

BY LAMPLIGHT

THE INVENTOR OF KEROSENE

During the recent power failures across the province, many of us have had occasion to dust off our old kerosene lamps and put them back into service. At these times I'm sure we all fully appreciate the tremendous superiority of the kerosene lamp over the candle in the intensity and quality of the light shed. What fewer of us may realize is that the invention of kerosene actually took place in Charlottetown 136 years ago!

The inventor of kerosene, Abraham Gesner, was born in Cornwallis, Nova Scotia in 1797, the son of a Loyalist army officer. As a young man he spent some time at sea on a sailing ship. Later he studied medicine in London, graduating as a doctor in 1827. He returned to Nova Scotia to practise medicine but increasingly turned his interests towards scientific pursuits, especially in the field of geology. In 1836 he published his Remarks on the Geology and Mineralogy of Nova Scotia, one of the earliest geological works on that province. From 1838 to 1843 he was commissioned to carry out a geological survey of New Brunswick. In St. John he opened a small museum which exhibited his personal collection of geological specimens.



In 1846 Gesner was appointed to make a geological survey of Prince Edward Island. It was in that year that he developed a process for distilling kerosene from a coal-like mineral now known as albertite. By 1852 he had perfected his process of obtaining kerosene oil from bituminous shale and cannel coal, and in 1853 he moved to New York and obtained a patent. The following year he started the North American Kerosene Gas Light Company, which produced kerosene from petroleum at its refinery on Long Island.

In 1863 Gesner sold his patents and returned to Halifax, where he died in 1864. During his lifetime he published several papers which ranged from geological accounts of parts of the Maritimes to A Practical Treatise on Coal, Petroleum and Other Distilled Oils. Although this last work was quite popular in its time, Gesner is today best remembered as the inventor of kerosene.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

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FEBRUARY MEETING. On Feb. 2, Andy Dean, a naturalist and birder who has recently moved to Charlottetown, will present a slide-tape program on Corbett Pond in the University of New Brunswick woodlot near Fredericton. The presentation will show the changing character of life in and around the pond through the four seasons.

MARCH MEETING. On March 2, Dr. Lawson Drake, an entomologist from the Biology Department at the University of Prince Edward Island, will be the guest speaker. His topic will be the Butterflies of P.E.I. and will be illustrated with slides and specimens.

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References for Grosbeak article:

- Godfrey, W.E. 1954. Birds of Prince Edward Island. Nat. Mus. Can. Bull. 132: 155-213.
- Tufts, R.W. 1973. The Birds of Nova Scotia. Nova Scotia Museum. Halifax. 532 p.