

Philippe Lebon Biography

Philippe Lebon

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Contents

Philippe Lebon Biography.....	1
Contents.....	2
Philippe Lebon.....	3

Philippe Lebon

During his brief scientific career, Philippe Lebon invented one of the first gaslights and envisioned many other applications for gas that would be developed during the nineteenth century. His work was cut short in 1804, when he was murdered in the streets of Paris. Perhaps if he had lived longer, his ideas would have hastened the evolution of the gas industry. Regardless of such speculation, Lebon is recognized today as a pioneer of gas lighting.

Lebon began experimenting with gas made from sawdust when he was in his twenties, around the same time that Scottish inventor William Murdock was developing *coal-gas lighting* in England. In 1799 Lebon patented a method of distilling gas from wood and used it in a lighting fixture called the Thermolamp, which he exhibited as a large model for several months in 1801 in Paris. Despite the favorable attention received by this demonstration, the French government declined to finance Lebon's plans for a large-scale lighting system. However, news of Lebon's work reached James Watt, Murdock's employer, and the threat of competition from France spurred the British industry to complete the development of coal-gas lighting.

In addition to his *Thermolamp*, Lebon conceived the idea of running a motor on gas, using an electric fuel pump and spark ignition. This concept was far beyond its time. He also suggested that compressing the fuel charge in an engine could improve its efficiency, but Lebon did not live long enough to pursue these ideas. On the eve of Napoleon Bonaparte's coronation in 1804, Lebon was robbed and stabbed under mysterious circumstances. He died two days later, just 37 years old.