

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service  
National Register of Historic Places Registration Form



1. Name of Property

Historic Name: Abilene Courts  
Other name/site number: NA  
Name of related multiple property listing: NA

2. Location

Street & number: 633 S. 11<sup>th</sup> Street  
City or town: Abilene State: Texas County: Taylor  
Not for publication:  Vicinity:

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.

I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following levels of significance:  
 national  statewide  local

Applicable National Register Criteria:  A  B  C  D

Mark Wolfe State Historic Preservation Officer Date 4/20/15  
Signature of certifying official / Title  
Texas Historical Commission  
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency / bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:  
 entered in the National Register  
\_\_\_\_\_ determined eligible for the National Register  
\_\_\_\_\_ determined not eligible for the National Register.  
\_\_\_\_\_ removed from the National Register  
\_\_\_\_\_ other, explain: \_\_\_\_\_

[Signature] Date of Action 6/3/2015  
Signature of the Keeper

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**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Private
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Local
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - State
<input type="checkbox"/>	Public - Federal

**Category of Property**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	building(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	district
<input type="checkbox"/>	site
<input type="checkbox"/>	structure
<input type="checkbox"/>	object

**Number of Resources within Property**

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	-	buildings
-	-	sites
-	-	structures
-	-	objects
1	0	total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register:

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions:** DOMESTIC/hotel

**Current Functions:** Work in Progress

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification:** Other: Tourist Court

**Principal Exterior Materials:** Brick, Stucco, Wood

**Narrative Description** (see continuation sheets 7 and 8)

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## 8. Statement of Significance

### Applicable National Register Criteria

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>A</b>	Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>B</b>	Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<b>C</b>	Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<b>D</b>	Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations:** NA

**Areas of Significance:** Commerce, Architecture

**Period of Significance:** 1930-1961

**Significant Dates:** 1930

**Significant Person** (only if criterion b is marked): NA

**Cultural Affiliation** (only if criterion d is marked): NA

**Architect/Builder:** Chambers & Mills, general contractor.

**Narrative Statement of Significance** (see continuation sheets 9 through 14)

## 9. Major Bibliographic References

**Bibliography** (see continuation sheet 14 and 15)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State historic preservation office (*Texas Historical Commission, Austin*)
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository:

**Historic Resources Survey Number** (if assigned): NA

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## 10. Geographical Data

**Acreeage of Property:** Less than one acre

### Coordinates

#### Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: NA

1. Latitude: 32.436989° Longitude: -99.730747°

**Verbal Boundary Description:** Old Town Abilene Block 208 of the Anderson subdivision 1-A, Lot 10, 11, 12. The lot is bounded on the north by S 11<sup>th</sup> Street, on the east by an alleyway, on the west by Locust Street, and on the south by the southern parcel edge.

**Boundary Justification:** The boundary for Abilene Courts includes all property historically associated with Abilene Courts since its construction in 1930. No other parcels or buildings are associated with this business.

## 11. Form Prepared By

**Name/title:** Gregory Smith, THC National Register Coordinator, and Stephanie Goodrich, City of Abilene  
Historic Preservation Officer

**Organization:** City of Abilene

**Street & number:** 555 Walnut Street

**City or Town:** Abilene

**State:** Texas

**Zip Code:** 79601

**Email:** stephanie.goodrich@abilenetx.com

**Telephone:** 325-676-6230

**Date:** July 2014

## Additional Documentation

**Maps** (see continuation sheets 16 through 18)

**Additional items** (see continuation sheets 19 through 24)

**Photographs** (see continuation sheets 25 through 39)

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**Photographs**

Abilene Courts  
633 S. 11<sup>th</sup> Street  
Abilene, Taylor County, Texas  
All photos by Crystal Nichols, 2104 (except as noted)

Photo 1  
Entrance gate, camera facing southwest  
Photographed by Gregory Smith, July 2013

Photo 2  
Archway over drive, camera facing southeast

Photo 3  
Neon sign and painted signage on south elevation, camera facing southwest.  
Photographed by Gregory Smith, July 2013

Photo 4  
Southwest oblique, camera facing northeast

Photo 5  
Original window on north elevation, camera facing south

Photo 6  
Courtyard, camera facing west  
Photographed by Stephanie Goodman, 2014

Photo 7  
Entrance gate from courtyard, camera facing north  
Photographed by Stephanie Goodman, 2014

Photo 8  
Western row of rooms with awning, camera facing south

Photo 9  
Open car bays, camera facing north

Photo 10  
Open car bays, camera facing north

Photo 11  
Metal roof cover detail

Photo 12  
Shed addition with sloped roof, camera facing north

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Photo 13

Southern façade, camera facing northwest

Photo 14

Typical condition in rental units, with deteriorated flooring

Photo 15

Typical interior door

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

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## Description

Abilene Courts, at 633 S. 11<sup>th</sup> Street in Abilene, Texas, is a compact rectangular courtyard-plan tourist court built in 1930 along the original alignment of the transcontinental Bankhead Highway. The single-story, flat-roofed, 20-unit wood frame building is finished with brick on the primary north exterior elevation, and stucco on all other facades, including the courtyard. The Mission Revival-inspired north façade features a brick arched driveway entrance in the second of five bays, featuring remarkably-intact painted signage with the name “Abilene Courts” and unit prices of “\$1” and “\$3.” A projecting neon sign hangs to the right of the arch in the third bay, and each north window is finished with a metal-tiled shed awning. Each rental unit is adjacent to a dedicated carport, all of which are accessed through the courtyard, maximizing privacy as the building turns inward from the street. Most of the carport bays have been infilled in with weatherboard siding and the exterior windows on the east, south, and west elevations have been covered with plywood and stucco, but most windows are intact. The building retains a high degree of integrity.

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Abilene Courts is located on the near south side of Abilene, Texas, approximately one mile south of the railroad tracks that have historically bisected the north-central Texas city. The building is on the south side of the street, and occupies the northwest quarter of a square city block. The property is surrounded by a mix of commercial buildings, parking lots, and grassy lots that were once the location of commercial and residential buildings. The building is set back approximately 20 feet from S. 11<sup>th</sup> Street to the north and Locust Street to the west, and abuts an alley to the east. The south yard is enclosed by a chain link fence.

