

HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDY REPORT

COPELAND'S SERVICE STATION

(Written 1995)

I. NAME

Historic: Copeland's Service

Common: Same

II. LOCATION

4924 West Roosevelt Drive

Legal description: Tax Key #: 288-1059-000

SHERIDANPARK IN SE ¼ SEC 11-7-21 BLOCK 9 ALL OF BLOCK 9

10th Aldermanic District

III. CLASSIFICATION

Structure

IV. OWNER

Action Imports
Attention: Elroy Kade
2848 West Wells Street
Milwaukee, WI 53208

V. YEAR BUILT

1938

Architect: U.F. Peacock & A. C. Runzler

VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Copeland's Service Station is located in the Sherman Park neighborhood on a triangular parcel of land bordered on the north by Keefe Avenue, on the west by 50th Street, on the south by Roosevelt Drive and on the east by 49th Street. The filling station itself occupies the west end of its lot with the gasoline pumps located to the east at the narrow end of the lot. With the exception of curbside grassy plots, the remainder of the property is paved with concrete. The surrounding area is residential with single-family homes and duplexes that date from the 1920' to the 1950's. A few commercial properties are located in the immediate vicinity and include a small building with two storefronts (1952) across the street from Copeland's addressed at 3451-3453 N. 50th Street and a windowless concrete block structure around the corner at 5007 W. Keefe Avenue, built in 1981 and used for the distribution of newspapers.

Copeland Service Station is a rectangular, one-story, flat-roofed concrete block structure approximately 16 feet high and 44 feet by 28 feet in size. An example of Streamlined Moderne Style, its chief design elements include a rounded corner at the southeast end of the building and a series of horizontal bands of projecting block that extend around the entire building. Aside from the narrow projecting bands that occur between every two courses of concrete block, the building has no applied ornament or decorative features.

The station's main entrance is located at the southeast curved end of the building where a doorway is flanked by three, metal-framed, curved windows. To the left or west of the entrance is a doorway opening to a restroom. To the right or north of the entrance are two overhead garage doors that open to the automobile service bays. The other elevations are utilitarian in character. The Keefe Avenue façade has three rectangular windows while two windows are located on the 50th Street façade in addition to a doorway and three narrow windows that serviced the public restrooms. Most of these openings are currently boarded-up; the larger windows on Keefe and 50th Street are filled in with concrete block. The original plans for the building show that the garage door had two rows of wood panels topped with two rows of glass panels and that the large windows on Keefe Avenue and 50th Street had steel sash with 12 lights, each light being 12-ince by 13-ince in dimension. Narrow horizontal muntins divided the narrow restroom windows as well as the large office windows into three lights each. Other than alterations to the windows and some deterioration of the concrete block at the roofline, the building has not been much changed. The current red and white color scheme is said not to be original to the building. Long-time neighborhood residents have reported that the color scheme changed each time the Copelands changed leases from Standard to Texaco to Union 76. The current gasoline pumps are not original.

VII. SIGNIFICANCE

Copeland's Service Station is architecturally significant as one of the city's few remaining unaltered examples of a Streamlined Moderne Style building. It is also one of the few local filling stations designed in this style. The Streamlined Modern Style is characterized by flat roofs, horizontal lines, sleek and uncluttered wall planes, and by curved surfaces such as curved corners, or cylindrical projections, which were that to be suggestive of movement and speed. It was a style that consciously broke with the handcrafted architecture of the past to celebrate the future by embracing the machine-made aesthetics of the manufacturing process. It was popular from the 1930's into the early 1950's. Copeland's Service Station exhibits many of the key elements of the Streamlined Moderne Style including a flat roof, a curved corner and horizontal banding.

