

George Washington Carver

Carver, George Washington



Record Information

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Description:

George Washington Carver is known in popular history as the man who discovered more than three hundred new uses for the peanut. It is more accurate, however, to say that he is the man who changed southern agriculture by finding new ways to restore soil and diversify crops. Among Carver's major accomplishments were the invention of a new organic fertilizing method, the introduction of crop rotation, and the development of the peanut and the sweet potato as southern agricultural staples.

Born into slavery, kidnapped as a child, and employed as a traveling farmhand as a youth, **George Washington Carver**—through his determination, talent, and curiosity—became an internationally known scientist and community organizer. **Carver** was born in Diamond Grove, Missouri, sometime between 1861 and 1864 to a woman known as Mary, who was the slave of Moses and Susan **Carver**, Union supporters who lived on the wild borderlands of southwest Missouri during the Civil War.

The Carvers were a curious couple. Although they lived in a region heavily populated with southern sympathizers, they backed Abraham Lincoln's war on the South. Even though they professed to dislike slavery, they owned slaves. Southwest Missouri at that was plagued not only by common bandits but by roving bands of northern and southern militias who frequently robbed people they thought to be supporters of their political opponents. During the war, Moses **Carver's** farm was robbed three times.

Not much is known about **George Washington Carver's** father, although it is thought that he was a slave who lived on a nearby farm. This man is believed to have been killed in a farm accident soon after **Carver's** birth. During his childhood, **Carver** probably had three siblings, a brother, Jim, and two sisters. The sisters died in infancy, and Jim lived to his early 20s, when he succumbed to smallpox.

At the end of the Civil War, when **George Washington Carver** was an infant, southern raiders attacked the **Carver** farm for the last time, taking Mary and **George** as captives. The raiders had ridden across the state line in Arkansas. For at least a year

after the end of the war, they kept mother and child. As a result of the arrival of federal troops and the intervention of a neighbor, George was returned to Moses Carver at the end of 1865. Mary had disappeared and nothing was heard from or about her again. Moses and Susan Carver assumed the task of raising George and Jim. During his captivity in Arkansas, George had contracted whooping cough, an illness that left him weak for many years. Because of his illness, he was unable to participate in field work. Instead he became proficient in cooking, cleaning, and sewing. As a child, he displayed the personality he would carry into the rest of his life. He was a dreamy loner who, in his own words, preferred "talking to flowers" to engaging with other people. Later in his life, in a brief autobiographical account, he described himself as a child:

I had an inordinate desire for knowledge and especially music, painting, flowers, and the sciences. Day after day, I spent in the woods alone in order to collect my floral beauties, and put them in my little garden I had hidden in the bush not far from the house, as it was considered foolishness in that neighborhood to waste time on flowers.

Using a weather-beaten copy of *Webster's Elementary Spelling Book*, Carver learned to read during the time that he still lived with Moses and Susan Carver. Soon he asked to attend a segregated school in nearby Neosho. After a year or two, when he was probably around 14, he was forced by necessity to begin work. For the next five or six years, he wandered through the Great Plains states—Kansas, western Missouri, possibly Oklahoma—harvesting wheat, chopping wood, and working as a cook. Whenever he could, he would study at local schools, and he finally managed to earn a high school diploma at Minneapolis, Kansas.

In 1886, when he was about 21, Carver became a homesteader in Kansas. He worked his plot of land for two years before selling out his claim for \$300. He then opened a laundry in Winterset, Kansas, and enrolled at Simpson College in nearby Indianola, Kansas. At Simpson, Carver was lucky enough to befriend his art teacher, Etta Budd, who soon discovered his intense interest in plants. Budd directed Carver to Iowa State University, where her brother, J. L., taught botany. Carver enrolled at Iowa State in 1891.

Guided by two professors who would soon become U.S. secretaries of agriculture (James C. Wilson, agricultural secretary under President McKinley, and Henry Wallace, secretary under Presidents Harding and Coolidge), Carver excelled in botany, earning an B.S. in 1894 and an M.S. in 1896. In accomplishing this goal, he became the first African American to earn a degree from Iowa State University.

On the completion of his master's degree, Carver was contacted by Booker Taliaferro Washington, the noted African-American educator who had founded the Tuskegee Institute, an all-black college in Alabama. "I cannot offer you money, position, or fame," Washington wrote. "The first two you have; the last ... you will no doubt achieve.... I offer you in their place work—hard, hard work—the task of bringing a people from degradation, poverty, and waste to full manhood." Replying, "Of course, it has always been the one great ideal of my life to be of the greatest good to the greatest number of

'my people'... and to this end I have been preparing myself for these many years," Carver accepted Washington's offer.

Having won a yearly grant of \$1,500 from the state of Alabama for an agricultural experiment, Carver began the task of revolutionizing southern agriculture. He quickly realized that much of the soil of southern farms was exhausted from the continual cultivation of a single crop, cotton. Poor farmers, black and white, were in desperate need of know-how to restore their farms from the edge of bankruptcy. At the Tuskegee experimental farm, Carver began a careful study of simple techniques that could be used to reinvigorate soils with nutrients. He devised ways to convert organic wastes such as leaves, paper, and grass into nutrient-rich compost. He also discovered that farmers could boost the nitrogen content of soils simply by planting cover crops such as cowpeas and peanuts.

The peanut, especially, became a crop that was tied to Carver's name. In the peanut, Carver saw a golden nugget where all others before him had seen a weed. He devised several ways to process the peanut—into a food product called peanut butter and into milk, cheese, shampoos, ink, and wood stains—that multiplied the value of the crop. Carver later applied the same logic to sweet potatoes and clays from the South's clay-rich soils, extracting numerous products from these simple goods. Carver never rested from his task of educating farmers. In 1899, he founded what he called the "Movable School," a traveling teaching display on mule-drawn wagons. By 1918, he had replaced this contraption with a gasoline-powered truck. In the 1950s and 1960s, Carver's movable school idea was duplicated in developing countries such as China and India.

For his inventions and dedication to helping poor farmers, Carver won worldwide renown. In 1916, he was made a fellow of the British Royal Society of Arts; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People awarded him its Spingarn Medal in 1923; and in 1941 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Rochester. Uninterested in material gain, Carver in 1940 used his life savings of \$60,000 to start the George Washington Carver Research Foundation, which today employs more than 100 faculty and staff. Carver died on January 5, 1943, and was buried on the campus of Tuskegee Institute. In 2005, the American Chemical Society designated Carver's research at Tuskegee a National Historic Chemical Landmark. That same year, the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis opened a George Washington Carver garden in his honor. A life-size statue of Carver stands in the garden.

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