GESNER, WILLIAMS AND THE BIRTH OF THE OIL INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT: This paper outlines the contributions of Abraham Gesner and James Miller Williams in the birth of the oil industry. It also explores how their relationships with two other key figures in the industry’s founding industry, James Young and Luther Atwood, affected their efforts, success, and—in the case of Gesner—financial failure. It draws in part from two of my books, the second edition of The Great Canadian Oil Patch, 2005; and Ontario’s Petroleum Legacy: The Birth, Evolution and Challenges of a Global Industry, 2008. It also draws on newer research that provides additional detail and insight.

GESNER AND THE COAL OIL INDUSTRY

Abraham Gesner, of Nova Scotia, (Fig. 1) established North America’s coal oil industry and thereby laid the foundation for the oil industry. James Young of Scotland (Fig. 2) established a business distilling a lubricating oil and solvent, and later a lamp fuel, and used his patent rights to bedevil other coal oil refiners. Luther Atwood was the American chemist who showed Young how to make lamp oil, and displaced Gesner at the refinery that Gesner had built. James Miller Williams (Fig. 3) was a carriage maker in Hamilton, Canada West (now Ontario) who discovered the world’s first oil field to supply crude oil to a substantial petroleum refining industry, initially the coal oil refiners, built largely on Gesner’s technology. Williams also established the continent’s first integrated crude oil producing, refining and marketing company. This is the story of how these four interacted in the birth of the oil industry.

The story starts at Chipman Corner near the Bay of Fundy, Nova Scotia in 1816, The Year Without Summer. Ash from a gigantic eruption of Indonesia’s Mount Tambora volcano had clouded much of the world, causing crop failures that resulted in some 200,000 deaths in Europe. Snow and ice lingered into summer causing more crop failures and hunger in northeastern North America. At Chipman Corner, more than just the farmers were hungry: so were their horses. To save some horses from slaughter and hopefully earn some money, 19-year-old Abraham Gesner collected a small herd of old nags and, working as a deckhand, shipped them for sale in the West Indies. The voyage took Gesner as far as South America. Barely covering expenses, Gesner returned home with no money but a boat load of rocks, minerals, shells, curious, and a pile of bitumen from the pitch lake in Trinidad (Fig. 4) that had caulked the ships of Walter Raleigh and others. Two succeeding horse-trading voyages were greater disasters—both ended in shipwrecks.

Gesner soon began experimenting with the Trinidad pitch, or bitumen, finding that it would be burn with a steady flame