The single-story building is a compact rectangular courtyard-plan tourist court with a flat roof. The 20-unit wood frame building is finished with brick on the primary north exterior elevation, and stucco on all other facades, including the courtyard. The primary elevation faces north, and features a brick arched driveway entrance in the second of five bays, featuring remarkably-intact painted signage with the name “Abilene Courts” and unit prices of “\$1” and “\$3.” A projecting neon sign hangs to the right of the arch in the third bay. Each rental unit is adjacent to a dedicated carport, all of which are accessed through the courtyard, maximizing privacy as the building turns inward from the street. Most of the carport bays have been infilled in with weatherboard siding and the exterior windows on the east, south, and west elevations have been covered with plywood and stucco, but most windows are intact. The building retains a high degree of integrity.

Abilene Courts is a single building arranged with all units and alternating carports facing a central courtyard, which is accessed by a driveway that enters from 11<sup>th</sup> Street under a brick archway. Prior to 1955, where the city permit records were lost, many of these garage bays were filled in with weatherboard siding to create a second room for some units and the tourist court was converted into apartments.<sup>1</sup> There are three car bays still in original form, and a total of 20 rental units, one of which was converted to a larger manager’s suite, also prior to 1955, with the addition of a shed style rear addition with a sloped roof. All of the rooms had private bathrooms. Each room has a small living/sleeping area, a small kitchenette area and a bathroom. Where the car bays have been enclosed for additional space, this room served as a bedroom with a small closet.

The S. 11th Street five-bay primary façade is finished with a brick veneer. The second bay is a large arched opening over the courtyard entrance, with a parapet extending slightly above the rest of facade, and topped with a semicircular concrete block inscribed with the date “1930.” The exterior windows of the front façade are 4/4 rectangular single hung wood sashes, each topped with a wooden awning finished with corrugated metal intended to resemble clay barrel tiles. The painted signage dates to at least 1941, when the oldest known photograph shows

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<sup>1</sup>City of Abilene Building permits, on file at the City of Abilene, 555 Walnut Street, Abilene, Texas 79604

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the still-legible words: "ROOMS" (Bay 1); the prices of "\$1" and "\$3" and the name "ABILENE COURTS" on the arch (Bay 2); "APARTMENTS" (Bay 3); "FOR" (Bay 4); "TOURIST" (Bay 5).

The windows on the eastern wing of the building have been covered over with boards and covered with stucco. The original windows are still intact under these boards, although not in pristine condition. They are 4/4 single hung sash windows for the kitchenette windows and 2/2 rectangular single hung sash for the bathroom windows. The southern wing of the property is also covered with stucco on the exterior side. This side fronts on a vacant, partially-wooded lot surrounded by a chain-link fence. The windows were not boarded and covered, and as a result have suffered some vandalism. Some of the framing is intact and the windows match those of the rest of the property. The western wing exterior is also stucco over wood framing. The windows on this side of the building have also been covered with wood panels and stucco.

The courtyard provides access to all of the rooms. The eastern wing has rooms with awnings over both the windows to the living space and the doorway. Where the car bays have not been covered, the interior walls are stucco and they there is evidence of asphalt paving. The rooms themselves had wood flooring, and drywall walls. Most of that flooring is currently missing. In the southeast corner of the building is a double car bay, next to the largest of the original rooms. The wooden doors, where they are still in place, feature a five- panel configuration. The southern wing of the building also alternates with rooms and infilled garage bays. Where the bays have been infilled, a 1/1 aluminum frame window was added. The western wing has a continual awning. The only car bays on this part of the building have been converted into storage. The exterior of the courtyard side of this wing is wood weatherboard siding for the bottom third of the building and stucco on the top. These rooms are slightly smaller than the rest of the building. The northern wing courtyard side is also finished with stucco and weatherboard over the car bays. The shed addition is stucco over wood framing. Here the roof is slanted towards the courtyard and there are exposed rafter tails under the asphalt shingle roof.

The courtyard was paved with asphalt at an unknown date. The neon sign in the front is not the original sign, but is most likely more than fifty years old; the earliest known photo of the sign dates to 1979. The glass tubing has been removed and the metal box appears to have been painted more than once.<sup>2</sup>

Although the materials have deteriorated, the building retains a remarkable degree of integrity, and is easily recognizable as an excellent example of a prewar tourist court with intact painted signage.

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<sup>2</sup> City of Abilene Historic Survey Records form, 1979.



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### Statement of Significance

Abilene Courts in Abilene, Taylor County, Texas, is an outstanding example of a pre-World War II tourist court along the transcontinental Bankhead Highway, and is nominated to the National Register under Criteria A in the area of Commerce and Criterion C in the area of Architecture, at the state level of significance. Built in 1930 by former rancher William Bateman Burns one year after the paving of the Bankhead Highway through Abilene, the building reflects the explosion of family-owned roadside businesses across the United States, including gas stations, restaurants, and lodging facilities. The property consists of a single rectangular building wrapped around a central courtyard, accessed by a driveway under an arched opening, and stands as one of only two eligible examples of this once-common plan type along the Bankhead Highway in Texas. The property operated as a motel and apartment building under the same name until 1985, but is currently vacant and shows years of deferred maintenance. Displaying painted signage advertising rooms for one and three dollars, the building retains a remarkably high degree of integrity and stands as a rare example of its type in Texas.

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### Abilene, Texas

The north-central Texas city of Abilene is the county seat and largest city in Taylor County. The city is situated along a well-travelled statewide corridor, established by the Texas and Pacific Railway in the 1880s, and later crossed by a series of 20<sup>th</sup> century trans-state and transcontinental automobile routes, including the Bankhead Highway, State Highway 1, U.S. Highway 80, and Interstate 20. The city was incorporated in 1883, and later that same year, citizens voted to move the county seat from nearby Buffalo Gap to Abilene. The city steadily grew as a regional supply and shipping center for the increasing number of area ranchers and cotton farmers. Agricultural products commanded high prices during and immediately after World War I, boosting the local economy. The oil boom in nearby counties and the city's location along primary transportation routes combined to create a decade of explosive population and construction growth for the city in the 1920s, as the population more than doubled from 10,274 to 23,175 by 1930. Construction of public buildings, commercial buildings, and residences set records at this time, unmatched by any other period.<sup>3</sup> The establishment of military bases in the city and its environs during World War II (Camp Barkley and Tye Air Field, later Dyess AFB), also boosted the local economy. The city reached a population of 45,000 by 1950, flourished in the postwar period as a regional oil center, and today is home to several colleges and universities, two hospitals, and numerous food manufacturers. With a 2010 population over 117,000, Abilene is by far the largest city in the immediate 9-county region.<sup>4</sup>

