

# FINAL HISTORIC DESIGNATION STUDY REPORT

## CLINTON STREET FILLING STATION

### I. NAME

Historic: Clinton Street Filling Station of the Wadhams Oil Company

Common Name: Wadhams Station

### II. LOCATION

Address: 104 West Walker Street

Legal description - Tax Key No. 431-0608-000

Subd of BLK 99 in SE ¼ SEC 32-7-22  
BLOCK 99 E 75' LOT 6

### III. CLASSIFICATION

Building

### III. OWNER

Federal Manufacturing Company  
901 South 2<sup>nd</sup> Street  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53204

### V. YEAR BUILT:

1930

### ARCHITECT:

Prototype design by Alexander C. Eschweiler

### VI. PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Clinton Street Filling Station occupies a 75-foot by 51-foot lot at the northwest corner of South First (formerly Clinton) and West Walker Streets. The building is situated at the north end of the lot and abuts an adjacent garage/manufacturing structure. A small grassy plot is located at the building's eastside and near the sidewalk at the southwest corner of the grounds but otherwise the remainder of the lot is paved. The neighborhood around the building is industrial.

The Clinton Street Filling Station is a small, 20-foot by 14-foot rectangular structure. Two small 3-foot "wings" to the east and west are set back from the main block of the building and once served as restrooms. Concrete corner piers form the main support of the building. The front or south elevation consists of a central entrance flanked by large windows that are topped with transoms. The side windows repeat the theme, as do the restroom wings. The transoms and side windows feature a scalloped corner in keeping

with the Oriental theme of the building. The bulkhead areas below the windows are built of brick; red brick forms the outer border while yellow ochre brick fills in the field within the border. The main feature of the building is of course the oriental-style Pagoda roof with its upswept corners. The roof is made of pressed metal tiles and was always red in color. The gable ends were filled in with back lit leaded glass featuring a large capital letter "W" for Wadhams. A brick chimney is located at the rear of the structure and is topped with a rectangular stone cap atop which sit two irregularly shaped rocks.

Alterations to the building have been minimal although the station has been closed since around 1983. It appears that the front and side windows were replaced with large single panes. Historic photos of other stations show that a ladder-like arrangement of rectangular panes in these openings was typical. The pump island that last held two pumps was once located southeast of the building but has been removed along with the underground tanks. One of these pumps is now stored within the building. The gable ends are now covered over to hide the large stained glass "W's" that were once a prominent feature of the buildings and are still extant. The brick bulkhead area has been painted gray and white and obscures the original boldly colored red and yellow ochre brick. The interior is simply finished. The ceiling is highlighted by a grid design and features 3 pendant light fixtures. Crown moldings provide the transition from ceiling to wall. While there are references to fireplaces in the larger stations it is not known whether or not one is located here since a partition has been constructed across the center portion of the station interior.

## **VII. SIGNIFICANCE**

The Clinton Street Filling Station is significant as a rare surviving example of Milwaukee's signature filling station design. Local architect Alexander C. Eschweiler for Milwaukee-based regional Wadhams Oil Company designed the prototype for the pagoda-roofed structure. Said to date from 1916, the prototype came at a time when oil companies began establishing their own filling station chains rather than just supplying the local repair shops, small manufacturers and independent operators as had been done earlier. These chains provided good service as well as a snazzy design to attract and keep customers and establish brand recognition.

Wadhams built the pagoda style station from approximately 1917 to the early 1930's by which time they had some 41 filling stations in town and in the nearby communities of Wauwatosa, West Allis and Franklin. While further research might indicate just how many of these were of the pagoda-roofed design, we know from historic photographs that stations in this design once stood at 27<sup>th</sup> and Wisconsin Avenue, Van Buren and State Streets, Hawley and Blue Mound Roads, 35<sup>th</sup> and Vliet, 4<sup>th</sup> and North, 5<sup>th</sup> and Michigan Streets, South 1<sup>st</sup> and Walker Streets, and 16<sup>th</sup> and Center Streets. Of all of these only the Clinton Street and the 4th and North stations survive in the city today.

