

# Shining a Light on Oil Lamps

*By Inga Milbauer*

Now that the days are getting shorter, we may appreciate the ability to turn on the lights in our homes even more. Until the advent of the electric lamp, candles, oil and gas lamps were used. This nineteenth century oil lamp from our museum collection is one of a set donated by the Boylston Public Library. The lamp, made of glass and brass, is set on a marble base.

In the early nineteenth century a variety of fuels were used in lamps in American households. These fuels included whale oil rendered from whale blubber, the more expensive spermaceti (from the head of sperm whales), lard and rapeseed oil.

This changed when Isaiah Jennings of New York developed a mix of turpentine and alcohol to be used as fuel for oil lamps in 1830. The mixture of turpentine, alcohol and camphor oil derived from the wood of camphor trees, was patented by Henry Porter of Bangor, Maine with the name “burning fluid” in 1835. He started a business in Boston to sell this new fuel and it became known as Porter’s Burning Fluid. Because it burned bright and smelled good, it became a popular lamp fuel. It was, however, also dangerous as the Boston Mattapan Register reported that house fires and injuries were common. The newspaper noted on September 1859:

*“There are different kinds of lamps and of lamp oil, adapted to different tastes and circumstances; and there is one at least, most abominable invention under the name of Camphene Oil, or Burning Fluid, which were better denominated a Swift and Ready Means of Destruction for Private Families; for this designation would convey a true idea of its nature and effects.”*

Consumer demand for “burning fluid” grew despite the risks. By 1856 Rufus H. Spalding had taken over Henry Porter’s business in Boston and was “the Sole Manufacturer of Porter’s Patent Composition.” The company also sold many ornamental lighting devices, lanterns and lamps.

In 1853 the Canadian scientist Abraham Gesner patented and coined the term kerosene for “coal oil” extracted from coal. The discovery that oil could be refined into kerosene, in combination with the discovery of oil in Pennsylvania led to a revolution in lighting. In 1857 Michael Dietz brought a clean burning kerosene lamp to the market. He made improvements in 1860 and 1880 to the original “wick lamp” which led to increasingly brighter lamps.

Bill Kovarik, professor of communication at Radford University, estimates the prices for the different lamp fuels in 1850 as follows:

- Camphine (“burning fluid”) 50 cents/gallon
- Whale oil \$1.30 to \$2.50/gallon
- Lard oil 90 cents/gallon
- Coal oil 50 cents/gallon (the original kerosene)
- Kerosene from petroleum 60 cents/gallon (introduced in the early 1860s)

When Congress passed the Revenue Act of 1862 to help pay for the Civil War, it included a tax on alcohol. Since the tax applied to the alcohol used in camphine production, it became more costly than kerosene. Kerosene became the standard lighting fuel in homes. A purified version of kerosene is used for modern oil lamps, which some of us may still use when the power goes out!



**CAMPBOR LAMP**

ORIGINALLY OWNED BY JONATHAN MOREY  
BOYLSTON CIVIL WAR VETERAN  
CURRENTLY ON DISPLAY AT THE BOYLSTON  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

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