

Vignette one

The Early Years of Johann Gregor Mendel

In 1822, Johann Gregor Mendel was born in what is now the Czech Republic. His family were poor farmers. Mendel helped his father tend the orchards on the family farm. In grade school, he was recognized as a gifted child and sent to boarding school in the German town of Opava. His parents could not afford the school so Mendel tutored other students to pay for school. After graduating, he was unable to find a job as a teacher and returned to his parents' farm. In 1841, Mendel was accepted to the University of Olomouc, but attending the university was tough because he spoke a different language at home than at school. He made good relationships with his teachers and earned top marks in mathematics and science.

When Mendel's father was injured on the farm, his sister and her husband took over running the farm. Mendel needed money to continue his education, so in 1843, Mendel entered the Augustinian Monastery in Brno, a city in the Czech Republic, and was christened "Gregor." A monastery is a religious community where priests live together to work, worship, and study. As long as he performed his priestly duties, Mendel was free to study whatever he wished. He visited the sick and poor, attended regular church services, and taught students at the technical school. Despite being praised for his classroom teaching, Mendel could not pass the very tough teaching exams. He took and failed the exams over four times. The head at the monastery (Abbot) decided to send Mendel to the University of Vienna to sharpen his education. In Vienna, Mendel studied physics with Christian Doppler. He also took coursework in botany, zoology, and anthropology. He finished his degree in 1853 and returned to the monastery. Mendel took the teaching test again in 1856, but his nerves got the best of him and he stormed out of the exam room. He failed again.