The Clinton Street Filling Station is also significant as one of the most unusual designs from local architect Alexander C. Eschweiler. This architect was one of Milwaukee's outstanding designers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work and the work of his firm includes some of Milwaukee's most cherished and well-recognized architectural landmarks as the Charles Allis Museum, the Downer Quad at UWM, Emanuel Philip School, the Arena, and the Gas Company building downtown.

## **VIII HISTORY**

Little did Edward A. Wadhams know how his name would still be remembered among Milwaukeeans at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Wadhams was born in Litchfield, Connecticut in 1848/1849 and became interested in the oil industry at the age of eighteen. Taking his \$1,000 inheritance he ventured to the oil fields of western Pennsylvania but lost everything after investing in a small machine and supply business. He relocated to New York where he took on the job of salesman to a metal concern. This was followed by a period in Texas where he worked for the railroad and also herded cattle.

Wadhams moved to Milwaukee in 1875 and worked for oil firms C. A. Folsom & Son, and Isted & Halsted, becoming a partner in the latter business in 1879. In 1883 he sold his interest in the firm and organized Wadhams, Magie & Co. with Eldred Magie. The firm specialized in machinery oil. Wadhams bought out Mr. Magie in 1888 and changed the name of the company to Wadhams Oil and Grease Co. with himself as president, Eugene C. Kirby as vice-president, George L. Graves as treasurer and George F. O'Neil as secretary. The company offices were located on Fowler Street from 1889 to 1899/1900 when they moved to National Avenue east of Barclay Street. The company would remain based out of Walkers Point for the next six decades. In 1905 the business reorganized as the Wadhams Oil Company with officers E. A. Wadhams, Frank J. Kipp, George A. Streeter, Louis McNally, S.S. Cramer, and H.J. Noyes. Wadhams himself died on April 18, 1916 at the age of 67 or 68 or 69 (sources disagree). He died after a 10-day bout of pneumonia in Los Angeles, California having gone there two months earlier for a combined business and pleasure trip. He was subsequently buried at Milwaukee's Forest Home Cemetery. Representatives from Wadhams Oil branches in Seattle, Minneapolis and Wisconsin attended the funeral. Honorary pallbearers from St. James Episcopal Church included Augustus H. Vogel and Judge William Turner and active pallbearers included the company's officers.

Following Wadhams' death, S.S. Cramer assumed the presidency and Wadhams' son –in-law Harger W. Dodge became one of the vice presidents along with F.J. Kipp and George A. Streeter.

New developments would soon make Wadhams a household word in Milwaukee. A large new office building would be constructed in the summer of 1917 at the southwest corner of South First (Clinton) and West Walker Streets. It was designed by the local firm of Schnetzky & Son and cost \$25,000. Harger Dodge is credited with steering the company's new concept, the filling station. He is said to have been the one to hire local society architect Alexander Eschweiler to design a prototype station for the firm. The concept of oil companies operating their own chain of filling stations was a development that would flourish in later years and give rise to some of the most interesting and inventive architecture that this country has ever seen.

This was a time of great opportunity for oil companies such as Wadhams. Before the era of the large global monopolies, hundreds of cities like Milwaukee were home to hundreds of local oil companies that provided lubricants and grease to the burgeoning industries with their myriad of machinery. With the development of the automobile, enterprising oilmen expanded their product lines to service the growing need for motor oils, and specialty lubricants and, most importantly, gasoline. Initially an unwanted byproduct of the production of kerosene, gasoline became the fuel of choice for the new horseless carriages. The cumbersome and inconvenient fueling depots at the edges of town were made necessary by the highly volatile fuel and it was not until the development of easy to use hand pumps, pumps with gages and safe underground storage tanks that gasoline filling stations could be located at convenient locations within the heart of populated urban areas.

