owned by the Haynes family from the 1940s-70. During this time it was an Esso station. Leon Miranian has owned the station since 1970.
4. Original plans and construction: "Gas Station Entourage," site plan dated 1932. "Intersection--Va. Ave. & Rock Creek & Potomac Parkway," n.d., showing trees along the parkway and avenue and station labelled "L. P. Higgins."
5. Alterations and Additions: A 1935 photo shows a large sign on the roof, long since removed, that read "Higgins Service Station." According to the present owner, the garage bays were extended about 4' in the mid 1950s; the masonry joint is evident on the exterior. Originally there was a basement, but it has long since been filled in to comply with legislation forbidding cellars in filling stations. The tanks and pumps were most recently replaced in 1983. Security bars protecting the windows have been in place since the mid 1970s.

B. Historical Context:

Background on Filling Stations

The filling station was a new, twentieth-century building type created to supply automobiles with fuel and limited repairs. A few shops selling gasoline existed by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Gulf Refining Company built the first drive-in filling station in 1913. By 1929, gas was sold at 317,000 locations in the United States. However, this business curtailed sharply during the Depression, causing station owners to devise new strategies to attract customers.¹

As ownership of automobiles outpaced the number of outlets in the 1910s, demand for gasoline exceeded supply. Station owners no longer needed to project an image to attract customers, and the buildings took on a uniformly nondescript appearance. Early filling stations were often simple brick buildings or metal sheds.² In the late 1910s and early 1920s, prefabricated metal and glass stations that could be moved from one location to another--as roads went into and out of use--became the preferred type.³ The first chain of stations, launched by Standard Oil Corporation in 1914, included thirty-four identical box-shaped structures with uniform signs and paint.⁴

In the 1930s, increased competition for patrons again led gasoline distributors to adopt methods to draw in business. Stations began to offer amenities to the customer, such as restrooms and better-trained personnel--often with skills in automobile maintenance--and the sale of auto-related merchandise, in an effort to attract and maintain their patronage.⁵ Architectural design was employed by oil companies to market the stations.⁶

Community controls and building regulations were factors that played a role in the form of filling stations erected in specific areas, especially parkways.⁷ Aesthetic requirements for commercial structures were especially stringent in the capital city. The Shipstead-Luce Act of 1930, for instance, dictated that the development of property in the monumental core "should proceed along the lines of good order, good taste, and due regard to the public interests involved, and a reasonable degree of control should be exercised over the architecture of private or semi-public buildings adjacent to public buildings and grounds of major importance." The Commission of Fine Arts (CFA), set up in 1910 to advise the government

¹ "Planning Techniques For New and Remodelled Buildings: Service Stations 1," Architectural Forum 66.2 (1937): 86-95.

² Scott Anderson, Check the Oil (Lombard, IL: Wallace-Homestead Book Co., 1986), 120.

³ Daniel I. Vieyra, "Fill'er Up": An Architectural History of America's Gas Stations (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 7-9.

⁴ John A. Jakle, "The American Gasoline Station, 1920 to 1970," Journal of American Culture 1 (Spring 1978): 521.

⁵ "Planning Techniques For New and Remodelled Buildings," 86.

⁶ Alexander G. Guth, "Small Buildings: The Automobile Service Station," Architectural Forum 45.1 (1926): 33.

⁷ Vieyra, xiii.

on artistic matters, was given the responsibility of reviewing plans for construction within these areas. The Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway was specifically cited in this act as within the jurisdiction of these reviews.

