

Kentucky Oil History: the Approaching 200th Anniversary of the Beatty Well

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ABSTRACT

Kentucky's petroleum industry began with exploration and development of brines and salt. The importance of these resources is reflected both in the abundance of Kentucky place names such as Oil Springs and Salt River and in the resources' continued protection. This usually forgotten history tells the tale of emerging resources and technology development before 1859 when Col. Drake drilled his well in Pennsylvania' often recognized as the birth of the modern oil industry. In 1806, the Ruffner brothers invented surface casing, tubing, and packers in their quest for salt water near Charleston, W. Va., and demonstrated that brines could be produced by drilling. In 1807, John Francis discovered salt water on Richard Slavey's homestead at the confluence of Bear Creek with the South Fork of the Cumberland River, McCreary County, Ky. In 1811, Francis and Slavey petitioned the Commonwealth and received a grant of 1,000 acres on the condition that they produce 1,000 bushels of salt, which they accomplished before 1818. Around this time, Martin Beatty was operating an iron furnace at Cumberland Gap and very likely heard of the successes of Slavey and Francis. He crossed the gap into Kentucky and acquired 1,000 acres from Francis to establish his own salt works. He contracted with Marcus Huling and Andrew Zimmerman to sink a well near the mouth of what is now Oil Well Branch along the South Fork. Sometime before Dec. 4, 1818, at a depth of about 170 feet, the well began flowing up to 100 barrels of oil per day, becoming the "Father of American Flowing Wells". The oil having ruined the salt water, Beatty abandoned the well, established a salt works downstream, and pursued a career in politics. Huling and Zimmerman, however, contracted with Beatty to construct wooden barrels and with local fishermen to take petroleum downriver by boat. After two disastrous attempts, a longer overland route was found and the oil was sold to local merchants, who in turn sold it to the manufacturers of medicinal preparations. In an 1820 letter, Huling indicated he had sent about 2,000 gallons of the oil to Europe, but had not yet made any money. Many tales are told of this well: rivers on fire, a fugitive murderer, and ruined goose feathers. The well was finally plugged Oct. 18, 2011, by the U.S. Forest Service. By virtue of sales and international speculation, the Beatty well is thus not only one of the earliest oil producers, but one of the first commercial oil wells in North America.