

Looking Back

Our Petroleum Prosperity

This summer is the sesquicentennial of the first oil well in the United States—marking the birth of an industry that has profoundly transformed the world.

In the early nineteenth century, petroleum was considered worthless and rare. The only high-quality lamp oil then available came from whales. It was a luxury; most Americans subsisted on cheaper, dirtier alternatives like turpentine. But in the 1840s, Samuel Martin Kier, who owned a batch of Pennsylvania salt wells, watched as their apparently worthless petroleum byproduct caught fire, and realized its potential profitability as lamp oil. Crude oil, however, had a foul smell when burned. So Kier, despite having no formal training in chemistry, spent years inventing a process to refine it into kerosene.

Up to that point, oil was still only harvested in places where it seeped from the ground. But once Kier's refinery helped create a demand for oil that could be turned into kerosene, a man named Edwin Drake realized that there was money to be made if petroleum were collected more systematically. Drake dug the first American oil well in Titusville, Pennsylvania in August 1859. He encountered no small number of problems in drilling deep enough, and had to invent new techniques to keep his well from collapsing. But just as his financial backers, tired of waiting for results, were about to pull out their money, Drake struck oil. Cheap, clean-burning kerosene soon dominated the lamp-oil market.

In time, refined petroleum came to be used for purposes far beyond lighting. Oil heats homes and warms stoves. And it has forever altered our landscapes and our lives—from our cars and their vast highways, to our trucks and their throbbing commerce, to our airplanes and machines of war.

The prosperity made possible by oil and by entrepreneurial genius is awe-inspiring. But we are nowadays reminded constantly of the problems of the oil economy—the environmental harms of our burning of it, and the security harms of dependency on unfriendly nations for its provision. We would do well to remember also a less tangible harm: The abundance of oil has allowed us to believe “that we could abandon a whole set of ancient hard-won virtues—especially thrift and care for the future,” as *New Atlantis* contributor Patrick J. Deneen has argued elsewhere. “It has afforded us the temporary belief that life is primarily an existence of ease and convenience.”

As that illusion dims, we find ourselves once again looking to innovate. Just as oil shaped our world, so will our new sources of energy come to reshape it. Let us cling fast to our hard-won virtues—so that, fifteen decades hence, posterity will have more than we do to rejoice in, and less than we do to regret.