Design History

The first classically styled filling stations appeared in the United States in the mid 1920s. Inspiration for station design included Georgian, Tudor and Roman sources.⁸ Daniel Vieyra, author of "Fill'er Up": An Architectural History of America's Gas Stations, describes the 1930s as the era of "respectable designs." Stations built in this decade were often designed with a view to the civic role that commercial buildings played within the community. As a result, their appearance reflected that of the important civic buildings in the cities in which these stations were located.⁹

The Domestic-style station was an alternative to classical designs, though both were considered assets to the community. The Domestic version, often designed for a suburban setting, was modelled after the picturesque, rustic cottage in an attempt to integrate it with the surroundings. This style became popular for stations in parkway locations. Vieyra considers the parkway "related both to civic awareness and suburbanization." The filling station was the only commercial building type allowed on parkways. The designs developed for the Westchester County, New York, parkway system and the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut, for instance, are built in this style and were widely praised. A prominent example was designed by Penrose Stout for the Hutchinson River Parkway. Built of local stone with a gabled, wood-shingle roof and shuttered windows, this structure has much in common with the Higgins Service Station adjacent to Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. A clock set within the pediment of a filling station facade was a popular device used to make the association between these buildings and traditional civic structures. This appears in the Higgins Service Station; a clock, though a modern replacement is in the western gable today. The use of historical styles for filling stations declined in the 1940s as Modern designs for commercial buildings gained acceptance in the United States. Thereafter standardized filling station--built of brick, stucco, glass, and steel--became prevalent again.¹⁰

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HABS/HAER Historian
Summer 1992

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Higgins Service Station exemplifies the Domestic-style filling stations of the 1930s, and its use in conjunction with parkway

⁸ Anderson, 120.

⁹ Vieyra, 27.

¹⁰ Vieyra, 32, 35, 49-51.

design. This building, with its twin-gabled roof and domestic scale, evokes a picturesque cottage. The rustic materials--local stone facing and slate roof--tie the design into the building's parkway setting.

2. Condition of the fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: One-story, 66' long x 27' deep, in a shallow U plan.
2. Foundations: Concrete.
3. Wall construction: Cut stone, ashlar facing.
4. Structural system, framing: Load-bearing brick.
5. Porches: There were formerly two small, hipped-roof porticos--one at each end of the front facade ("Gas Station Entourage" drawing). Only the one on the west end remains. The walkway under its roof leads along the east side of the building to the restrooms. The east portico was likely removed when this end of the building was extended.
6. Chimneys: There are two non-functioning stone chimneys; on the rear slope at the middle of the building, and at the rear of the ridge of the east gable.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: There are two wood doors on the front of the building, centered below each gable. On the west end two steel doors lead to the restrooms. The two garage doors at the east end are aluminum. All metal doors are new.
 - b. Windows: Nine bays of six-over-six-light double-hung sash extend across the front facade. Each centered entrance is flanked by windows. The central block of the front facade has a central window flanked by windows. There are no openings on the rear facade.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Twin cross-gable roof with slate covering and copper flashing. A 1935 photo shows a large sign along the ridge line that no longer exists.
 - b. Cornice: Wood cornice painted white; exposed rafters on west end of building. Copper gutters line the eaves.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:
 - a. Cellar: A basement has been filled in.
 - b. First floor: An office occupies the northwest corner of the building. The restrooms are behind the office. The two-bay garage area is at the east end. The center of the building is used for storage.
2. Stairways: Wood stairway leads to an unfinished attic.
3. Flooring: Concrete covered with linoleum tile.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Wood paneling in the office. Sheet rock over concrete block in storage room and garage bays.
5. Doorways and doors: Doorways, with plain wood surrounds, are found between office, storage room, and bays. There is a metal door between the office and restroom.
6. Decorative features: The small portico at the east end is ornamental; the oculus within each gable contribute to the station's picturesque character, though only the eastern one contains a clock.
7. Lighting fixtures: No original fixtures remain. Lighting in the building is fluorescent bulbs.

D. Site:

1. General Setting: The triangular lot adjacent to Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway is 110' deep. The southwest corner of the structure is within 20' of the parkway, and the rear facade is just 4' from the looming bulk of the Watergate complex. The encroachment of modern buildings and increased traffic volume in the area have detracted from what once was a park-like setting; there is a grassy lot along the front of the lot. The west side of the property, along the parkway, is planted with four large trees.
2. Outbuildings: None. Original pumps are gone.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Anderson, Scott. Check the Oil. Lombard, Ill: Wallace-Homestead Book Co., 1986.

Guth, Alexander G. "Small Buildings: The Automobile Service Station." Architectural Forum 45.1 (1926): 33-56.

