



66.1988.1 First Indiana Natural Gas Well
Pulaski County
Marker Text Review Report
4/22/2010

Marker Text

One mile southwest of this marker gas was discovered in 1867 by G. Bates while drilling for oil at a depth of 500 feet. Gas wells were drilled in 1887-1888; gas piped into Francesville lasted only four years.

Report

After further research on the validity of the First Indiana Natural Gas Well marker text, some contradictions arose about the date the natural gas was discovered, the person who discovered the natural gas, and the depth at which the gas was found. In addition, the sources indicate that this may not have been the first natural gas well in Indiana as the text claims. Locating primary sources for this topic has been extremely difficult because not many sources exist about the small community of Francesville in the 1860s. This may be because the benefits of natural gas were not fully known in the 1860s or because the national focus in the 1860s was the Civil War and its aftermath.

Secondary sources all have a slightly different perspective on the discovery of natural gas in Francesville. Of the secondary sources provided in the marker folder by the applicant, only Weston Arthur Goodspeed's *Counties of White and Pulaski* (1883) indicates that the well may have been sunk in 1867, and this source does not list any references about where the information may have come from. Goodspeed notes, "there was a well sunk in 1867...it was 960 feet deep...the well was sunk by G. Bates, of Chicago, who was, at that time, owner of the farm on which it is situated. He began the work under the conviction that he would be able to find oil at that place." While the date of this source and the name of the well digger agree with the marker text, the information about the depth of the well differs from that on the marker. Two undated sources, one a newspaper article from *Francesville Tribune* (circa 1889 or later) and J. V. Bechdolt's *History of Francesville and Community* (written for the Francesville Lions Club), both indicate that the well was drilled in 1866, one year prior to the year listed on the marker. In addition, both of these sources claim that the person who discovered the natural gas was Simon C. Blair of Chicago, not G. Bates as the marker specifies.

The information about Simon C. Blair is most likely incorrect. A search in the census data only listed two people with the name Simon Blair in the vicinity: one in Warren County, Illinois and the other in Morgan County, Illinois. There was no Simon Blair or Simon C. Blair listed in Indiana in the 19th century or in Cook County, Illinois, where Chicago is located. Bechdolt's Francesville history also suggests that the depth of the well was 630 feet, 130 feet deeper than the marker text says.



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The final source included by the applicant is from an “abstract of the Gas Well farm.” The source has no notation about where it came from (author, publisher, date, etc.).¹ It gives information about who owed the plot of land where the gas was allegedly found. The information in the abstract, however, indicates that Granville Bates did not own the land until November 2, 1871 when it was sold to him by Lyman Blair.² The abstract also indicates that the deed was recorded November 28, 1871. A search in the Pulaski County Deed Records verified the information on the abstract.³

None of the secondary sources claimed 1867 was the date of natural gas discovery in Francesville. One source says, “The earliest recorded flows of natural gas in Indiana dated back as far as 1865 at Francesville, Pulaski County, Eaton in Delaware County, and Terre Haute.”⁴ In the *Indiana Magazine of History*, author Margaret Wynn writes that “the first mention [of gas being discovered in Indiana] is that of a well at Francisville [*sic*], in Pulaski county, put down during the oil excitement of 1865” (31).⁵ A third author also listed 1865 as the date of natural gas discovery in Francesville, Pulaski County.⁶

Besides the conflicting dates as to when the natural gas was discovered in Francesville, there is some discrepancy about whether this was truly the first discovery of natural gas in the state. The Indiana Department of Geology and Natural History claims that Eaton was the pioneer of natural gas towns and that natural gas was first discovered in Eaton, not Francesville.⁷ Emma Lou Thornbrough, accomplished Indiana historian, noted “in 1857 the first gas street lights in Fort Wayne were authorized by the city government. In nearly all cases the gas used for street lights was supplied by privately owned corporations. A state law passed in 1857 authorized cities to establish their own gas works or to regulate those which were privately owned.”⁸ Although this evidence is not conclusive, it indicates that natural gas may have existed naturally in Indiana prior to the discovery in Francesville, which would mean the premise of the marker is incorrect.

