

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Roger Arliner Young (1899 - November 9, 1964)

"First African-American Woman to Receive a Doctorate in Zoology"



Roger Arliner Young was born in Clifton Forge, Virginia in 1889 and grew up in Burgettstown, Pennsylvania. Although her family was poor and she struggled to care for her disabled mother, Roger excelled in her studies. In 1916, Roger entered Howard College in Washington, D.C. to study music. Due to limited resources, she required a longer term to complete her studies. In 1921, the course of her studies would change when she took her first zoology class. In 1923, seven years after enrolling in Howard, Roger graduated with a B.S. in in Biology. The same year, Ernest Everett Just, a prominent Black biologist and head of the Howard Zoology Department, hired Roger as faculty member. He also helped her secure funding to attend graduate school at the University of Chicago in 1924.



While there, Roger excelled in her studies and began working as a research assistant studying the internal structures of the Paramecium that allow the creature to regulate salt concentrations. The same year she published her first scientific article,

"On the Excretory Apparatus in Paramecium" in the journal Science, also becoming the first Black woman to publish in this journal from her field. In 1926, Roger was invited to join Sigma Xi, an exclusive science research society with members that included Albert Einstein. After graduating with her Master's degree, she joined her college mentor

Dr. Just at the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory in Massachusetts in 1927. There she taught classes and continued her own research focusing on fertilization in marine organisms; particularly, how ultraviolet radiation (i.e. the part of the light spectrum that produces high energy waves and is known to cause cancer and cataracts) affects sea urchin eggs. She stood in for Dr. Just as acting department head in early 1929 as Just traveled to Europe on a grant. In the Fall of 1929, Roger returned to the University of Chicago to pursue her doctorate in Zoology. Unfortunately, and likely due to radiation exposure during her experiments, Young permanently damaged her eyes and struggled through her Doctorate program.

Despite her health issues, the demands of caring for her disabled mother, the responsibility of being interim head of the Zoology Department at Howard University, and living in the height of the Jim Crow era, Roger had allies that rallied to help her succeed. She eventually left Howard and returned to the University of Pennsylvania in 1937 to try again for her doctorate. She completed her Ph.D. in 1940, and between 1940 and 1953 she taught at North Carolina College and Shaw University, where she served as the Biology Department Chair. In 1953, Roger's mother died causing her to spiral into despair. She struggled with her physical and mental health and after working at various black colleges until the late 1950s, she voluntarily committed herself to the Mississippi State Mental Asylum.

After her release in 1962, Roger took a temporary position lecturing at Southern University until she died on November 9, 1964 in New Orleans.

