

# W. H. Brown's Oil Wick Lamp

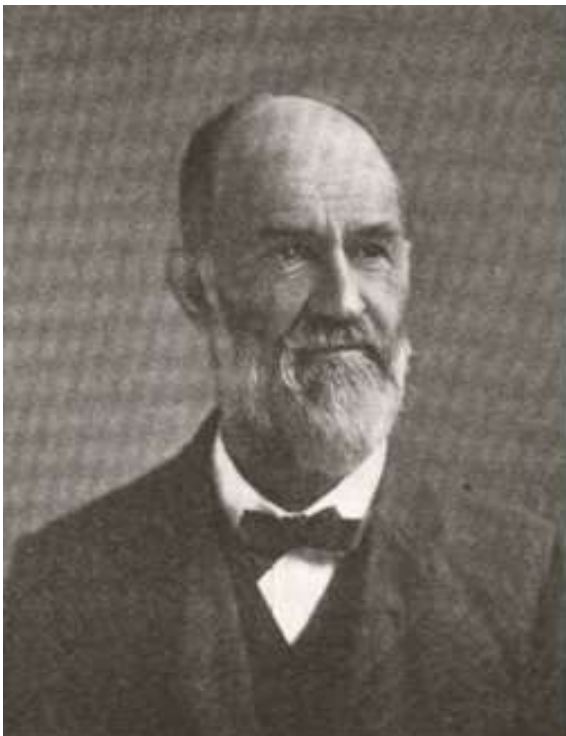
Dave Thorpe

A small oil wick cap lamp was sold at auction in Pennsylvania. Clearly stamped on the font is:

W. H. BROWN

CIVIL ENGR.

William H. Brown (1836-1910) was one of Pennsylvania's most famous civil engineers. He became Chief Engineer of the Pennsylvania Railroad and his specialty was the design of stone railway bridges, from which he acquired the nickname 'Stone Man.' Could this coal miner's style oil wick lamp have possibly belonged to the railroad engineer?



*Left: William H. Brown, Right: Miner's oil wick lamp stamped W. H. BROWN, CIVIL ENGR*

The seller of the lamp stated that: "My mother bought this lamp years ago from the daughter of Baird Halberstadt. Baird was from Pottsville, PA and was a noted mining engineer and geologist, well known and prominent in the U.S., Great Britain, Scotland, and mining societies. He passed on around the 1930s. [His daughter] Ann passed away several years ago at the age around 100. Baird founded, and was the head of the Historical Society of Schuylkill County for many years."

## PROMINENT GEOLOGIST DIES AT POTTSVILLE

**Baird Halberstadt Served Many  
Government Agencies.**

Baird Halberstadt, 74, internationally known geologist, discoverer of the Pottsville conglomerate, and one of Pennsylvania's most brilliant engineers, died yesterday at St. Agnes Hospital, Philadelphia, where he underwent a serious operation last week.

He was graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and the International Institute, Paris, France. From 1881 to 1886 he aided in a geological survey of Pennsylvania. In 1887 he became an engineer and was made superintendent for the Tazewell Coal and Iron Company. Two years later he became assistant to Dr. Charles A. Ashburner, nationally known coal expert, and until 1891 was a special agent and expert for the eleventh United States census. He was a special technician and correspondent for a group of mining journals.

Mr. Halberstadt was an expert witness in many court trials involving valuable coal tracts and was consulting geologist for the state board of agriculture from 1909 to 1919. For a number of years he was attached to various branches of the Pennsylvania National Guard.

From 1917 to 1919, Mr. Halberstadt was federal fuel administrator in Schuylkill County, and was chairman of the material and membership committee of the Public Safety of Pennsylvania. He was a life long Republican and for several years served as alderman of the Seventh Ward, Pottsville. He was a son of the late Dr. Andrew Howell Halberstadt and Mrs. Augusta Baird Halberstadt.

Surviving is his widow, the former Miss Ida Ray Smith, Pottsville, and two children.

Halberstadt's obituary confirms this. Given that he was a generation younger than W. H. Brown and was passionate about local history, Halberstadt was at least aware of Brown, if not personally acquainted with him. In any event, it appears that he owned and preserved Brown's lamp until his own death in 1934.





An outstanding biography of Brown's professional life was written in 2014 by Michael Frolio, and to my knowledge exists only in electronic form on-line. It is titled *William H. Brown: The Tale of Two bridges*. Brown is said to have begun with the railroad in 1850 at only fourteen years of age, working as a rod man on a survey crew. Thirty one years later, in 1881, he was promoted to Chief Engineer of the Pennsylvania Railroad. He was most famous for designing Roman style stone truss bridges in a time when steel span bridges were the popular structure. He argued that the stone needed for construction could always be obtained near the rivers. An obituary in the *New York Times* notes that he built 163 stone bridges including the world's largest: the Rockville bridge. All but one are still in use today.



*Conestoga River bridge built by William H. Brown. Photograph by William H. Rae, from the collection American Premier Underwriters, Inc.*

Brown retired in 1906. His renown and success in bridge and tunnel building apparently brought him great reward, for his home in Philadelphia was practically a mansion.



*Left: Brown's home. 3510 Baring Street, Philadelphia, PA from the 1889 Directory.*

Brown died in 1910 while visiting northern Ireland. He is buried in Laurel Hill West Cemetery outside of Philadelphia. Frederic E. Baldwin, inventor and pioneer of the miner's acetylene lamp is buried just across the Schuylkill River in Laurel Hill Cemetery.

The seller of the Brown oil wick lamp stated that his mother bought the lamp from engineer Baird Halberstadt's daughter Ann[e]. A review of US Census reports show that Halberstadt remained single until his 50s. The 1930 census does indeed show the 70 year old

living with nine year old daughter Anne. She was also active in the Schuylkill County Historical Society, which her father founded, and at some time prior to her death in 2012, she sold Brown's oil wick lamp to the mother of the person who sold it at auction. I am happy to keep the W. H. Brown lamp alive.