

The Life and Science of Percy Julian

1899-1917: Developing an Early Love for Science 1917-1926: Julian's College Experiences 1926-1929: Julian's Struggle to find a Place as a Chemist 1929-1931: Vienna



Wooden building used as a school for African American children in Camden, Mississippi, (c. 1921). Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-0551.

1. DEVELOPING AN EARLY LOVE FOR SCIENCE: 1899–1916

Growing Up in the Segregated South

Percy Lavon Julian was born in Montgomery, Alabama, on 11 April 1899. His grandparents had been slaves before the Civil War. Though they and all slaves were set free by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, life was still hard for southern African Americans in 1899.

Racial segregation ☀ was the law in Alabama and many other states, and many people still had deeply ingrained racist attitudes and



☀ ACTIVITIES & READINGS

> Next Section
If slavery was over by 1865, why did Percy Julian face racism in the early 1900s?

Spend a day with young Percy in Montgomery.

Meet St. Elmo Brady and other trailblazing African American scientists.






Theater sign, Leland, Mississippi, in the Delta area. June 1937. Photograph by Dorothea Lange. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

treated African Americans as inferior.

Luckily, Julian had a strong and loving family 🌞. His father, James Julian, had a good job as a mail clerk for a railroad at a time when most people in Alabama, black or white, were poor farmers. Both James and Elizabeth Julian, Percy's mother, wanted their children to be able to get the education they never had.

Julian went to a segregated elementary school that didn't teach any science. He couldn't go to high school because there was no high school for African Americans in Montgomery. Instead, he went to the Alabama State Normal School, a school for blacks that taught practical skills like blacksmithing and hat making, and trained teachers for black schools. It too offered little or no science. Julian had read about science in his father's library at home, and chemistry fascinated him. He soon decided he wanted to be a chemist.

Julian's father, however, wanted him to be a doctor. Back then, because of segregation, there was a need for black doctors who would treat black patients, but the only jobs in chemistry were in white-owned factories and laboratories. Julian's father warned him about how hard it would be for him to find a job as a chemist, but young Percy was highly motivated. He became even more determined when he heard about an African American named [St. Elmo Brady](#)  who had recently graduated from the University of Illinois with a Ph.D. in chemistry. Julian convinced his father that he could achieve his goal, and in 1916, with the help of a teacher named Joan Stuart at the Normal School, he entered DePauw University in Indiana to study chemistry.

[NEXT](#) ▶

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