### Establishment of Automobile Highways in Texas

Before the 1890s most roads in the United States were often the same dirt trails that earlier pioneers had blazed across the country. Poorly engineered and rarely maintained, these roads were marred by impassible stretches during inclement weather that limited their usefulness to most travelers.<sup>5</sup> Beginning in the 1890s, however, various groups known collectively as the "Good Roads Movement" promoted the development of improved roads nationwide for bicyclists and automobiles. These groups worked in tandem with farmers, ranchers, and other rural residents to petition for federal support of improved local and state transportation infrastructure. Automobile enthusiasts, especially in urban areas of Texas, joined regional auto clubs, which furthered the cause of good roads,

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<sup>3</sup> Molinda S. Parker. Abilene High School, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas." National Register nomination, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Fane Downs, "ABILENE, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hda01>), accessed October 23, 2014. Uploaded on June 9, 2010. Modified on May 13, 2014. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

<sup>5</sup> This section partially adapted from Gregory Smith, "Old Spanish Trail from U.S. 90 to Interstate Highway 10, Columbus vicinity, Colorado County, Texas," National Register of Historic Places nomination, 2012.

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and in the absence of government oversight of a state highway system, produced maps and guides for their members. By 1910, private highway associations began to organize to promote good roads in general, and support improvement of particular regional and national routes. By the mid-1920s, over 250 such highway associations represented named and numbered routes across the U.S., with dozens of named regional and interstate auto routes in Texas identified on road maps, including national roads such as the Bankhead Highway (Washington, DC, to San Diego, via Texarkana, Dallas, and El Paso), the Meridian Highway (Winnipeg to Mexico City, via Fort Worth and Laredo), and the Old Spanish Trail (St. Augustine, Florida to San Diego, via Houston, San Antonio, and El Paso). These associations furthered the cause of good roads through increased public awareness and supported roadside business such as hotels and other lodging, restaurants, and automobile parts and repair facilities; these businesses in turn advertised their services in the associations' publications. The task of building and improving roads in Texas was left to various governmental entities, beginning with municipal and county governments, but eventually including a high degree of state and federal control.

The Federal Road Act of 1916 allocated federal road construction funds only to states with central highway agencies. In 1917, Texas established the Texas Highway Commission, which at its first meeting proposed a network of 22 state highways. These routes largely followed existing county and local roads, and many followed routes that had been identified and promoted by various named highway associations. By 1919, the first 38 state highways were formally designated, including State Highway 1 (the Bankhead Highway), running between Texarkana and El Paso. By 1925, most of the major named highways became part of a federal trunk-line system with a federal numbering system working in tandem with the state highway system.

### **The Bankhead Highway in Taylor County**

The Bankhead Highway was one of two east-west transcontinental highways to cross Texas and was the only one in Taylor County.<sup>6</sup> The Bankhead National Highway Association, established in Alabama in 1916, became active in Texas in 1918.<sup>7</sup> Named after Alabama's U.S. Senator John H. Bankhead, the highway stretched from Washington, DC to San Diego, connecting the Texas cities of Texarkana, Dallas, Fort Worth, Abilene, Midland, and El Paso, along with dozens of smaller cities and rural communities along its 850-mile-long path across the state. Largely designated as State Highway 1 in 1919, the Bankhead Highway corridor also became part of the national highway system, carrying the "U.S. 80" identification in the western part of the state, including its route through Abilene. By the late 1920s, with the paving of the highway in Texas nearly complete, the Bankhead National Highway Association's activity in Texas slowed considerably, as local groups became more involved with the promotion of improved roads. Abilene was fortunate to have both the main Texas 1 route and Alternate route Texas A1 join in the center of town.<sup>8</sup> In Abilene, the eastern segment (South 11<sup>th</sup> Street) was paved in the late 1920s, but the Federal Aid Road Act and a one million dollar bond issued in 1927 underwrote the paving of 82 miles of county roads, thus

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<sup>6</sup>The Bankhead Highway in Texas has been extensively studied and surveyed through the Texas Historical Commission's Historic Highways program, culminating in the publication of a multi-volume historic context and survey report. See: <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/preserve/projects-and-programs/historic-texas-highways/bankhead-highway>. Sections of the Bankhead Highway in Abilene and Taylor County were listed in the NRHP in 1998 (*Bankhead Highway Historic District*). In 2013, Dan Smith published a comprehensive guide to Bankhead Highway in Texas, detailing its various alignments and the roadside businesses once located alongside the road (*The Bankhead Highway in Texas: A History and Driving Guide for the Nation's Earliest All-weather Transcontinental Highway* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Bankhead Highway Pub., 2013).

<sup>7</sup>Hardy Heck Moore, Inc., for the Texas Historical Commission. *The Development of Highways in Texas: A Historic Context of the Bankhead Highway and Other Historic Named Highways*. (Texas Historical Commission, 2014), p.262.

<sup>8</sup>Dan L. Smith, *The Bankhead Highway in Texas*, pp. 19-20.

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completing the Bankhead Highway through Taylor County in 1929.<sup>9</sup> The final section of the Bankhead Highway in Texas was paved in Mitchell County in 1931.<sup>10</sup>

Downtown Abilene lies north of the T&P railroad tracks, although the county court house and related governmental buildings are on the south side at 3<sup>rd</sup> and Oak. The city streets form two regular – though not quite matched – grids on the north and south sides of the railroad tracks, which bisect the city. The original alignment of the Bankhead Highway – which ultimately became known as State Highway 1 and U.S. Route 80 – entered the city on the southeast, becoming South 11<sup>th</sup> Street at the city limits at Rose Street. East of Rose Street, the road was known locally as “Bankhead Highway.” The Bankhead continued west for six blocks, before turning north at Oak Street and continuing eleven blocks towards the railroad tracks and downtown Abilene. This alignment served as a link in the major east-west highway through Abilene until the early 1960s, when it was bypassed by a newly-aligned US 80 along South 1<sup>st</sup> Street. Thereafter the 11<sup>th</sup>–Oak Street alignment served primarily as city streets carrying local traffic, and the number of businesses catering to travelers along the original bypassed corridor dwindled considerably.