The debate continues over when the first filling station was established. Some say it was in New York in 1901, some give credit to St. Louis in 1905. Periodicals in the mid-1920's requested subscribers to send in information about the earliest stations they knew and many claimed to be the "first" in their area. Given the rapid growth in the use of the automobile and the quick succession of technological innovations we will probably never know. Countless fueling stations that brokered in kerosene soon began to dispense gasoline

These locations gave way to roadside pumps operated by independent owners who often had a repair shop, or machine shop or livery business. The unsightly roadside pumps with their utilitarian trappings in turn gave way to the well-designed filling station that promoted cleanliness and efficiency. Wadhams, like many of its contemporaries, recognized the importance of establishing its own chain of stations and its own "look" for instant name and product recognition.

Eschweiler is said to have designed the Wadhams prototype in 1916. The distinctive pagoda roofed structure was unique in the filling station genre. Why its exotic form was chosen is not known. Thomas Eschweiler, grandson of A.C. Eschweiler and curator of the Wisconsin Architectural Archives, hints that there was an interest in Oriental architecture with Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Eschweiler might have been playfully tweaking the great man's influence by coming up with a Japanese pagoda that would be used as a filling station, a building type not given much serious consideration by the serious architectural community. Attoe and Latus in their 1973 article on the subject make reference to the popularity of the Japanese exhibits at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia (1876), the Columbian Exposition (1893), the St. Louis Exposition (1904) and the interest in oriental exoticism at the time. It is said that the pavilions at Chicago and St. Louis were virtually identical in form and proportion to the first Wadhams Station. Perhaps the company wanted a structure that would have no historic design roots in the midwest. Perhaps Harger or other officers had a particular fondness for Japanese art or culture.

The station that Eschweiler designed consisted of a rectangular base with a large, showy pagoda-style roof with upturned eaves. There were two basic forms to the station, the free standing four-sided version and the three-sided model which had its rear attached to either a party wall or a brick wall constructed for the station. Most roofs featured gabled ends in which leaded glass was placed that had the signature capital letter W as part of the design. The roofs were made of sheet metal stamped to look like tile. More ambitious models had multi-tiered roofs such as the example at 27<sup>th</sup> and Wisconsin (razed) and in Cedarburg (extant). R. A. M. Anderson, an architect and architectural critic writing for **Petroleum Age** in 1926 commented "I ran across the oddest service station the other day in Milwaukee that I believe that I have ever seen". He went on to state the "a friend of mine remarked when he saw the photo, "When an alien driver sees that station for the first time he wont [sic] know whether he is going to get gas, chop suey or Japanese tea." Anderson continues that the "color scheme ...can be "heard" for fourteen blocks in every direction." This color scheme, supposedly in the company colors, consisted of a brilliant red roof, a bright yellow for the trim and eaves with touches of black and blue to complete the picture. Anderson comments that even "if the unusual architecture did not attract the motorists' attention the color scheme is enough to knock his eye out and the two taken together are enough to give any driver pause." The bulkhead area below the windows is known to been constructed of either black or dark red brick or tile bordering a center field of ochre or yellow brick or tile. Corner posts were painted red or black and the windows were trimmed in yellow. At the back wall of the building would stand a prominent chimney of brick or stone and always capped with a rectangular block of stone surmounted by two irregular stones set upright.

The first of the signature Wadhams stations is said to have been built in 1917 at the corner of

5<sup>th</sup> and West Wisconsin Avenue. Since city directories do not show this station until 1920, further research will have to be done on this matter. Regardless of the location, the stations proved eye-catching and popular and under the direction of Wadhams building director Robert Baumgartner some 100 pagoda-roofed stations were built in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Upper Michigan. Eschweiler designed a handful of stations after the prototype but other architects were responsible for other stations built. Local architect Hugo Haeuser seemed to be the architect of choice in the 1930's. In addition to designing an addition to the company's headquarters at that time, he also is responsible for stations at 16<sup>th</sup> and Center Street (razed) and 4<sup>th</sup> and North (extant). These latter reflected the evolution of the filling station to include service bays for changing tires and oil, part of the "one stop shop" being promoted in the trade literature of the time.

Just how many pagoda-roofed stations were built in the city of Milwaukee is not known at this time. The Milwaukee City Directory began listing filling stations in 1915 at which time Wadhams is the only company shown. Wadhams had some 25 entries that included stations in North Milwaukee, St. Francis, Wauwatosa, Whitefish Bay and West Allis. Most of the listings were for independent operators who ran parking or service garages or repair or machine shops and just happened to sell gasoline as a sideline. Only four were listed as owned by Wadhams. By 1918 Wadhams had competition from Standard Oil and the Bartles-McGuire Oil Company and there were some six other independent stations listed. Listings change from year to year as the company acquired new sites and dropped independents for the expansion of its own chain. By 1922 there were 74 other filling stations in town in addition to the Wadhams and Standard chains and the number grew to 153 by 1925 and 166 by 1927.

By 1931 Wadhams had some 41 stations in the metro area. It is safe to say that the filling station could be found at virtually every major and secondary intersection in town by this time. The periodical **Petroleum Age** in 1925 indicated that Wisconsin was an "Independent hot bed" with a half dozen concerns doing business all over the state such as Wadhams, Bartles-Maguire, O'Neil, and Lindsay-McMillan. Each was said to be better known or at least as well known as the giant Standard Oil. On the whole they are said to have beat Standard in its own game with better-looking stations and frequently, better locations. The locals are also said to have done better advertising. Wadhams' S. S. Cramer is also credited with initiating advertising to convince consumers to purchase not just the average low-test gas but rather to spend more on high test gasoline and "tempered" motor oil. The article went on to say that Wadhams was spending the incredible sum of \$500 per day in advertising, something unheard of among independents. As a result, Wadhams and many of the Wisconsin chains offered consumers three grades of product in comparison to Standard's two.

Big changes took place at Wadhams in 1930 when the national firm, Vacuum Oil Company, took over the Milwaukee company. Another local chain, Bartles-Maguire, was also merged into the firm. Vacuum Oil was one of the nation's oldest petroleum firms, having been founded in 1866 in Rochester, New York. The company was named after Matthew Ewing's invention that made possible the production of kerosene by distilling crude oil in a vacuum. Vacuum Oil would merge with Socony in 1931 and eventually grew into the firm known as Mobil Corporation today. After Wadhams was taken over in 1930, Wadhams' S.S. Cramer took on the position of Chairman of the Board while Aubrey G. Maguire became president. Harger Dodge stayed on as one of the vice-presidents. Maguire became Chairman of the Board in 1931 and headed up the company for some time thereafter. Harger stepped up into the presidency in 1931 but left the company by 1939. The business was apparently structured into two divisions by that time, Wadhams-Division of Socony-Vacuum Oil Co. and Wadhams Oil Company. Company headquarters remained at 907 South First Street with additions being constructed in 1931 and 1941, both designed by local architect Hugo Haeuser. Mobil Oil

apparently shut down the Milwaukee office in 1963 and the building was vacated. Astronautics subsequently tenanted the old premises.

The Clinton Street Filling Station represents one of the small facilities built by Wadhams and interestingly, occupied the corner right across the street from the company headquarters. City directories show a station or at least a pump at 825-831 South First St. (a Wadhams garage built in 1919). This building still stands and is owned by Federal Manufacturing. To the south of this garage, at the corner of Walker St., was located a frame dwelling. This house was eventually razed and Wadhams took out a permit on May 16, 1930 to construct the existing pagoda-roofed filling station and pump island. The station survived under the ownership of Harley Sprague who still pumped gas at the facility into the early 1980's. It was one of only two of the eight documented pagoda-roofed structures in Milwaukee to survive and is the only example of the station's early form. In recognition of the building's distinctive form, it has been included in the 1973 Wisconsin Inventory of Historic Places, the Milwaukee County Directory of Historic Places, was recorded for the Historic American Building Survey and was made a City of Milwaukee Landmark in 1973. The building was also nominated for local designation in 1983 but was tabled at that time.