The use of this style for transportation-related structures such as automobile service and sales buildings was considered to be particularly appropriate in the 1930's and in the 1940's, although not too many examples were built in Milwaukee. Gas stations by nature are short-lived structures and have traditionally been built, remodeled and replaced over the decades to serve the changing image and needs of the gasoline sales and auto repair industry. The Copeland Service Station is unusual in that it has remained virtually unaltered since it was built. Filling stations are typically affiliated with a particular oil company through direct ownership or by a lease arrangement, as was Copeland's with the Standard Oil Company. From the earliest days, oil companies have chosen to use their stations as a three-dimensional advertisement for their companies, to reflect their corporate image and to be instantly recognizable to the motoring public as purveyors of a particular brand of gasoline. One of the most unusual and endearing local manifestations of this trend are the eye-catching pagoda-roofed stations erected by the Wadhams Oil Company. Other companies used other architectural styles, for example, the English cottage style, for their gas stations. The Standard Oil Company built thousands of their flat-roofed, compact, modern style stations easily distinguished by their enamel-clad metal exteriors executed in sleek, sanitary white. The Copeland station was a privately built gas station intended to reflect the established ultra-modern corporate image of the Standard Oil Company in the 1930's. While more research needs to be done on local filling station design, the Copeland station is even more

unusual as an example of a gas station built privately by a family who operated it under the names of a succession of oil companies over three generations.

Copeland's Service Station is also significant as an uncommon example of a Streamlined Moderne Style building produced by Urban F. Peacock, a distinguished local architect better known for his Period Revival work. Peacock was an architect best known for his movie theater designs and luxurious houses. Educated at Columbia University's School of Architecture, Peacock opened his own architectural firm with Armen C. Frank in Milwaukee in 1920.

During the 1920's, Peacock was quite active locally in designing expensive residential structures, most notably the J. A. Nolan House (1921-22), the Clara Wuesthoff Post House (1923) and the Anders J. Christensen House (1925). Peacock also designed larger buildings including the Ambassador Hotel (1927), the convent at St. John's Cathedral Complex (1926), and the Deaconess Hospital (1958-63).

Peacock, however, may be best remembered for the movie theaters that he designed throughout Milwaukee. These theaters included the Lake Theater (1926), the Egyptian Theater (1927), the Venetian Theater (1927) the Arabia Theater (1926, never completed), and the Airway Theater (1949, drive-in). These theaters were characterized by elaborate ornamentation, flamboyant color schemes and exotic-looking materials.

Peacock's design business flourished in the 1920's, but the economic conditions of the 1930's forced clients to eliminate extravagant building expenditures and this included the type of architecture that was associated with Peacock's firm. Peacock, like other architects during the Great Depression, had to take on clients and projects that might otherwise have gone to lesser firms. Copeland's Service Station represents one such project and it appears that Peacock was trying his hand at an architectural style that was quite different from what he was most accustomed to. The Streamlined Moderne building was in many ways the antithesis of the elaborate historical styled buildings that he designed during the "Roaring Twenties." It could be suggested that the Copeland gas station reflects the socio-economic realities of the 1930's in that it celebrates an austere industrial aesthetic that spoke of progress and a return to economic stability. The Streamlined Moderne style expressed both the designer's and the public's desire to overcome the past and move into a smooth, mechanistic world of economic certainty. It also seemed to be the most appropriate architectural mode to service the automobile, the single machine that had the most influence on changing the American way of life in the early twentieth century.

The site on which the gas station is located is also significant from a community-planning standpoint. The area surrounding the gas station is almost exclusively residential. The gas station is really the only commercial property for several blocks around and serves as a visual landmark in the neighborhood, because of its prominent site. The fact that this commercial property is a gas station reinforced the larger belief of the period that the automobile should be welcomed as an integral part of modern life. The engines and steel bodies of modern cars were viewed as friendly items that could be directly incorporated into daily life. The location of this gas station in the midst of a newly developing residential area was as natural at that time as welcoming the car right into the home would be in the 1950's through the popularization of the attached garage.

VIII. HISTORY

Walter H. Copeland (1885-1942) was a native of England who came to the United States around 1904. He eventually settled in Janesville, Wisconsin where he worked as a traveling representative for the General Motors Corporation. Copeland was living in nearby Milton in 1938 when he acquired the property at 4924 West Roosevelt Drive. He was one of a number of property owners who successfully protested in August of that year against a proposed rezoning of the south side of Keefe Avenue between

49th and 60th Street from local business to residential use. On September 23, 1938 Copeland took out a permit to build a service station on his property.

Local architects Urban F. Peacock and A .C. Runzler designed the simple, Streamlined Moderne Style structure which cost an estimated \$3,000. The building was completed in January of 1939. Copeland's filling station is Peacock's only known gas station project to date and reflects the type of small projects that probably enabled him to remain in business during the Great Depression of the 1930's.