Jakle, John A. "The American Gasoline Station, 1920 to 1970." Journal of American Culture 1 (Spring 1978): 520-42.

Miranian, Leon, owner. Interview by Amy Ross. 18 August 1992. Washington, D.C.

"Planning Techniques For New and Remodelled Buildings: Service Stations 1." Architectural Forum 66.2 (1937): 86-95.

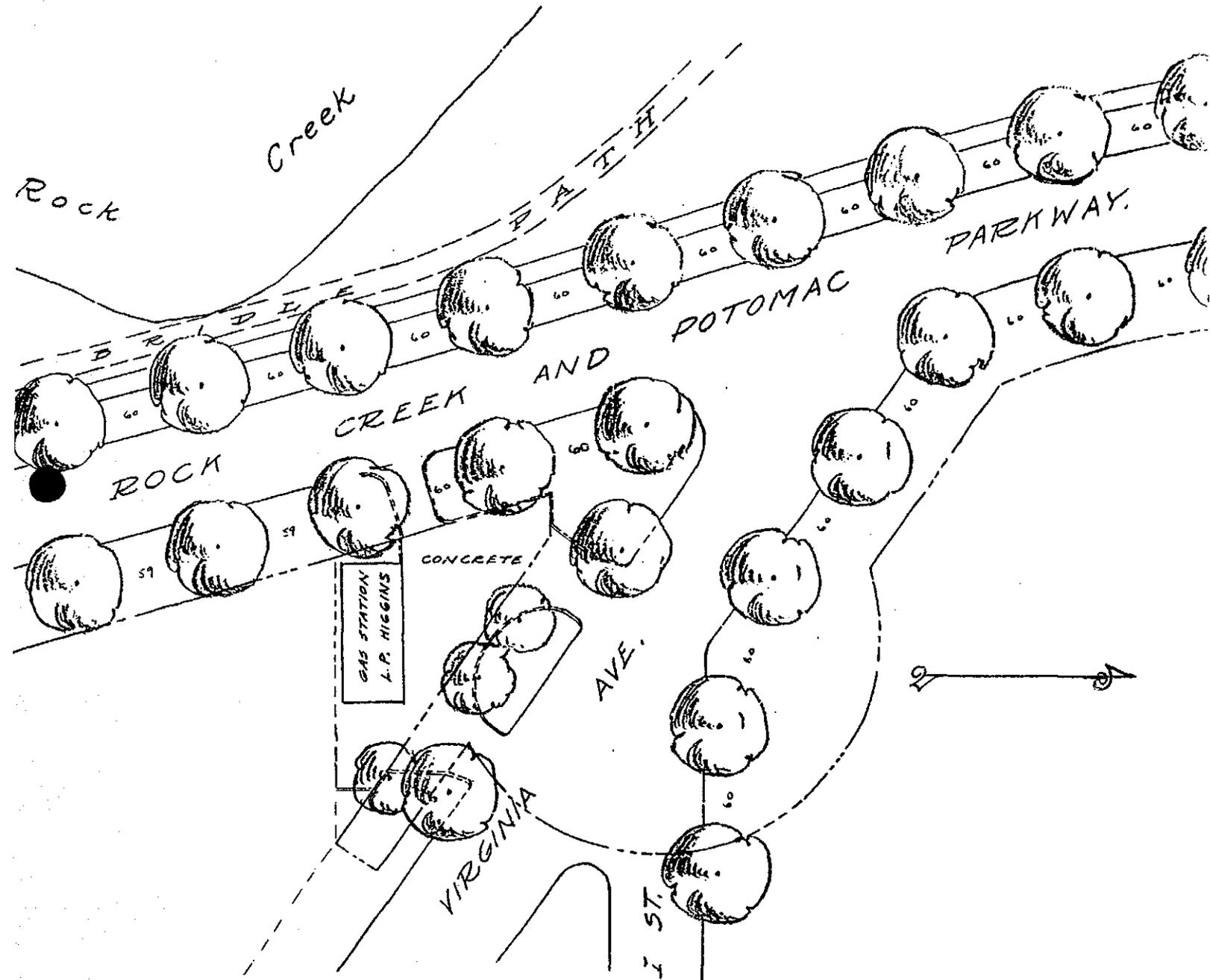
"Preserving a Vintage Service Station." Orange Disc 21.7 (1974): 30-32.

