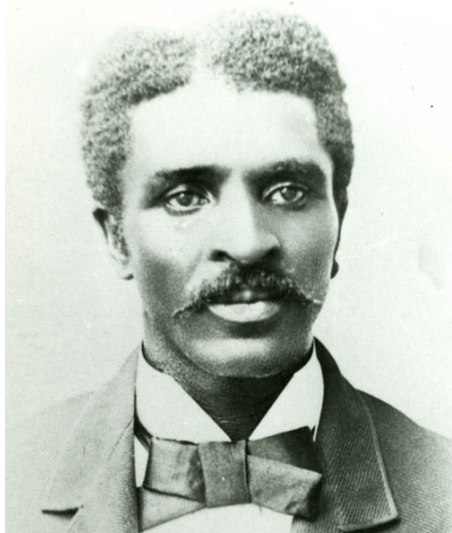


Retrospective: George Washington Carver



George Washington Carver (1864?-1943) mastered chemistry, botany, mycology (study of fungi), music, herbalism, art, and cooking; his life began in slavery about 1864 in Diamond Grove, Missouri. Finding himself rejected from college due to his race, he tried his hand at homesteading in Kansas. Finally, in 1890 he was accepted as an art major at Simpson College in Iowa, where he was the only African American. Within a year, he transferred to Iowa State Agricultural College (today's Iowa State University) to pursue agriculture. Hence, Carver earned a master's degree at Iowa State Agricultural College and went on to become that university's first Black faculty member. His peanut work, beginning in about 1903, was aimed at freeing African American farmers and the South from the tyranny of cotton production. With innovative farming

methods, Carver convinced Southern farmers to grow such soil-enriching crops as soybeans and peanuts, in addition to cotton. At the heart of his vision for an economically rejuvenated South was his teaching that nature produced no waste.

After receiving his education at Iowa Agricultural College (Iowa State University), Carver gained an international reputation during his career at Tuskegee University. His research resulted in the creation of 325 products from peanuts, more than 100 products from sweet potatoes, and hundreds more from a dozen other plants native to the South.

Looking to attract the best and brightest African-American professionals to Tuskegee, Booker T. Washington (a man who rose from slavery to a position of power and influence; a realist and a man of action, he became one of the most important African-American leaders of his time; he was committed to improving the lives of African-Americans after the Civil War; he advocated economic independence through self-help, hard work, and a practical education; hence, his drive and vision built Tuskegee into a major African-American presence and place of learning) hired the young teaching assistant, George W. Carver, in 1896. The two men shared the belief that a practical education would make African Americans self-sufficient. In a letter to Washington, Carver said "it has always been the one ideal of my life to be of the greatest good to the greatest number of my people possible and to this end I have been preparing myself for these many years, feeling as I do that this line of education is the key." Carver believed that Tuskegee Institute was the place that could "unlock the golden dawn of freedom to our people." Carver was assigned various responsibilities at Tuskegee over a long career. Although he was frustrated by Carver's management and administrative shortcomings, Washington realized that Carver was "a great teacher, a great lecturer, a great inspirer of young men and old men."

At schools, on farms, and county fairs, Carver urged others to recognize their own potential, and that of their surroundings. He was committed to learning by doing. Students were encouraged to "figure it out for themselves." They need a thorough preparation to "do all common things uncommonly well." Carver's talks and writings were direct, practical, and engaging. His warmth and charm allowed him to develop and maintain close personal relationships with students, farmers and powerful philanthropists over the years.

Applying his wide ranging research to finding practical solutions, Carver experimented with seeds, soils, soil enrichment, and feed grains. "Soil enrichment, natural fertilizer use, and crop rotation" was his message to students and farmers. Carver developed fertilizers to produce more food and better cash crops. As yields improved, the creative researcher developed new products from crops such as sweet potatoes and peanuts. His plant hybridization, recycling, and use of locally available technology was ahead of his time. Carver's work on synthetic substitutes for petroleum products and paints was of great interest to industry. He also patented several inventions. All Carver's efforts were geared to increasing African-American farmers' economic independence.

Carver came to public attention in 1921 with his captivating testimony before a U.S. Congress House committee debating a peanut tariff bill. His work and encyclopedic knowledge of plant properties impressed Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, who sought information from him on industrial uses of plants, including peanuts and soybeans. Carver died at Tuskegee on Jan. 5, 1943. That July, Congress designated George Washington Carver National Monument as the first National Park to honor an African American scientist, educator and humanitarian.

Carver devoted his life to research and finding practical alternatives to improving agriculture and the economic condition of African-Americans in the South. Hence, he directed his faculty to "take their teaching into the community" by designing a "movable school" that students built, named for Morris K. Jesup, a New York financier who gave Washington the money to equip and operate the "movable school", a horse-drawn vehicle called a Jesup Agricultural Wagon, later a mechanized truck that carried agricultural exhibits to county fairs and community gatherings. By 1930, the "Booker T. Washington Agricultural School on Wheels" carried a nurse, a home demonstration agent, an agricultural agent, and an architect to share the latest techniques with rural people. Later, community services were increased and educational films and lectures were circulated in local churches and schools. The "movable school" was the cornerstone of Tuskegee's extension services and epitomized the Institute's doctrines of self-sufficiency and self-improvement.



Nearly every American can cite at least one of the accomplishments of George Washington Carver. The many tributes honoring his contributions to scientific advancement and black history include a national monument bearing his name, a U.S.-minted coin featuring his likeness, and induction into the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

The “Collection George Washington Carver Papers, 1893-[ongoing] are available at Iowa State University Library Special Collections and University Archives), and at the National Agriculture Library in Washington, D.C. of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (one of four national libraries of the United States and houses one of the world's largest collections devoted to agriculture and its related sciences) house a collection of correspondence between Carver and former Agricultural Research Service scientist Paul R. Miller. There are three handwritten letters dated 1932-1933 from Carver and a reply from Miller regarding rust specimens. A signed portrait from Carver to Miller (1938) is included. Additionally, there are two letters dated 1943 from Rackham Holt (author of *George Washington Carver: An American Biography*) to Miller regarding Miller's text contribution to the book. Miller described Carver's standing in the scientific world.