Louis Nicolas Vauquelin Biography

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Biography

The son of Nicolas Vauquelin, Louis Nicolas began his life as a field laborer on the estate that his father managed. Having been reprimanded at age fourteen by the estate master for taking scientific notes on his master's lectures, Vauquelin was rescued by the village priest and sent off to Paris to work in an apothecary shop.

Once there, he was introduced to chemist Antoine François de Fourcroy, and was made his laboratory assistant in 1783. In 1792 Vauquelin became manager of a pharmacy, but was forced to live outside France from 1793 to 1794 to escape the Reign of Terror. Upon his return, he became assistant professor of chemistry at the Ecole Centrale des Travaux Publiques. In 1795 he gained the title of master pharmacist.

While in this position Vauquelin made his two major discoveries. In 1797 he developed a chromium compound and succeeded in isolating chromium the following year. In 1798, he identified the element beryllium in the gems beryl and emerald. Beryllium was actually isolated by Friedrich Wöhler about thirty years later.

Vauquelin took professorships at the College de France in 1801 and at the Musee d'Histoire Naturelle in 1804. While at the museum, he reestablished his relationship with Fourcroy. When the latter died in 1809, Vauquelin was appointed to fill his position.

In 1806 Vauquelin discovered the amino acid asparagine, which is the identifying compound present in asparagus. He and Fourcroy set up a chemical factory in Paris in 1804 which Vauquelin continued to manage until 1822.

In 1827, he was elected to the French legislature; after serving in that capacity for two years, Vauquelin died at the age of sixty-six.