

Professor Wendell Latimer, whose office was on the first floor of Gilman Hall, to suggest the strongest oxidizing agent he knew for use in aqueous solution. At his suggestion we used peroxydisulphate with argentic ion as catalyst.

On the stormy night of February 23, 1941, in an experiment that ran well into the next morning, Wahl performed the oxidation which gave us proof that what we had made was chemically different from all other known elements. That experiment, and hence the first chemical identification of element 94, took place in Room 307 of Gilman Hall, the room that was dedicated as a National Historic Landmark, 25 years later. Thus, we showed that the chemical properties of element 94 were similar to those of uranium and not like osmium (as suggested by Figure 1).

The communication to Washington describing this oxidation experiment, which was critical to the discovery of element 94, was sent on March 7, 1941, and this served for later publication in The Physical Review under the authorship of Seaborg, Wahl, and Kennedy (8) (Figure 3).

How element 94 eventually got the name plutonium is an interesting story and one worth telling. This work was carried on under self-imposed secrecy in view of its potential implications for national security. Following the discovery in February 1941 and well into 1942, we used only the name "element 94" among ourselves and the few other people who knew of the element's existence. But we needed a code name to be used when we might be overheard. Someone suggested "silver" as a code name for element 93, and we decided to use "copper" for element 94. This worked fine until, for some reason I cannot recall now, it became necessary to use real copper in our work. Since we continued to call element 94 "copper" on occasion we had to refer to the real thing as 'honest-to-God-copper.'

The first time a true name for element 94 seemed necessary was in writing the report to the Uranium Committee in Washington in March of 1942, which was published later under the authorship of Seaborg and Wahl (9). I remember very clearly the debates within our small group as to what the name should be. It eventually became obvious to us that we should follow the lead of Ed McMillan, who had named element 93 neptunium because Neptune is the next planet after Uranus, which had served as the basis for the naming of uranium 150 years earlier. Thus we should name element 94 for Pluto, the next planet beyond Neptune. But, and this is a little-known story, it seemed to us that one way of using the base name Pluto was to name the element "plutium." We debated the question of whether the name should be "plutium" or "plutonium," the sound of which we liked much better. We finally decided to take the name that sounded better. I think we made a wise choice, and I believe it also etymologically correct.

There was also the matter of the need for a symbol. Here, too, a great deal of debate was engendered because, although the symbol might have been "Pl," we liked