

Charles Augustin de Coulomb Biography

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Biography

The French physicist Charles Augustin de Coulomb was born in Angouleme to wealthy parents. During Coulomb's boyhood, the family moved to Paris.

Quarrelling with his mother over career plans, the young Coulomb joined his father in Montpellier, where the latter had become impoverished by his financial speculations. The younger Coulomb later returned to Paris, however, where he completed his studies at the École du Génie. Following his graduation, Coulomb undertook a lengthy period of service as a military engineer with the Corps du Génie in Martinique.

By 1779, Coulomb had returned to France. In that year, he published an analysis of friction in machinery in which he formulated the law governing the relationship between friction and normal pressure. He had already invented a torsion balance that would allow him to measure the forces of magnetic and electrical attraction which would lead to his formulation of the law (see below) that now bears his name.

During this period of his life, he held several public positions, but he had to give them up with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. Forced to flee Paris, Coulomb settled in Blois where he conducted studies of magnetism, friction, and electricity.

Coulomb did not return to Paris until 1795, at which time he was elected a member of the new Institut de France. Between 1802 and 1806, he served as Inspector-General of Public Instruction. In the post-war years, he assisted the new government in establishing a **metric system** of weights and measures. The Système Internationale d'Unités (SI) unit of electrical charge is named after him.

Coulomb is today best known for his measurements of the forces of magnetic and electric attraction and for his formulation of the law now known as Coulomb's law. Coulomb's law states that the **force** between two small charged spheres is inversely proportional to the **square** of the **distance** between them.