Vieyra, Daniel I. "Fill'er Up": An Architectural History of America's Gas Stations. New York: Macmillan, 1979.

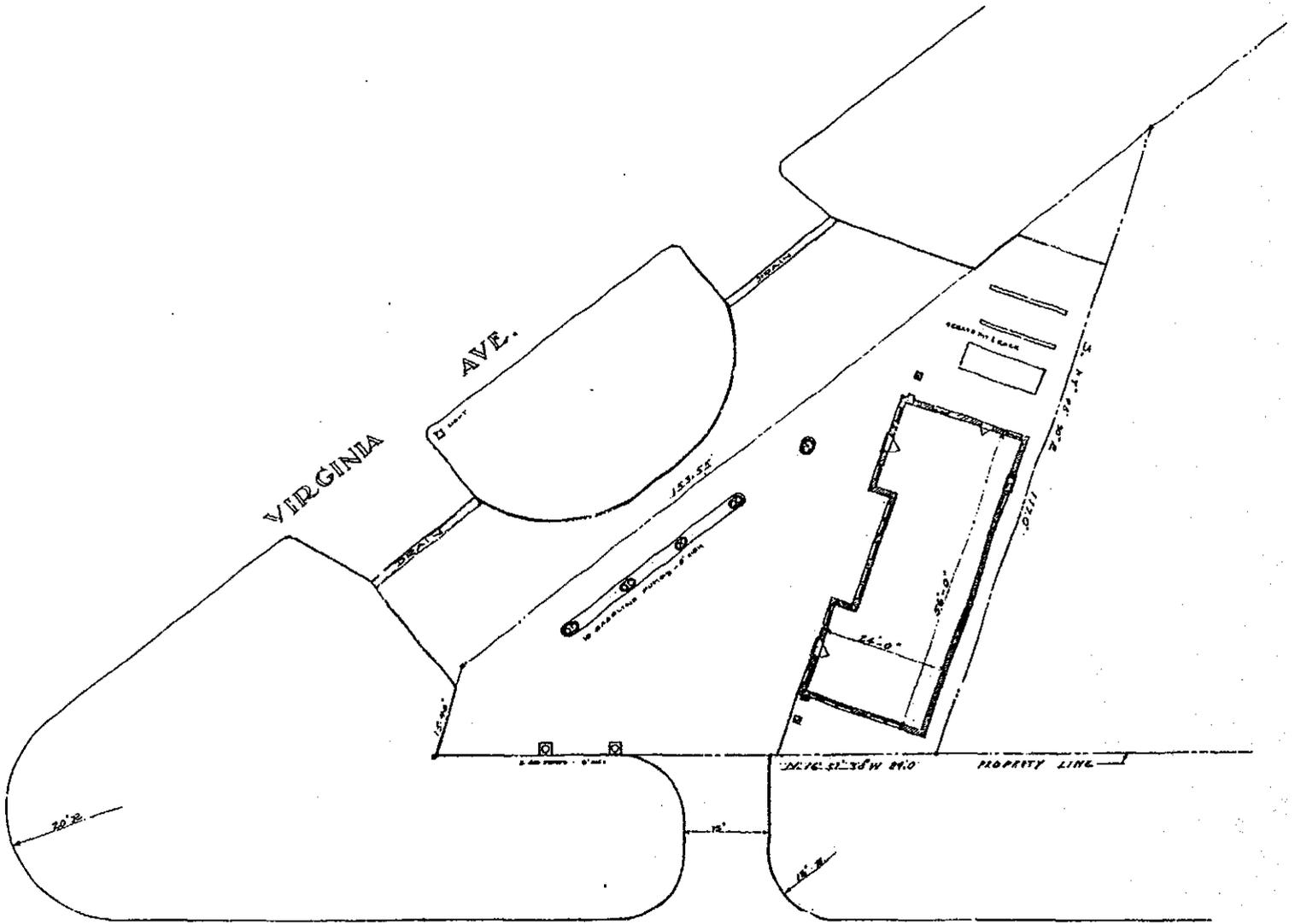
PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The documentation of Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway was undertaken as a two-year pilot project to help establish standards and guidelines for recording the structures and landscape features of park roads and parkways. This project was a joint effort of the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a combined division of the National Park Service, Robert Kapsch, chief. The project was sponsored by the Park Roads and Bridges Program of the National Park Service, John Gingles, deputy chief, Engineering and Safety Services Division. The project supervisor was Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian.