By 1920 automobile traffic was on the rise through Abilene. Government commitment to transportation infrastructure and increasing numbers of registered automobiles (from 4,656 in 1922 to 14,072 in Taylor County in 1929)<sup>11</sup> brought with it a new growth of automobile-related services. The Bankhead Highway, advertised as the nation’s first “all weather” coast-to-coast highway, served as a major travel and tourism route, lined with restaurants, gas stations and lodgings, from tourist camps to more refined tourist courts. In the early 1920s, Abilene entrepreneurs opened numerous roadside businesses along the highway. Many of these were family-owned and operated, with architectural styles that often reflected regional or national trends. Tourist courts such as Abilene Courts – the precursors to motels – appealed to auto travelers who sought affordable and conveniently located lodging along major highways. Evolving from auto camps and cabin camps, tourist courts consisted of room units and dedicated garages or carports integrated under one roofline, with wings were commonly arranged around a central courtyard. Painted signage, and wood or neon signs advertised the properties to passing motorists. Tourist courts could be established by entrepreneurs with minimal previous experience, and built without the use of an architect, as plan books and industry publications such as the *Tourist Court Journal* provided plans construction guidelines. Perhaps recognizing the ever-changing whims of highway travelers, the *Journal* recommended that style take precedence over quality or durability of construction, with the expectation that the building would be remodeled frequently to meet changing market demands.<sup>12</sup>

In the early 1930s, nearly all tourist courts in Abilene (classified as “tourist camps” by Worley’s Abilene City Directory through the mid-1940s) were located on the Bankhead Highway corridor, equally divided along S. 11<sup>th</sup> Street on the east side and S. 1<sup>st</sup> Street on the west. In 1933, thirteen lodgings were identified in the directory, with six of them located on S. 11<sup>th</sup> Street, and another five on S. 1st. By 1939, the total number of lodgings increased to 18, with seven on S. 11<sup>th</sup>/Bankhead Highway, five on S. 1st, and four on Pine, north of downtown. By this time, motor courts had begun to appear just outside the city limits east of Rose Street. In 1946, the percentage of tourist courts increased to 29, but with less than one third (eight) on S. 11<sup>th</sup> Street/Bankhead Highway. By 1960, the number of lodgings (this time identified as “motels and auto courts”) increased to 33 overall, but the number along S. 11<sup>th</sup> had dwindled to five, and the majority of motels were now found along North and South First streets (newly-

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid p. 196.

<sup>10</sup> Hardy-Heck-Moore, p. 270-271

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p. 184.

<sup>12</sup> John Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers. *The Motel in America*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 47, 74.

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designated as Highway 80). Over the next decade, all of the tourist courts and motels on the old S. 11<sup>th</sup> Street alignment closed and were demolished, with the exception of Abilene Courts.

### 1930 Abilene Courts

Abilene Courts is set along the original route of the Bankhead Highway, and was constructed shortly after the last 3,000 feet of concrete pavement was laid along the Bankhead Highway through Abilene in January 1929.<sup>13</sup> Abilene Courts owner William Bateman Burns (1878-1959) was a former rancher who had been living in Big Spring, about 110 miles west of Abilene. Burns was born in Flatwood, Tennessee, but by 1910 he was living in Glasscock County, Texas, working as a “ranchman” on a stock farm. He continued to live in Glasscock County with his family (wife Nola, and three children, Weldon, Bernice, and Clara) until moving to Big Spring in 1926 so that the children could “attend a good school.”<sup>14</sup> A 1926 article in the *Big Spring Herald* noted that Burns “sold his cattle, teams, farm tools, etc., and leased his ranch to Lee Cox, so he hasn’t a thing to do now but go fishing and play golf.”<sup>15</sup> The 1930 census lists him as a resident of Big Spring and proprietor of a tourist camp, possibly the Abilene Courts.

Abilene Courts formally opened on May 14, 1930, and boasted 20 rooms, 20 garages and 20 bathrooms. The general contractor was Chambers & Mills, and Abilene Courts was advertised in the *Reporter-News* to be “West Texas’ finest Tourist Camp.” Many amenities for the traveler were located in close proximity, including Hallmarks Bakery, Homer Curtis Grocery, and the Moon Drug Company (where one could get a chicken dinner for 50¢).<sup>16</sup> There is no record of William Burns having any previous experience in the lodging business before the establishment of Abilene Courts, and it is not known what motivated him to build the complex, although the 1929 Wall Street crash and subsequent start of the Great Depression may have affected him financially, leading him to seek another source of income. In any case, his story fits within the national context of tourist courts and other roadside business being established largely by local entrepreneurs, rather than regional or national corporate chains. By 1933, Burns is listed as residing at 1842 Swenson Avenue on the north side of Abilene. Burns appears to have sold the business c.1941, as William D. Bledsoe is identified as the owner in the 1942 city directory. The property sold again in 1945, and the property appears to have changed hands a few times after that.<sup>17</sup> By 1951, Ernest R. Clemmer is listed as the owner in the city directory. According to Worley’s and Polk’s City Directories Abilene Courts operated as a tourist court and apartments until 1986.<sup>18</sup>

Tourist Courts and related roadside lodgings in Texas have been widely studied through Texas Historical Commission programs, including several individual National Register listings, the Route 66 in Texas survey and multiple property submission completed in 2007, and most recently the Bankhead Highway survey and historic context. Tourist courts such as this came into vogue in the late 1920s as the latest development in tourist accommodations, a progression from free roadside camps, to motor camps with basic accommodations, to more permanent and private accommodations. In 1933, the American Automobile Association estimated that thirty thousand “tourist cottage and camp establishments” lined the nation’s highways, and by the mid-1930s, the transition from tent sites to cabins had been made.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dromgoole, et al. *Abilene Stories* p. 70

<sup>14</sup> “W.B. Burns Buys B.E. Howell Home,” *Big Spring Herald*, March 5, 1926.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Full page ad for Abilene Courts, *Abilene Reporter News*, May 11, 1930, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> “Abilene Courts Sell for \$33,000.” *Abilene Reporter-News*, Sept. 14, 1945, p.23.

<sup>18</sup> *Polk’s Abilene (Taylor County, Texas) City Directories*. Dallas, Texas: R. L. Polk & Co., Various Dates

<sup>19</sup> Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile, American Roadside Architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), 170-177.

Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Abilene Courts is an excellent example of the modest lodging found along Texas highways in the prewar period, with the arrangement, plan, size, vehicular access, orientation of the units and scale that characterize a family-operated motor court. The building's plan features an alternating garage-room configuration with carports interspersed with individual lodging units, a design that catered to overnight guests who wanted to park directly next to their room. The courtyard provided a small space area for travelers to socialize, and offered a sense of security and privacy from the bustle of the busy highway. The property is also a rare survivor of an intact motor court complex in the smaller cities of north Texas along the Bankhead Highway. While Abilene boasts several motels from the highway's period of significance through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Abilene Courts is the only intact example on the east section of highway on the city's southeast side, and is the only building that stands as evidence that the otherwise-nondescript local road was once part of the transcontinental highway. The building has not been extensively enlarged or remodeled since 1930 and retains its overall integrity, down to the extraordinarily-preserved painted signage, advertising Depression-era pricing of one- and three-dollar rooms. The 2014 *Bankhead Highway in Texas* survey identified 51 NRHP-eligible tourist courts/motels along the highway in Texas, but only two with a "closed courtyard" configuration found in Abilene Courts (the other being the Boulder Courts in Pecos, some 250 miles west of Abilene). As a rare, early, and especially evocative example of its type, the property is nominated at the state level of significance. The period of significance begins in 1930, with the construction of the building, and ends in 1961, the year that S. 11<sup>th</sup> Street was bypassed by the new alignment of U.S 80.

Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas



Latitude: 32.436989° Longitude: -99.730747°

**Verbal Boundary Description:** Old Town Abilene Block 208 of the Anderson subdivision 1-A, Lot 10, 11, 12. The lot is bounded on the north by S 11<sup>th</sup> Street, on the east by an alleyway, on the west by Locust Street, and on the south by the southern parcel edge.

**Boundary Justification:** The boundary for Abilene Courts includes all property historically associated with the Tourist Court since its construction in 1930. No other parcels or buildings are associated with this business.

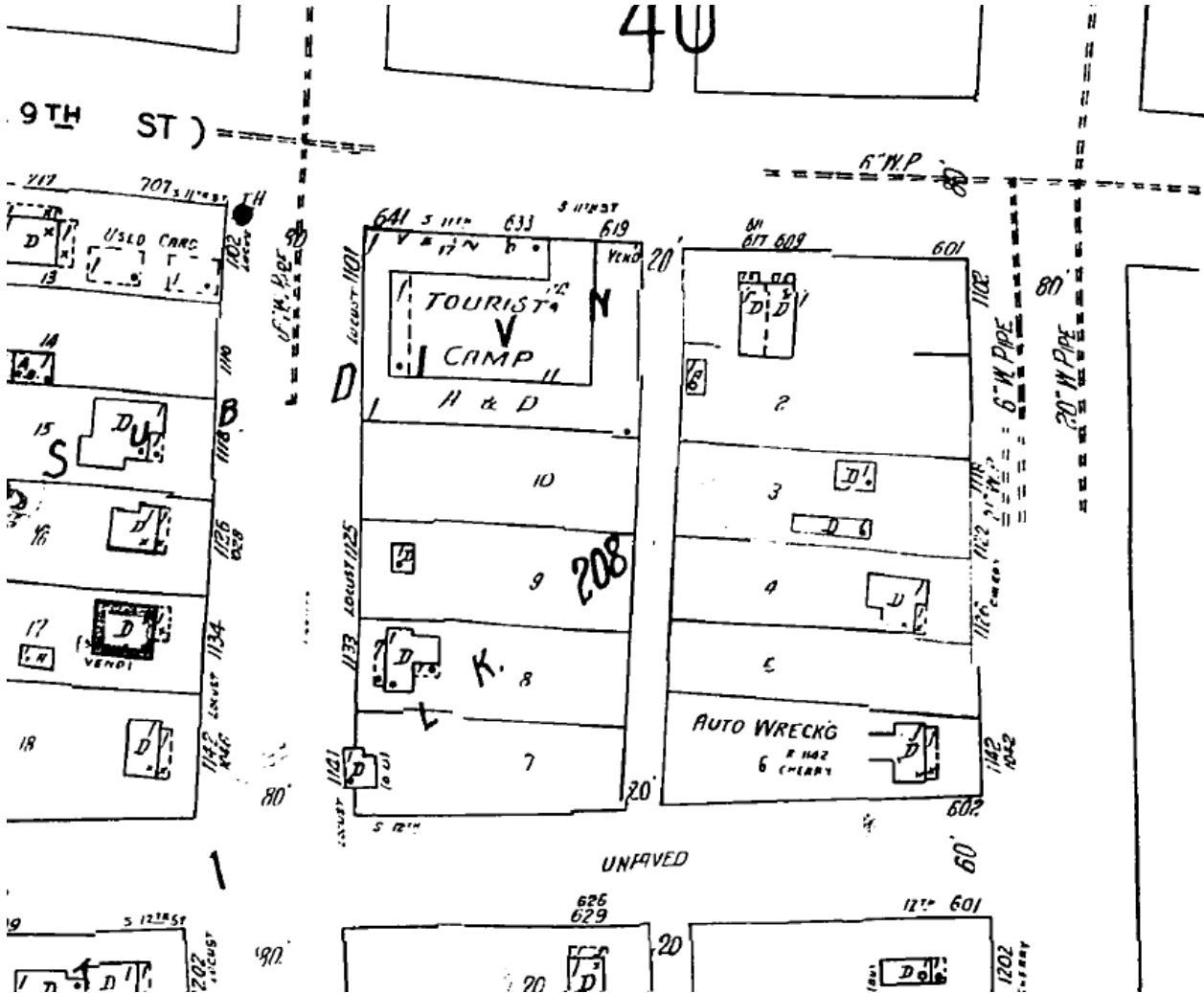
*Google Earth*, accessed October 22, 2014.





Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

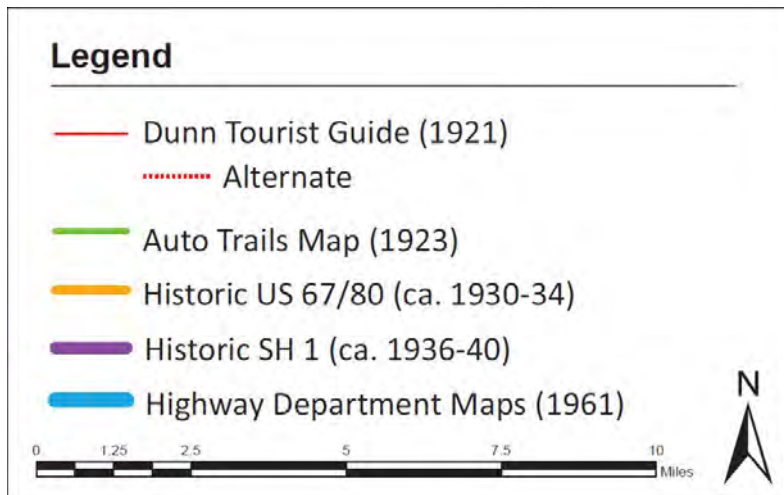
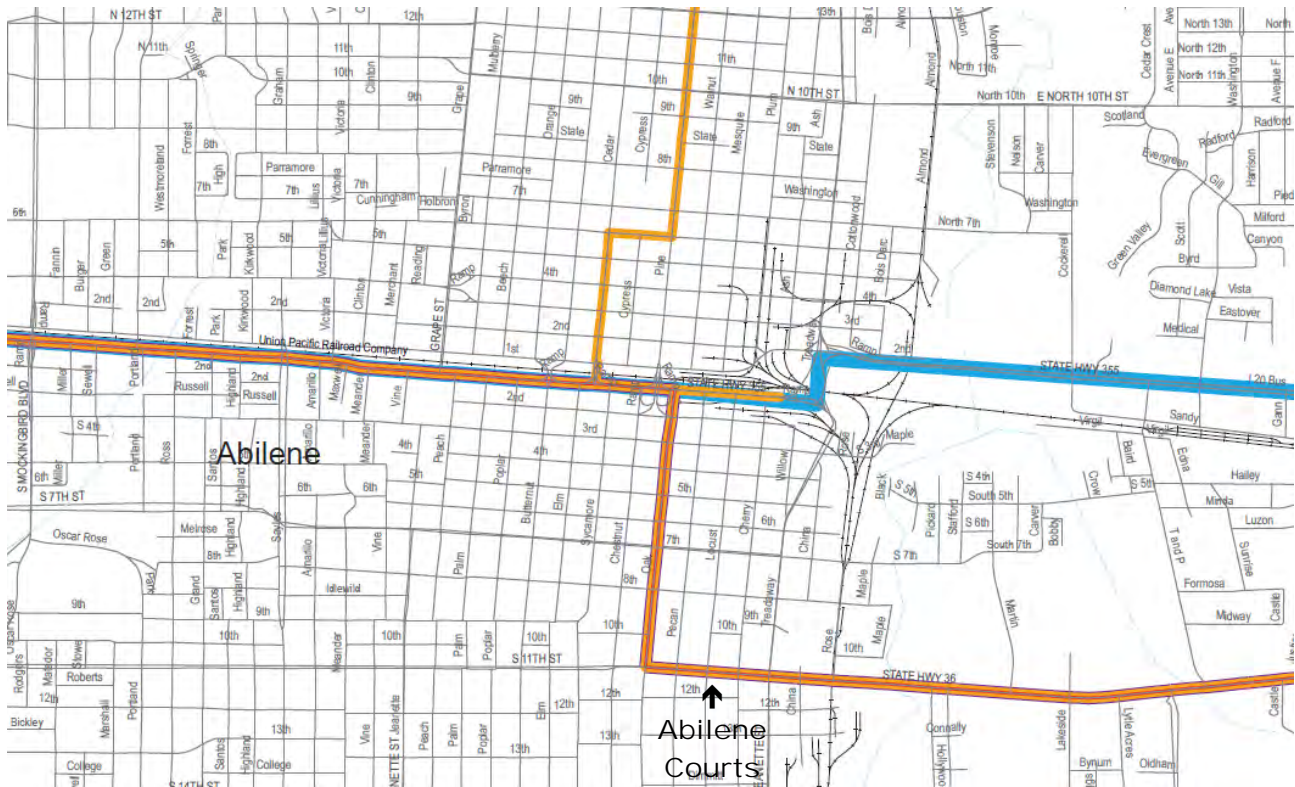
Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1929, corrected to 1950.