Walter H. Copeland moved his wife, Alice Moore, and their son, Walter H. Jr., to Milwaukee once the business was operational. The family lived at 4530A W. Medford Avenue. Copeland died suddenly on July 11, 1942 at the age of 57 of a heart attack and was buried at Oak Hill Cemetery in Janesville, Wisconsin. His son, Walter, Jr., took over the business and continued the lease with the Standard Oil Company that his father had initiated.

Walter H. Copeland, Jr., his Wife, Doris, and their children, Walter E., Christine S., and Richard A. lived within a few blocks of the filling station at 3709 N. 42nd Street and also cared for his mother, the widowed Alice Moore Copeland. Like his father, Walter, Jr. died unexpectedly of a stroke at St. Joseph Hospital on June 5, 1967 at the age of 51. Although legally the filling station was still part of the life trust estate of Alice Moore Copeland, her mother-in-law, Doris Copeland was able to administer the business while their son, Walter E., only 23 at the time, took care of the day-to-day operations. Walter E. or "Wally," as the neighborhood resident knew him, continued the business that his grandfather had founded until his own retirement in 1990. Wally Copeland changed his lease from Standard Oil to Texaco (fall, 1976) and then to Union 76 (fall, 1982) before closing the business. Neighborhood residents say that Wally Copeland is now living in the Lake Winnebago area while his mother, Doris, is in a nursing home. The station has been closed since the Copeland sold it.

IX. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Copeland Service Station, 4924 West Roosevelt Drive, be studied for possible designation as a City of Milwaukee Historic Structure as a result of its possible fulfillment of criteria e-5 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 308-81(2)(e), of the Milwaukee Code of Ordinance.

X. PRESERVATION GUIDELINES

The following preservation guidelines represent the principal concerns of the Historic Preservation Commission regarding this historic designation. However, the Commission reserves the right to make final decisions based upon particular design submissions. Nothing in these guidelines shall be construed to prevent ordinary maintenance or the restoration and/or replacement of documented original elements.

A. Roofs

Retain the existing roof shape. Skylights may be added to roof surfaces if they are not visible from the street. Avoid making changes to the roof that would alter the building height, roofline or pitch.

B. Materials

1. Masonry

- a. Repoint defective mortar by duplicating the original in style. Avoid using mortar colors and pointing styles that were unavailable or were not used when the building was constructed.
- b. Clean masonry only when necessary to halt deterioration and with the gentlest method possible.
- c. Repair or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the old as closely as possible.

2. Wood/Metal

- a. Retain original material whenever possible. Avoid removing architectural features that are essential to maintaining the building's character and appearance.
- b. Retain or replace deteriorated material with new material that duplicates the appearance of the old as closely as possible. Avoid covering architectural features with new materials that do not duplicate the appearance of the original materials.

C. Windows and Doors

1. Retain existing window and door openings. Retain the existing configuration of panes, sash, surrounds and sills except as necessary to restore to the original condition. Avoid making additional openings or changes in existing fenestration by enlarging or reducing window or door openings. Avoid changing the size or configuration of the overhead garage doors unless the door retains the appearance of an overhead garage door. Use storm windows or protective glazing that has glazing configurations similar to the prime windows and that obscures the prime windows as little as possible.
2. Respect the building's stylistic period. If the replacement of doors or window sash is necessary, the replacement should duplicate the appearance and design of the original window sash or door. Avoid using inappropriate sash and door replacements. Avoid

the filling-in or covering of original openings with inappropriate materials such as glass block.

3. Exterior mounted steel bar security doors and window guards are generally not allowed. If permitted, the doors or grates shall be of the simplest design and installed so as to be as unobtrusive as possible.

D. Trim and Ornamentation

There should be no changes to the existing trim or ornamentation except as necessary to restore the building to its original condition. Replacement features shall match the original member in scale, design, color and appearance.

E. Additions

No additions will be permitted.

F. Signs/Exterior Lighting

The installation of any permanent exterior sign or light fixture shall require the approval of the Commission. Approval will be based on the compatibility of the proposed sign or light with the historic and architectural character of the building.

G. Site Features

New plant materials, paving, fencing or accessory structures shall be compatible with the historic architectural character of the building if visible from the public right of way.