

Nicolas Leblanc Biography

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Biography

Nicolas Leblanc was born in Ivoy-le-Pré France. Emulating his guardian, a doctor, Leblanc studied medicine and, in 1780, became physician to the Duke of Orléans. Supported financially by the Orléand family, Leblanc was able to devote time to research. He studied crystallization and then developed a commercially important process to produce soda (sodium carbonate) out of salt (sodium chloride). The Leblanc process was crucial to industrial-chemical progress in the nineteenth century, as economical supplies of soda ash were necessary for the widespread manufacture of both soap and glass.

In 1790, Leblanc, the Duke of Orléans, a chemist named J.J. Dizé, and Henry Shée established a company to produce soda ash using the Leblanc process. Between 1791 and 1793 they built a factory at St. Denis, near Paris, France. By then, however, the French Revolution was well underway. When the Duke was guillotined in 1793, the factory was closed and later nationalized in 1794. The prize Leblanc had won for developing the process was never paid. The Committee of Public Safety forced Leblanc to publish details of his process without remuneration.

Leblanc finally regained control of his factory in 1800, but by then it needed extensive and expensive renovations. Leblanc was unable to raise the necessary capital, and the settlement of his claims against the French government in 1805 was much less than he had hoped for. Financially ruined, Leblanc killed himself in 1806. His process, however, remained in use until it was finally replaced by Ernest Solvay's process in the 1860s.