Early Lighthouse Designs (and Monopolies)

Stephen Pleasonton was a real penny-pincher. As head of the US Treasury Department's Lighthouse Establishment, he always awarded lighthouse contracts to the lowest bidder, regardless of design or quality. Winslow Lewis (a former sea captain) figured this out and managed to underbid everyone to gain a near monopoly on building lighthouses in the early 1800s.

To keep his bids low, he ignored (or was not aware of) proper engineering practices. Most of the lighthouses were either poorly constructed or too short and had to soon be replaced. Even though Thomas Hammond of Massachusetts won the contract, he built the Cape Canaveral Lighthouse to Lewis' poor specifications.

Lighthouse Lantern Cape Canaveral Lighthouse

9 INCH LENS

REFLECTOR

FOUNTAIN

BURNER

Oil level adjusting screw added later.

Winslow Lewis Original 1810 Lamp with 9 inch Reflector and 9 inch Lens.

Brick by Brick

Nathaniel Scobie was appointed as the first Lighthouse Keeper and oversaw the construction of the Lighthouse (perhaps because he was the only person living in the area at the time).
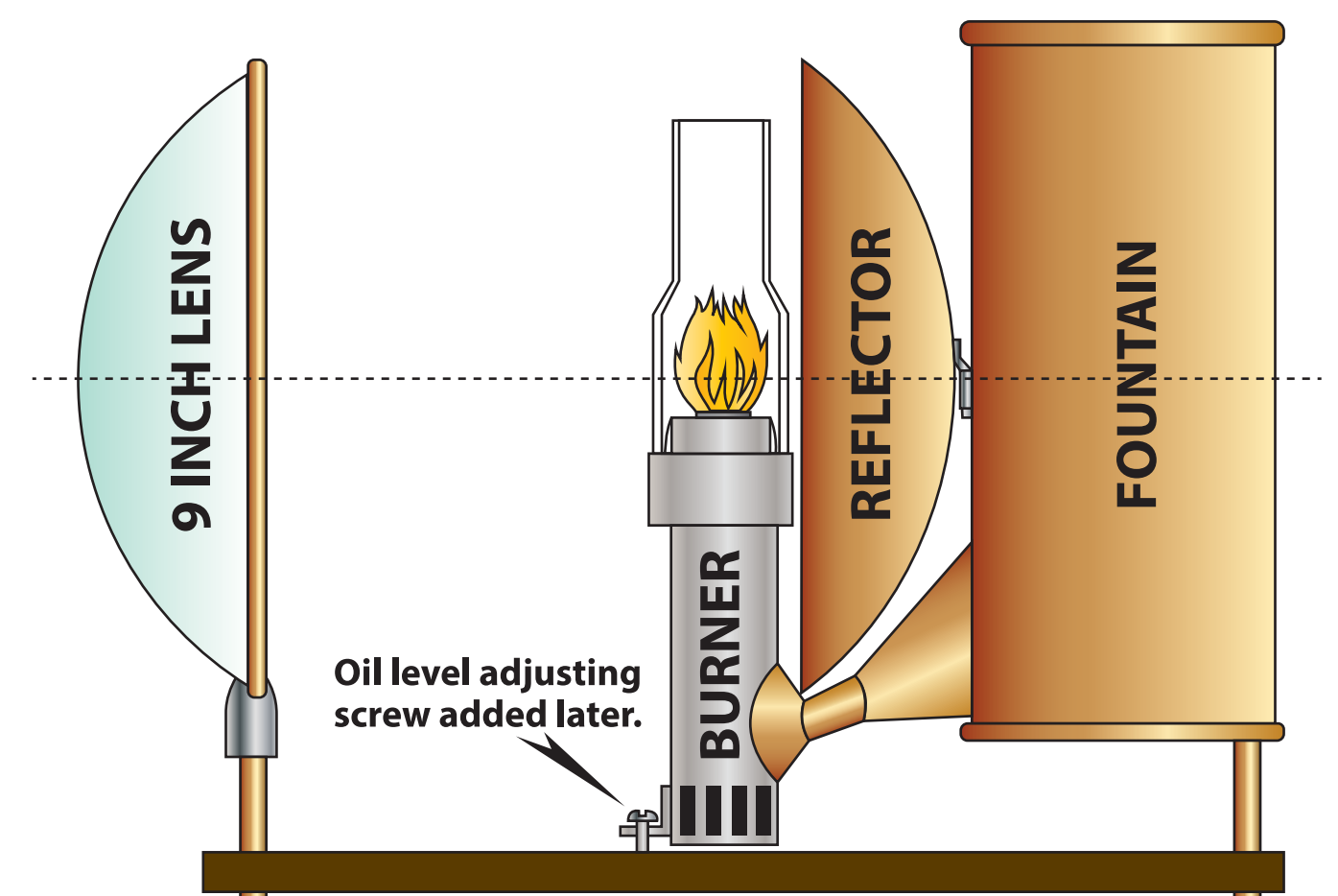
The tower and Keeper's dwelling were completed in January 1848 at a cost of $13,300. It was a 65-foot tall white, cone-shaped brick tower with a base of 20 feet. The top 10 feet was a "bird cage" style lamp room.

1848 brick tower and example of a birdcage-style lamproom similar to the one originally on the top.

The First Light Shines - Sort Of

Although the Lighthouse was certified complete in January 1848, it wouldn't be lit for the first time until over a year later, on March 1, 1849, due to oil supply delays.

Winslow Lewis supplied the lamps that he had patented and the oil to light them. The lamp room held 15 Lewis Gravity Feed Lamps, each with a 21-inch reflector. The lamps were set on a chandelier that was rotated by a clockwork mechanism, so the light flashed once every 3 minutes and 15 seconds until 1853 when it was reset to flash once per minute. It was supposed to shine up to 16 miles out to sea, but that's a later story.