

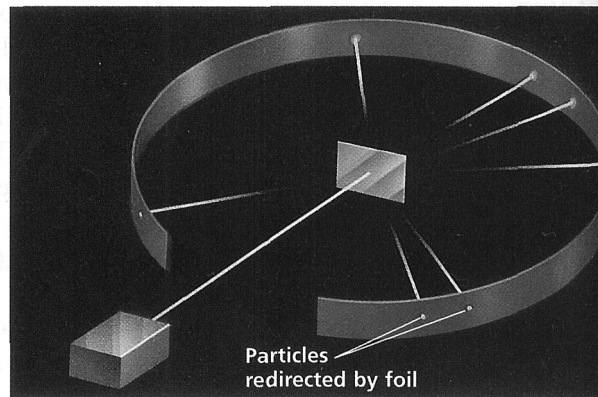
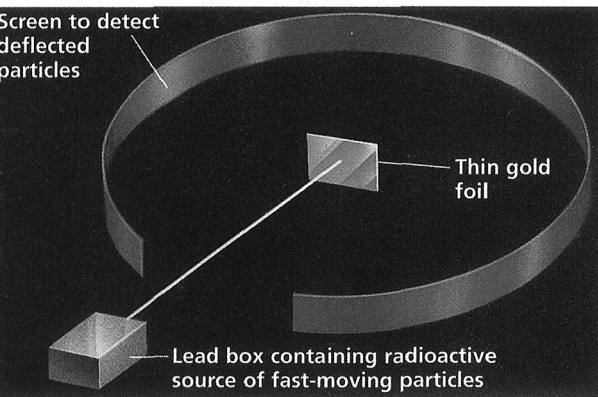
## Discovery of the Atomic Nucleus

More detail of the atom's structure was provided in 1911 by New Zealander Ernest Rutherford and his associates Hans Geiger and Ernest Marsden. The scientists bombarded a thin, gold foil with fast-moving *alpha particles*, which are positively charged particles with about four times the mass of a hydrogen atom. Geiger and Marsden assumed that mass and charge were uniformly distributed throughout the atoms of the gold foil. So they expected the alpha particles to pass through with only a slight deflection. And for the vast majority of the particles, this was the case. However, when the scientists checked for the possibility of wide-angle deflections, they were shocked to find that roughly 1 in 8000 of the alpha particles had actually been redirected back toward the source (see Figure 3-6). As Rutherford later exclaimed, it was “as if you had fired a 15-inch [artillery] shell at a piece of tissue paper and it came back and hit you.”

After thinking about the startling result for two years, Rutherford finally came up with an explanation. He reasoned that the rebounded alpha particles must have experienced some powerful force within the atom. And he figured that the source of this force must occupy a very small amount of space because so few of the total number of alpha particles had been affected by it. He concluded that the force must be caused by a very densely packed bundle of matter with a positive electric charge. Rutherford called this positive bundle of matter the nucleus (see Figure 3-7).

Rutherford had discovered that the volume of a nucleus was very small compared with the total volume of an atom. In fact, if the nuclei were the size of a marble, then the size of the atom would be about the size of a football field. But where were the electrons? Although he had no supporting evidence, Rutherford suggested that the electrons surrounded the positively charged nucleus like planets around the sun. He could not explain, however, what kept the electrons in motion around the nucleus.

**FIGURE 3-6** (a) Geiger and Marsden bombarded a thin piece of gold foil with a narrow beam of alpha particles. (b) Some of the particles were redirected by the gold foil back toward their source.



(a)

(b)