

Count Alessandro Volta (1745 - 1827)

Volta was an Italian scientist who made important discoveries about electricity. He came up with the theory of electric currents and invented the first battery.

Count Alessandro Volta was born in Como, Lombardy. He was born to nobility that had moved down in social station. Unlike his siblings, young Alessandro did not enter the church.

His young childhood did not show the makings of a prodigy. It was not until the age of four that he talked, and his family was convinced that he was retarded. However, at the age of seven when his father died, he was at the level of other children and then began to march ahead. By the age of fourteen, he made up his mind to be a physicist.



In 1774, he was appointed professor of physics in the Como high school and the next year he invented electrophorous, a charge- accumulating machine. Volta was the first to isolate the compound methane, a major constituent of natural gas.

The major feat of his life involved not static electricity, but dynamic electricity- the electric current. Following the experiments of Galvani, who was a friend of his and sent copies of his papers on the subject, Volta attacked the question of whether the electric current resulting when muscle was in contact with two different metals arose from the tissue or from the metals. To check this he decided in 1794 to make use of the metals alone, without the tissue. He found at once that an electric current resulted and maintained that it therefore had nothing to do with life or tissue. This sparked a controversy between the two Italians with the German Humboldt, the chief of Galvani's supporters, and the Frenchman Coulomb, the chief of Volta's. The weight of the evidence leaned more and more heavily toward Volta, and Galvani died embittered.

For a while he was a professor at the university of Pavia, but he did most of his work at his home in the beautiful lakeside town of Como. The Voltaic pile was Volta's life accomplishment. Volta received his greatest honor, however, at the hands of no ruler, but of his fellow scientists.