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

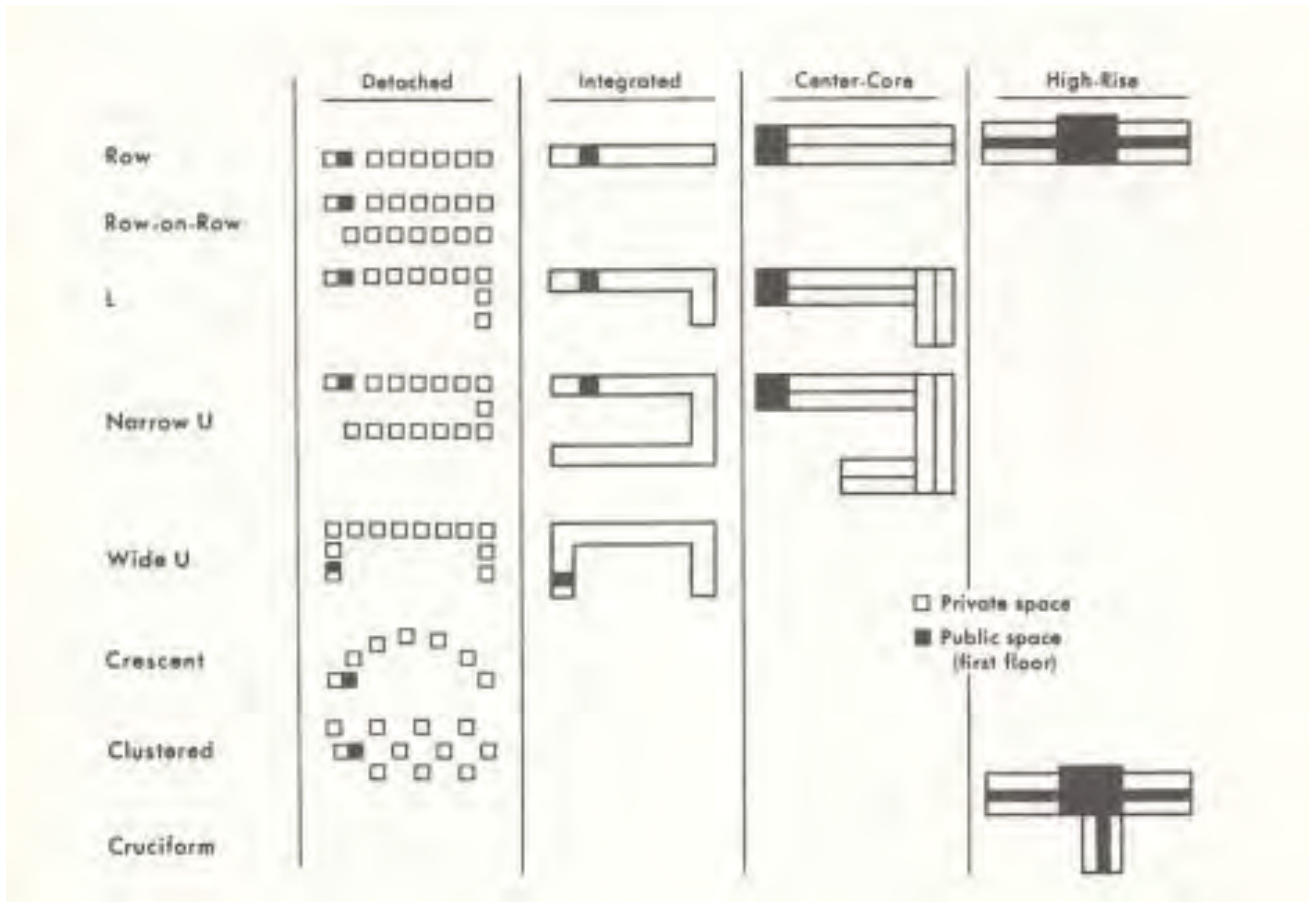
**Bankhead Highway in Abilene, Texas.**

Source: *The Development of Highways in Texas: A Historic Context of the Bankhead Highway and Other Historic Named Highways*. Texas Historical Commission, 2014.



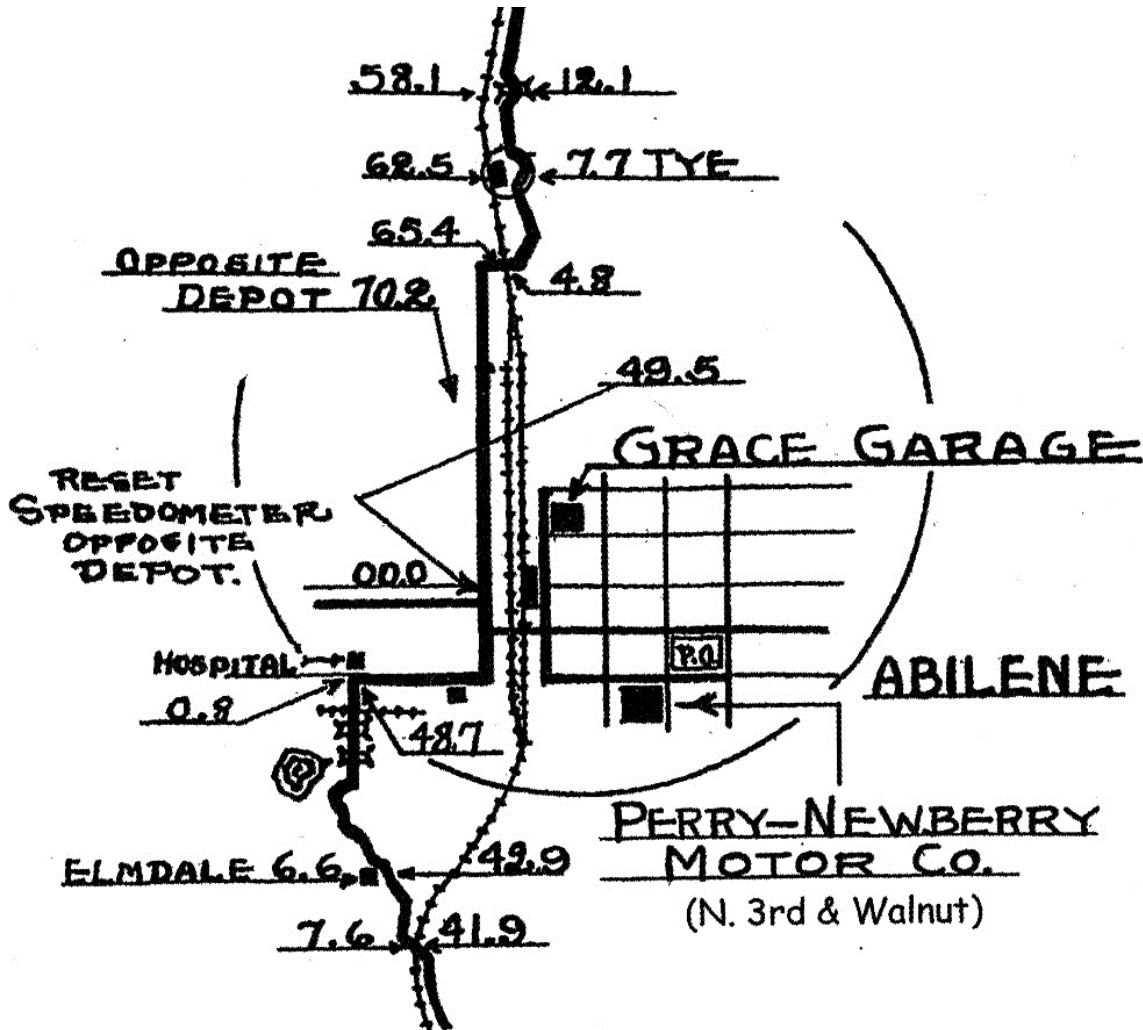
Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

Figure 1: Dominant Variations in the spatial organization of the motel, *The Motel in America* (Jakle) p. 37. Abilene Courts is a rare subtype of the *Integrated Narrow U* plan, with an enclosed courtyard accessed through an arched gateway.



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

Early travel map of Abilene for the Bankhead highway. Reprinted in Dan L. Smith, *Bankhead Highway in Texas*.



