

Adolf Wilhelm Hermann Kolbe Biography

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Biography

Adolf Wilhelm Hermann Kolbe was born in Göttingen, Germany. In 1832 he entered the Göttingen Gymnasium, where he met Robert Bunsen. As a result of Bunsen's influence, Kolbe decided to study chemistry, and four years later he entered the University of Göttingen. There he studied under Friedrich Wöhler and met Jöns Berzelius, who impressed him greatly. Unfortunately, his friendship with Berzelius caused him to support the latter's theory of vitalism long after it had been discredited by most researchers. In 1842 Kolbe left the university to become an assistant to Bunsen in Marburg, Germany. He studied gas analysis while there and finished his doctorate by studying the effect of chlorine on carbon disulfide. While working on his doctorate he also succeeded in producing acetic acid from inorganic compounds, which was impossible, according to the doctrines of vitalism.

Upon Bunsen's recommendations in 1845 Kolbe acquired a post with the School of Mines in London, where he stayed until 1847. While there Kolbe and chemist Edward Frankland discovered how to convert nitriles into fatty acids. Kolbe returned to Marburg with Frankland and began publishing their research results. Kolbe also studied the effects of galvanic current on organic compounds and succeeded in producing ethane from fatty acid salts. Because of his adherence to Berzelius's theories, Kolbe incorrectly thought that he had succeeded in producing radicals instead of ethane. In 1859 he succeeded using phenol and carbon dioxide to produce salicylic acid, which led to the cheaper production of acetylsalicylic acid, or aspirin. The two reactions came to be called Kolbe's synthesis.

Eventually Kolbe returned to Marburg to teach at the university, taking over Bunsen's chair. He moved to Leipzig in 1865 and built the largest, best equipped laboratory of the time. He became the editor of the *Journal for Practical Chemistry* in 1870. He continued writing until his death in 1884 near Leipzig.