

While he was a student at the German Academy, Wheeler used to haunt the old museum of natural history at the school. In 1884 a miscellaneous collection of museum specimens was sent to the Milwaukee Exposition by Professor H. A. Ward, and Wheeler offered his services to aid in unpacking and arranging this material. The enthusiasm which he showed at this task resulted in his being appointed to the staff of Ward's Natural Science Establishment in Rochester, his duties consisting of the identification of specimens and the preparation of catalogues. A year and a half later, however, at the age of twenty he returned to Milwaukee to teach German and physiology at the city high school. The principal of the high school at that time was Dr. George W. Peckham, and Wheeler's intimate association with Peckham's studies of the habits of wasps and spiders, and the technique which he developed in preparing illustrations for Peckham's writings were undoubtedly molding influences at this stage of Wheeler's life. During this same year (1886) Wheeler was also under the influence of Professor C. O. Whitman and Dr. William Patten, the embryologist, who were in the Allis Lake Laboratory in Milwaukee. Patten, recently returned from Leukart's laboratory at Leipzig, inspired Wheeler to study insect embryology, on which he concentrated his spare time for the next four years, and all of his attention for the next two years following. During this period (1887) Wheeler left the high school to become custodian of the Milwaukee Public Museum, a position which he held until 1890. His embryological studies were carried out after museum hours, at home, where he had fitted up a small laboratory.

In 1890 Wheeler left Milwaukee to assist Professor C. O. Whitman at the newly established Clark University, and two years later (1892) he secured his doctorate in philosophy at the University, his dissertation being a "Contribution to Insect Embryology," now regarded as an outstanding entomological classic. During the same year Whitman left Clark University to become head of the department of zoology at the University of Chicago. Wheeler was appointed instructor in embryology under Whitman (1892), but was immediately given a year's leave of absence which enabled him to study in Europe, with Boveri at Würzburg, van Beneden at Liege, and at the Naples Zoological Station, where he held the Smithsonian table for 1893. Three years later he was appointed assistant professor at Chicago.