Branded a traitor during the Reign of Terror by revolutionists, French chemist Antoine Lavoisier, who was also a tax collector with the Ferme Générale, was tried, convicted, and guillotined all on May 8, 1794.

Lavoisier is considered the “father of modern chemistry.” In 1777, he was the first to establish that sulfur was an element, not a compound. In 1778, he named oxygen and in 1783 he named hydrogen. He also predicted silicon in 1787.

Further, Lavoisier is credited with putting together the first extensive list of elements, helping to construct the metric system, and helping to reform chemical nomenclature. He is perhaps best known for discovering that although matter may change its form or shape, its mass always remains the same. Overall, his contributions are considered very important in advancing chemistry to the level reached in physics and mathematics during the 18th century.

Lavoisier carried out various political and economic activities to fund his scientific research. These included his work as an administrator of the Ferme Générale, 28 feudal tax collectors who profited by exploiting their position, and being a powerful member of a number of other aristocratic councils.

At the height of the French Revolution, he was accused of selling adulterated tobacco among other crimes. He had also intervened on behalf of a number of foreign-born scientists and mathematicians, unfavorably granting them exception to a mandate stripping all foreigners of possessions and freedom.

For this, Lavoisier was tried, convicted, and guillotined in Paris in 1794, at the age of 50. As the story has been told, arguments were made to spare Lavoisier’s life so that he could continue his experiments. Not allowing himself to be swayed, the judge responded that the Republic needed neither scientists nor chemists and that justice could not be delayed.

Italian mathematician and astronomer Joseph-Louis Lagrange is said to have lamented the beheading by saying: "It took them only an instant to cut off his head, but France may not produce another such head in a century."
A year and a half after his death, Lavoisier was exonerated by the French government. His private belongings were delivered to his widow with a note that said Lavoisier was falsely convicted.

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**Editor’s note:** This article was originally posted on May 8, 2013 and edited on May 8, 2019.