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Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

Full page advertisement for Abilene Courts Grand opening - *Abilene Morning Reporter News*, Sunday, May 11, 1930. Other than a small addition to the manager's rooms and the infill of several car bays, little appears to have been changed on the building since opening day.

Sunday Morning, May 11, 1930. THE ABILENE MORNING REPORTER NEWS

# ABILENE COURTS

South Eleventh at Locust

## Formal Opening Wednesday, May 14th

**CONGRATULATIONS**  
To Mr. W. B. Barns on the completion of West Texas' finest Tourist Camp  
**ABILENE COURTS**  
From Foundation to Roof  
**MARKHAM LUMBER CO**  
Builders Supplies

**ABILENE COURTS**  
West Texas' Finest Tourist Camp  
We Congratulate  
**CHAMBERS & MILLS**  
General Contractors

**WIRING AND ELECTRICAL WORK**  
for the  
**ABILENE COURTS**  
Was Done by Us  
We Extend Our Heartiest Congratulations  
**W. R. TUCKER ELECTRIC CO.**

**WE CONGRATULATE**  
The owner and builders of West Texas' Finest Tourist Camp  
**ABILENE COURTS**  
Furniture throughout for this beautiful and modern camp was supplied by the  
**BARROW FURNITURE CO.**

**General Electric—**  
**WATER COOLER**  
Installed throughout the water by  
**ABILENE COURTS**  
General Electric Supply Corp.

**General Electric—**  
**WATER COOLER**  
Installed throughout the water by  
**ABILENE COURTS**  
General Electric Supply Corp.

**LION HARDWARE CO**  
Exclusive General Electric Dealers

**CONGRATULATE**  
Mr. W. B. Barns, Owner and Builder of the  
**Abilene Courts**  
We are Glad of the Opportunity to  
**CONGRATULATE**  
Mr. W. B. Barns, Owner and Builder of the  
**Abilene Courts**  
We Take Pride in Announcing  
**FRANKLIN PLUMBING SUPPLY CO**

**Our Best Wishes**  
**ABILENE COURTS**  
Painting Done By Us  
**W. R. DIPPEL**  
Painting Contractor

**Congratulations to**  
**ABILENE COURTS**  
Try Our Chicken Dinner 50c  
**THE MOON DRUG CO**

**CONGRATULATIONS**  
**ABILENE COURTS**  
West Texas' Finest Tourist Camp  
**THE H. AND H. COMPANY**

**ABILENE COURTS**  
**RAY TUCKER**  
Engineering and Contracting

**CONGRATULATIONS**  
**ABILENE COURTS**  
We carry all high-grade food Products  
**HOMER CURTIS**

**HALLMARKS BAKERY**

Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

Postcard from 1941 (oldest known photo). Source: Collection of Dale Rankin (property owner).



1941 postcard, verso.



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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1979 Photograph, City of Abilene Archives.



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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1991 Survey photo from Abilene City Archives





Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Abilene Courts  
633 S. 11<sup>th</sup> Street  
Abilene, Taylor County, Texas  
All photos by Crystal Nichols, 2104 (except as noted)

Photo 1  
Entrance gate, camera facing southwest  
Photographed by Gregory Smith, July 2013



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 2  
Archway over drive, camera facing southeast



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 3: Neon sign and painted signage on south elevation. Camera facing southwest.  
Photographed by Gregory Smith, July 2013



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 4: Southwest oblique, camera facing northeast



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 5: Original window on north elevation, camera facing south



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 6  
Courtyard, camera facing west  
Photo bt Stephanie Goodman



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 7  
Entrance gate from courtyard, camera facing north  
Photographed by Stephanie Goodman



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 8  
Western row of rooms with awning, camera facing south





Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 9  
Open car bays, camera facing north



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 10  
Open car bays, camera facing north



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 11  
Metal roof cover detail



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 12  
Shed addition with sloped roof, camera facing north



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 13  
Southern façade, camera facing northwest



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 14  
Typical condition in rental units, with deteriorated flooring



Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

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Photo 15  
Typical interior door



- fin -



1934

ROOMS

MILITARY COURTS





1930

Avenue



ALL LIVES  
COUNTS



NO  
TRESPASSING

























UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY Abilene Courts  
NAME:

MULTIPLE  
NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: TEXAS, ~~Perry~~ Taylor

DATE RECEIVED: 4/24/15 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 5/19/15  
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 6/03/15 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 6/09/15  
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 15000338

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N  
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N  
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

\_\_\_ ACCEPT \_\_\_ RETURN \_\_\_ REJECT \_\_\_ DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

The Abilene Courts are of statewide significance under National Register Criteria A and C in the areas of Architecture and Commerce. Built in 1930 along the historic transcontinental Bankhead Highway, the property is an outstanding example of a pre-World War II tourist court. The complex, consisting of 20 compact housing units, features a courtyard plan with modest stucco-clad, wood-frame construction faced in decorative brick on the primary street-front elevation. Mission Revival-inspired detailing includes decorative window hoods and a prominent brick arched driveway entry. Historic signage reflects the commercial nature of the roadside operation. A once common roadside property type (at onetime numbering over 30,000), the tourist court building retains a remarkable degree of integrity despite years of deferred maintenance.

RECOM./CRITERIA Accept Criteria A+C

REVIEWER PAUL R. LUSIGNAN DISCIPLINE HISTORIAN

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_ DATE 6/3/2015

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.

**TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION**  
*real places telling real stories*



TO: Edson Beall  
 National Park Service  
 National Register of Historic Places  
 1201 Eye Street, NW (2280)  
 Washington , DC 20005

FROM: Gregory Smith  
 National Register Coordinator  
 Texas Historical Commission

RE: Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas

DATE: April 17, 2015

The following materials are submitted:

	Original National Register of Historic Places form on disk.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The enclosed disk contains the true and correct copy of the National Register of Historic Places nomination for Abilene Courts, Abilene, Taylor County, Texas.
	Resubmitted nomination.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Original NRHP signature page signed by the Texas SHPO.
	Multiple Property Documentation form on disk.
	Resubmitted form.
	Original MPDF signature page signed by the Texas SHPO.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	CD with TIFF photograph files, PDF, and KMZ file
	Correspondence

COMMENTS:

- SHPO requests substantive review (cover letter from SHPO attached)
- The enclosed owner objections (do ) (do not ) constitute a majority of property owners
- Other:

