



DD Dairy Queen

1947

By Joseph Schuchman

The Wilkinson Boulevard Dairy Queen is a fine albeit late example of the Art Deco style; the building's curved elements are typical features of this popular decorative movement. In site planning, the emphasis is clearly on vehicular traffic. The isolated one-story structure is literally surrounded by a parking lot. The store was constructed in 1947 by franchise operator Preston Aaron; plans were obtained from Harry Catz, operator of a Dairy Queen franchise in Miami, Florida who had previously utilized the design for his own store.

The cement block building is covered and ornamented with a variety of materials including tile, aluminum and neon. Rounded front corners ornament the rectangular-shaped main block. Plate glass windows dominate the front and side elevations; each window is set within a metal frame. Openings are set between wood piers with molded edges. A plain wood frieze and molded cornice runs across each elevation. Tiled wainscoting encircles the base. Square blocks of blue and white tile are set in the space between the serving windows on the front elevation. Similar-sized white tile is set on the remainder of the front and along each side. The blue and white scheme is also present in the aluminum awning which carries the main block. A plain frieze and cornice, also of aluminum, appears to rise from awning and continues in a northerly direction to enclose the rectangular-shaped rear ell. Neon lighting highlights the main block frieze. The words "Dairy Queen" are set in red colored neon and centrally placed on the main elevation; paired horizontal blue bands visually carry the eye to the east and west sides, where the words "Milk Shake" and "Sundaes Sodas" respectively are also lit in red neon. A newly repainted original display sign rises from the flat roof; paired figures of an Eskimo holding an oversized ice cream cone attractively proclaims the business housed beneath.

The rectangular-shaped ell, originally weatherboarded, has been vinyl sided. Both side elevations are recessed from the main block. Openings are minimal and consist of randomly placed single door entrances on the east and rear (north) sides. A white aluminum awning shelters the rear entrance. The structure was clearly designed for maximum business efficiency. Customers remain forever outside, even in the most inclement weather and the employees forever inside. In the post-war age of America on the move, no dining or seating facilities are provided, save for a lone exterior wood bench. The main block houses ice cream production and freezer facilities; the original ceiling height has been lowered. The rear ell contains storage and restroom facilities.

A 1947 Dairy Queen might seem an unusual site to be considered for historic designation. Yet, Art Deco ice cream stands and diners, English Tudor gas stations, and the functional drive-in movie theater are an important slice of a fading American culture. A *New York Times* article, which identified these structures as a kind of museum, perhaps best explains the ethic behind the preservation of such cultural monuments.

"No one said White Castles are great architecture but they are a facet of American culture. Golden Arches aren't great sculpture either but they deserve a place in the museum. So does a HoJo's orange roof and a string of Burma Shave signs. Too bad it's too late for the man blowing smoke rings in Times Square." ¹

But it is not too late for Dairy Queen, which remains both an architectural and gastronomic delight.

Notes

¹ "Museum America". *New York Times*. Mar. 18, 1984, "Week in Review", p. 20.

New York Times. Mar. 18, 1984, "Week in Review", p. 20.

Dr. William H. Huffman
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The traffic on Wilkinson Boulevard is virtually non-stop. As travelers pass the 2600 block of Wilkinson, few realize that they are riding by a slice of cultural, and culinary Americana. Built in 1947, the Wilkinson Boulevard Dairy Queen is the oldest franchise of the ice cream chain in North Carolina and the third oldest in the southeast. With the end of the Second World War, Americans found themselves in the midst of the post war economic boom. This prosperity coupled with the nation's love affair with the automobile encouraged the local and national population to take to the road; Dairy Queen joined with a number of automobile-related facilities, including drive-in theaters, curb station restaurants and gas stations, to meet the needs of the local and long distance traveler.

There are only two Dairy Queens in Charlotte, one on Wilkinson Boulevard (opened 1947), and one on Central Avenue (opened 1950), and both owe their existence to several factors: the post-war automobile society; the invention of soft ice cream by two Illinois men in 1938; and Preston Aaron, who acquired local Dairy Queen rights after the war.

Dairy Queen got its start in the late Thirties, when J. F. McCullough, who lived in a small Illinois town, noticed that his daughter, before eating her ice cream, would mash it and allow it to melt some in order to get it soft enough to eat. With a friend, Herb Noble, their tinkering with that idea led to the first sale of a new soft ice cream product in 1938, which sold for the extravagant price of 10 cents a portion, but even then it was an instant hit. The first store set up to sell their confection opened in Joliet, Ill. in 1940, and its success provided the incentive to open other stores. By the time of America's entry into World War II in December, 1941, however, there were only three in operation.¹

World War II broke the ten-year economic depression the U. S. suffered in the Thirties, and after the war, the pent-up affluence accumulated by the workers on the home front and those returning from the service caused a great economic boom that lasted until the late '50s. Much of this boom centered around demand for new automobiles (which had not been manufactured during the war) and new housing, as well as for other consumer goods. More than ever, America became an automobile-centered society that lived ever farther out from the middle of town in new suburbs. The phenomenon was magnified by a seemingly endless supply of inexpensive gasoline, low interest rates for loans, and government policies that encouraged individual home ownership. Above all, the automobile was king: trolleys ceased to run in many cities (in Charlotte, 1938); train ridership dropped dramatically; and many of the new suburban areas were not served by any kind of public transportation at all. In this context, it is not surprising to find, from that period to the present, the growth of businesses catering to the convenience of motorists.

It is also in this content that we find Dairy Queen to be one of the pioneers in this field, and their post-war expansion illustrates the point. In 1946, the company had franchised seventeen stores, but at the end of the following year, there were an even one hundred; and by 1950, there were 1,466 in operation. Today there are over 4700 worldwide.² In Charlotte, Preston Aaron opened his first store on Wilkinson Boulevard in 1947, and

another on Franklin Avenue in Gastonia two years later. (He got his franchise rights from Harry Oatz, who held the patent on the ice cream machine and ran a store in Miami, Florida.) The Wilkinson store was the first of its kind in the state, and only the third in the Southeast.³ They joined a host of automobile-related businesses that appeared in the city: drive-in movie theaters; curbside restaurants, and, of course, gas stations and repair shops. Many of these were located on the main thoroughfares leading in and out of the city: Wilkinson Boulevard, South Boulevard, Statesville Road, and Central Avenue.

The man who operated the Esso Station at the corner of Wilkinson Boulevard and Berryhill Road, Robert F. Hewitt, and his wife, Mary, became two of the Aarons' steady customers, and the Aarons, in turn, bought all of their gas from Hewitt. Over time, Hewitts became interested in the Dairy Queen business, and in 1950 they bought a franchise territory from Harry Oatz. Using sketches provided by Mr. Oatz for his Miami, Florida, store (the same one used for the Wilkinson store), Hewitt hired a local small contractor, Mr. Mauney, to construct the cement block building, and the first ice cream cone was vended from the new business on March 1, 1950.⁴ It was built on the corner of Central and Pecan Avenues on property leased from Charles H. Garmon, Sr., a retired automobile salesman.⁵

As a pioneer business in the city's automobile-oriented post-World War II past, the Wilkinson Boulevard Dairy Queen is now quaint in appearance and is no longer located on a major thoroughfare, but still plays a very active role in the in the modern world-on-wheels we still live in, and is a significant artifact of our modern culture.

NOTES

¹ Brochure, Dairy Queen International. Inc.

² Ibid.

³ Interview with Preston Aaron, Charlotte, NC, 27 June 1985.

⁴ Ibid.; interview with Mary Hewitt, Charlotte, NC 26 June 1985.

⁵ Deed Book 699, p. 29B, 16 April 1928; Charlotte City Directories. 1926-1950.

⁶ Interview With Mary Hewitt, cited above.

Contextual Description

Dairy Queen

2620 Wilkinson Blvd.