The Washington-based summer 1992 documentation team was headed by landscape architect Robert Harvey (Iowa State University-Department of Landscape Architecture) who served as field supervisor; the landscape architects were Deborah Warshaw (University of Virginia) and Dorota Pape-Siliwonzuk (US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Palaces and Gardens Restoration); the architects were Evan Miller (University of Colorado-Boulder), Steven Nose (University of Maryland), and Tony Arcaro (Catholic University). The historians were Tim Davis (University of Texas) and Amy Ross (University of Virginia). Jack E. Boucher made the large-format photographs; Air Survey Corporation of Sterling, Virginia, produced the aerial photography and digital mapping from which the site-plan delineations were made.

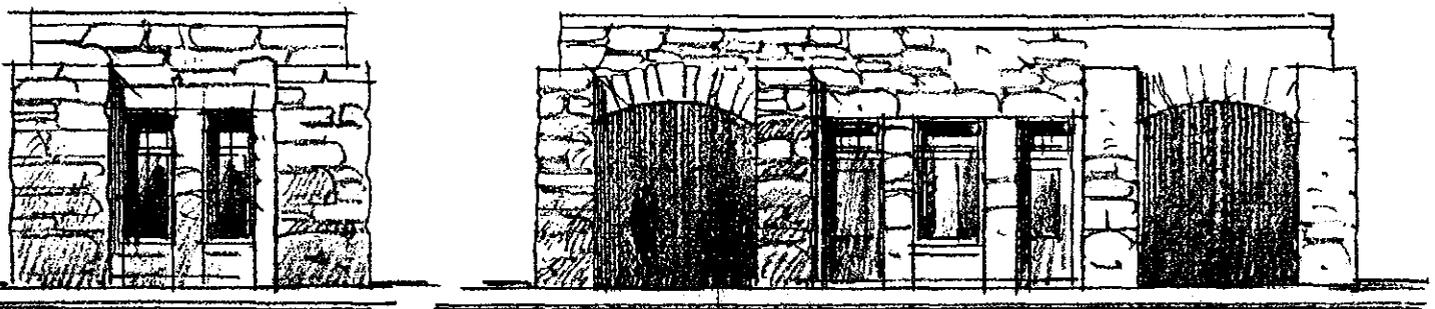


Plan, "Intersection VA Ave. & RC&PP." Original at 1" = 40'. No date. No. 844/80135 (91.2-96)
National Archives.



ROCK CREEK AND POTOMAC PARKWAY

Plan, "Rock Creek & Potomac Parkway, Virginia Ave. & Parkway Intersection: Gas Station Entourage, Planting Plan." Original at 1" = 10'. 1932. 844/80136 (91.2-97) National Archives. Though the title of the sheet indicates vegetation is shown, it is not.



SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVE FOR FILLING STATION
27th St. & NEW HAMPSHIRE AVE

STONE TREATMENT

NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK & PLANNING COMMISSION

844/8012

Elevation, "Suggested Alternative for Filling Station--Stone Treatment," 27th St. & New Hampshire Ave. National Capital Park & Planning Commission, 1932. 844/80124 (91.2-64) National Archives. This rendering of a rustic filling station, for a site not far from Rock Creek & Potomac Parkway, is stylistically akin to that of Higgins Service Station. There is no evidence it was ever built.



Looking north to the rear facade of Higgins Service Station, showing parkway and sod being installed around newly planted trees and shrubs. Photograph ca. 1932-35. Martin Luther King Library.