

PQ Corporation, Anderson Plant

Founded: 1889 (company founded 1831; Anderson plant established 1889)

Location: 1115 Grant, Anderson; 1904 Columbus Avenue (1950s– )

In 1886 prospectors discovered what was at the time the largest natural gas field in the world in Indiana. The Indiana “Gas Belt” covered approximately 3,750 square miles in the east-central portion of the state, and its discovery prompted the industrial growth of cities such as Anderson, Elwood, Gas City, Kokomo, Marion, Muncie, and New Castle. Tourists came on excursion trains to see the great flaming torches in the gas fields, which were wastefully burning off great amounts of what was considered a limitless supply of natural gas. Local boosters lured factories to the area by promising cheap energy and sometimes offering free gas and free property. In Anderson, where a large flow of gas was established in March 1887, the local board of trade successfully lured new factories to the city. One of the new companies was the Philadelphia Quartz Company, which produced soluble silicates, including sodium silicates, useful in a number of industrial processes, including the manufacture of soap.

The Philadelphia Quartz Company was descended from a soap factory established by Quaker businessman Joseph Elkinton in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1831.

Elkinton, a trained silversmith, established himself in the simpler trade of soap making out of religious scruples. His firm eventually marketed such brands as “Trolley Soap,” “Plantation Soap,” and “Brown Soap.” In the 1860s Elkinton’s sons, Joseph S. and Thomas, led the firm into the production of soluble silicates, compounds made by fusing sand with soda ash under extreme heat. Silicates were used as a substitute for rosin in the

production of soaps. In 1864 the Elkinton brothers formed the Philadelphia Quartz Company (named for the high-grade quartz sand that was the basic source of silica) to manufacture and trade silicates. The brothers' soap production gradually diminished as the silicate industry slowly grew; from 1863 to 1892 the firm's production of silicates grew from two million to fifteen million pounds.

The Philadelphia Quartz Company decided to establish production facilities closer to its largest consumers, and the Anderson plant, constructed in 1889, was the first step in accomplishing this strategy. The plant, managed by W. H. Stanton, employed sixty workers and was located at the junction of the Big Four and Pan Handle railroad tracks. Early photographs show the factory surrounded by countryside. The Indiana gas boom faded in the 1890s as the gas fields were depleted. Many companies closed, but the Philadelphia Quartz Company continued production of silicate of soda and heavy chemicals, although on a smaller scale. In 1914 the company employed only twenty-five workers, although by 1925 this number had rebounded to forty-three. In the 1950s the Anderson plant moved from 1115 Grant to 1904 Columbus Avenue at East 19th Street. The Philadelphia Quartz Company expanded and diversified over the course of the twentieth century. In the 1960s the company's management adopted a market-oriented strategy, increasing the international profile of the firm and aggressively pursuing new markets and product development. Sodium silicates were used primarily in detergent production but also in petroleum refining and the recovery of oil from the ground. In the 1970s the firm moved its corporate headquarters from Philadelphia to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, and in 1978 changed its name to the PQ Corporation, all the time

remaining privately held. By the 1990s it operated fifteen inorganic chemical production plants in the United States and twelve abroad.