Edward Bouchet

Physicist

1852 -1916

Edward Bouchet was an American physicist and teacher and the first African-American to receive a Doctorate of any kind from any United States university. Born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1852, the son of a freed slave, Bouchet graduated valedictorian of the Hopkins Grammar School before gaining acceptance to Yale College. After graduating he continued his studies for two more years before becoming the first African-American to obtain a PhD in physics. During this time Bouchet's original research focused on geometrical optics.

Despite his qualifications, Bouchet was unable to obtain a university position – almost certainly as a result of racial discrimination. Instead he took a teaching position at the Institute for Colored Youth (ICY) in Philadelphia – one of the only locations in the city to offer a high school education for black students. While there Bouchet advocated for improving science education. In 1902 the ICY managers dropped academic subjects in place of industrial training and Bouchet lost his job. He spent the next years in different teaching positions throughout the country until retiring back to New Haven in poor health in 1916.