### **The Architect**

Alexander C. Eschweiler (1865-1940) was born in Boston, Massachusetts, the son of German mining engineer Carl Ferdinand Eschweiler and Hannah Lincoln Chadbourne, who was from an old New England family. Alexander's boyhood was spent in Michigan's Upper Peninsula copper country. In 1882, at the age of 17, he relocated to Milwaukee with his family. After attending Marquette University for a year, Eschweiler worked as a clerk and later a draftsman in an architect's office in 1886. The following year he left town to study architecture at Cornell University in New York and graduated in 1890. Upon his return to Milwaukee, Eschweiler worked for H.C. Koch & Co. and is said to have done some of the drafting on the City Hall tower. When he won the design competition for the Milwaukee Downer College Buildings in 1893, Eschweiler established his own practice in the Metropolitan Block at Third and State Streets. During these early years, Eschweiler designed the Milwaukee Gas Light Company Plant in the Menomonee Valley, the Wisconsin Telephone Company Building (razed) on Fifth Street, Plymouth Church, and numerous residences on the city's East Side, including those for Elizabeth Black, Charles Allis, Charles D. Mann, and Andrew Story Goodrich. Many of Eschweiler's early works were published in the **Architectural Record** of March, 1905. Herman H. Bruns and Fitzhugh Scott worked for Eschweiler in the early years before establishing their own architectural offices.

Eschweiler's three sons, Alexander Jr., Carl F., and Theodore L., followed in their father's footsteps and studied at Marquette University and Cornell University before being taken into the business in 1923. With the inclusion of the younger Eschweilers, the firm was renamed Eschweiler and Eschweiler. Offices were set up at 720 East Mason Street. The practice continued to design a variety of buildings including schools, churches, office buildings, residences, and industrial complexes. Among their better known projects are the Bankers Building (now remodeled), the Wisconsin Telephone Company Building, the Wisconsin Gas Company Building, WTMJ's Radio City, the Mariner Building (now the Hotel Metro), Rex Chainbelt, Cutler-Hammer Corporate Headquarters, the Milwaukee Arena, and the Milwaukee Public Museum. In honor of the firm's fiftieth anniversary, a commemorative publication written by Richard S. Davis was published in 1943 with an updated edition produced in 1951.

Alexander Eschweiler died on June 12, 1940 at his summer home at North Lake in Waukesha

County where the family has established summer and permanent homes on a farm at the south end of the lake. The three sons continued the architectural practice after their father's death. Alexander C. Jr. died in 1951 at the age of 58 in a plane crash. Carl F. Eschweiler retired from the firm in 1960 and died at the age of 76 on January 11, 1977. Theodore L. Eschweiler died on November 16, 1966 at the age of 77. Alexander C. Jr.'s son, Thomas L. Eschweiler, worked for the firm between 1954 and 1960 and left to work with Herbst, Jacoby & Herbst and in 1966 became director of construction with the Milwaukee Public Schools. By 1962 the firm was known as Eschweiler, Eschweiler & Sielaff. Between 1966 and 1974 it was known as Eschweiler, Schneider & Associates, Inc. It was last known as Eschweiler & Schneider in 1975 when it finally closed. The Eschweiler legacy continues through the Wisconsin Architectural Archives, begun in 1975 by Thomas Eschweiler with 1,250 drawings of the firm's work and an endowment to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Architecture which has brought internationally prominent architects to the school as visiting professors.

The Clinton Street Filling Station represents a unique design in the body of work produced by A.C. Eschweiler. While we do not know if he specifically designed this particular structure, we do know that he designed the prototype that it followed. Known more for his period revival designs, Eschweiler designed a station that is almost whimsical in character yet eye-catching and memorable, attributes undoubtedly appreciated by his client, Wadhams Oil Company.