Primary sources regarding natural gas discoveries in Indiana are difficult to locate. Information about the Francesville gas well in state or county newspapers, the card catalog, the newspaper index, Indiana Geological Surveys from the 1860s, or in the Journals of the House of Representatives or the Senate of the State of Indiana could not be found. A partial report of the well at Francesville in a preliminary report of the Department of Conservation, Division of Geology in Indiana was located. However, a date is not given for this partial report.⁹ In an attempt to locate the complete report, the Division of Oil and Gas at the Indiana Department of Natural Resources searched for the complete



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report in their files. The director of the Division of Oil and Gas could not locate the complete report, but sent a later edition of the partial report.¹⁰ Both of these publications indicate the depth of the well was 895 feet, although neither publication lists the date the natural gas was discovered. The director of the Division of Oil and Gas also sent a copy of the Well History Report for the Francesville well in Pulaski County. This report lists January 1, 1867 as the completion date for the well, which would imply that natural gas was discovered prior to 1867.¹¹

The Pulaski County historian was not able to provide much help in the search for further clarification. She was able to suggest a newspaper article from the *Winamac Democrat-Journal* that was printed in 1907. The article, entitled "Forty Years Ago," said "we understand...that the oil company at Francesville has reached oil in small quantities at a depth of 600 feet."¹² Forty years earlier than 1907 would have been 1867, which is consistent with the marker, but the fact that it states that an oil company discovered oil, does not prove what the marker text states.

Ultimately, after a thorough investigation of the marker text, there were no definitive answer to any of the questions presented by the marker text and the source evidence. Primary sources proved extremely difficult to locate with regard to this topic, and secondary sources all seem to contradict one another.

¹ The source has no notation about where it came from (author, publisher, date, etc.). The information about it being from an abstract of the Gas Well farm was given in a letter from the applicant sent September 28, 1988. This letter is also included in the marker folder.

² U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Eighth Census* (1860), Michigan City, LaPorte County, Indiana, p. 48, ancestrylibrary.com (accessed 12/10/2007). Lyman Blair was a wealthy merchant according to the 1860 U. S. Federal Census. The value of his real estate and his personal estate summed near \$92,000.

"Board of Directors," *Chicago Board of Trade* <http://www.cbot.com/cbot/docs/bod.pdf>, (accessed 12/12/2007). Further research also revealed that he was the First Vice President of the Chicago Board of Trade Board of Directors in 1867. His brothers also were prominent Chicago citizens.

U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Ninth Census* (1870), Cook County, Illinois, heritagequstononline.com (accessed 12/10/2007). Lyman Blair is located in Michigan City, Indiana in the 1860 U. S. Federal Census and in Cook County, Illinois in the 1870 U. S. Federal Census.

"Lyman Blair's Death: A Well-Known Provision Man Shoots Himself in His Room," *New York Times*, September 26, 1883, Historic New York Times (accessed 12/12/2007). This is a copy of Lyman Blair's Obituary.



³ The abstract states that Samuel Ward sold the plot of land to Lyman Blair, and then Lyman Blair sold the land to Granville Bates. The deed indicating that the land was sold to Blair by Ward can be found in Pulaski County Deed Record Book G on page 385. Although the physical deed could not be located, indicating the transfer of land from Blair to Bates, the Pulaski County Deed Record Book Index lists the transfer in 1871, which confirms what is listed on the abstract.

⁴ Phillips, Clifton J., *Indiana in Transition: the Emergence of an Industrial Commonwealth* (Indianapolis 1968), 192.

⁵ Wynn, Margaret, "Natural Gas in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, Vol. 4 (March 1908): 31-45.

⁶ Wyatt, Ed, *Indiana Natural Gas Story* (1994). This is a pamphlet located at the Indiana Historical Society.

⁷ Indiana Department of Geology and Natural History, *Sixteenth Annual Report*, 1888, p. 283.

⁸ Thornbrough, Emma Lou, *Indiana in the Civil War Era 1850-1880* (Indianapolis, 1965).

⁹ Logan, W. N., *The Department of Conservation Division of Geology: Petroleum and Natural Gas in Indiana* (Fort Wayne, 1920), 19-25, 216-17. This book was listed as Publication No. 8 from the Department of Conservation.

¹⁰ Although the director of the Division of Oil and Gas did not send information about the author, or publication location for this book, he did send the publication number, which is No. 108 from 1931. The pages he sent were pages 653-655.

¹¹ "Well History Report- Indiana Geological Survey, Petroleum Database Management System (PDMS)," Indiana Geological Survey, <http://igs.indiana.edu/pdms/Query/Events/WellHistoryReport.cfm?IGSID=144522>, (accessed December 3, 2007).

¹² "Forty Years Ago," *Winamac Democrat-Journal*, June 7, 1907.