

Historical series

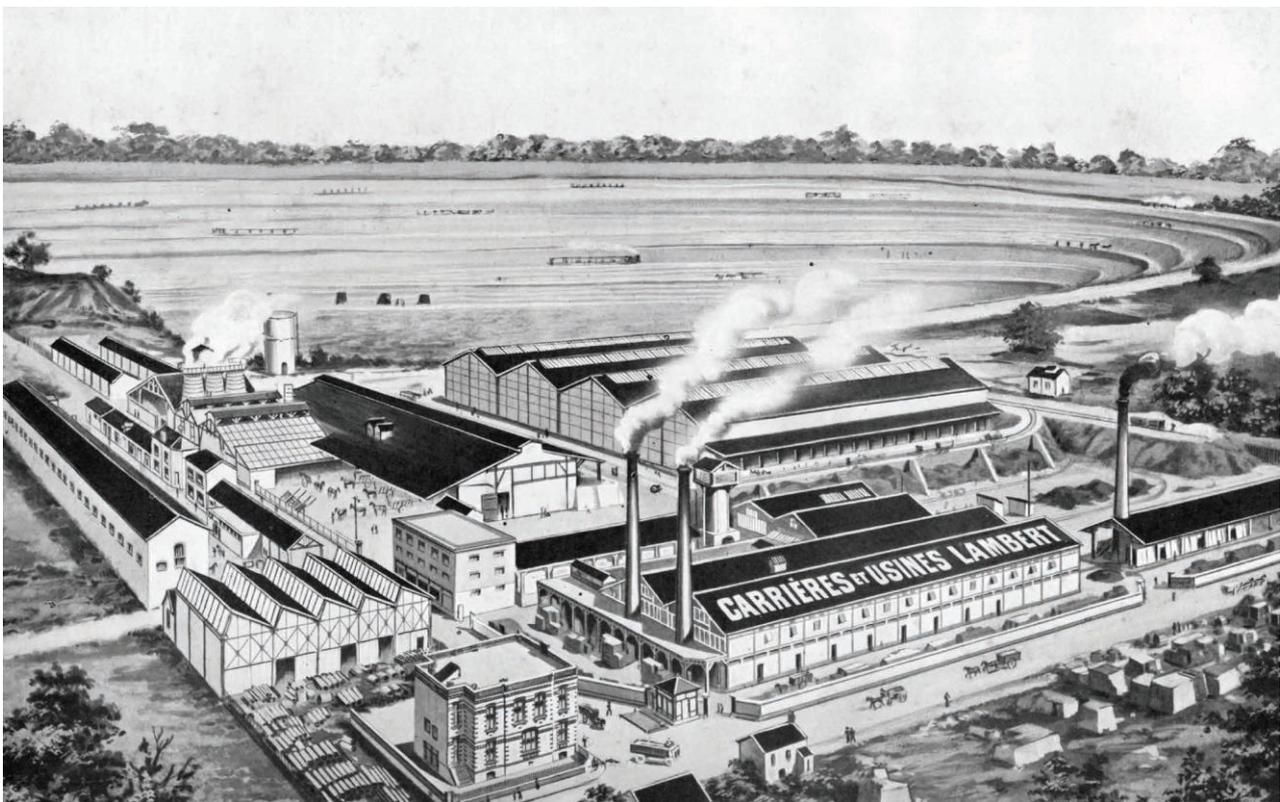
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The Cormeilles Quarry a Century Ago

Lambert in the 1920s

Expansion of the gypsum quarry and diversification into related industries in the 1920s established Cormeilles as a leading center for building materials.



Overall view of the Lambert quarry and factories, 1914.

This conventional cavalier view of a modern factory complex conveys the rational organization of the Lambert facilities at the start of the 20th century. In the background, on the slope of the hill ("butte"), the quarry is worked in benches to remove each of the raw materials separately. On various levels there are horse-drawn carts and even a train drawn by a steam locomotive. In the foreground, the plants are interconnected, with the plaster plant, lime kilns, brickworks, bagging area, machine room, store rooms, offices, garage, farmhouse, and stables.

Photo Musée du Plâtre collection

19th century origins

After beginning as a small-scale artisanal operation in the 1830s, the quarries in Cormeilles shifted to industrial production starting in 1882 under Hilaire Lambert (1846-1928), with the construction of the first plaster plant, followed by a brickworks in 1890 and a lime plant in 1894. The family-owned company, Lambert Frères & Cie, was founded in 1908 and opened its capital to outside shareholders in 1921, thus acquiring the financial resources to expand and modernize its production facilities.

Gypsum plaster

A plaster plant installed in Cormeilles before 1914 produced 500 tonnes of plaster a day. In 1923, Lambert opened a second plant in Vaujourn (some 30 kilometers to the east), using Diederich rotary kilns. This technological change in heating gypsum, and the development of semihydrate plasters produced in autoclave kilns, prompted the industry to set up research labs and to standardize products. Work by Louis Chassevent, a Lambert engineer, led to the 1928 introduction of Molda molding plaster, which even today remains the flagship product from the Placoplatre plant in Cormeilles. Standardization also resulted in Lambert's creation of Lutèce plaster for building, Fibra board for ceilings, and S panels for walls.

Lime and cement

The lime kilns in Cormeilles were modernized in the early 1920s. At the same time, Lambert began operating in the Beffes basin, some 250 kilometres southwest of Paris, where there was a considerable industry active in lime and cements. In 1931 Lambert opened its cement works in Cormeilles, on the banks of the River Seine; output came to 250,000 tonnes a year.*

Bricks and roofing tiles

After modernization, the Cormeilles brickworks produced what was known as the "Cormeilles" brick. In 1918, the Lambert brothers invested in a terracotta tile works in Chagny (Burgundy). In 1922, the company acquired plants in Nogent-l'Artaud (100 kilometres east of Paris) and Choisy-le-Roi (just southeast of Paris); the latter plant made the "Amiantine" brick.**

Sales of building materials

At the same time, Lambert opened depots across the greater Paris region and acquired stakes in dealers across the rest of France. Customers in the building trades could find everything they needed in the same location. The industrial and geographical expansion of Lambert is also evidenced in the thousands of men and women who arrived from France and abroad in successive waves of immigration.

Operated today by Placoplatre (a Saint-Gobain company), the quarry and plant in Cormeilles continue to be an iconic site for the gypsum plaster industry.

By Vincent Farion (*first published 2015*)



Workers in the Cormeilles quarry with picks, spades and bars, photographed in the 1930s in front of a 1915 model Orenstein & Koppel locomotive. *Private collection.*

SOURCES:

Farion (Vincent), "Lambert dans les années 20, une entrée dans la modernité," *Les Articles du Musée du Plâtre*, 2015, 8 p.

Hantraye (Jacques), 1924, "Quand la carrière et l'usine Lambert ouvraient leurs portes," *Les Articles du Musée du Plâtre*, 2014, 8 p.

* The cement plant was connected to the quarry and factory by a private railway, and ultimately closed in 1990. (*note added 2019*)

** The Amiantine brick was made with lime, silica, and asbestos imported from Quebec. (*note added 2019*)