

George Washington Carver

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington_Carver

George Washington Carver (July 12, 1864 – January 5, 1943)^[1] was an American botanical researcher and agronomy educator who worked in agricultural extension at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, teaching former slaves farming techniques for self-sufficiency.

To bring education to farmers, Carver designed a mobile school. It was called a Jesup Wagon after the New York financier, Morris Ketchum Jesup, who provided funding.^[2] In 1921, Carver spoke in favor of a peanut tariff before the House Ways and Means Committee. Given racial discrimination of the time, it was unusual for an African-American to be called as an expert. Carver's well-received testimony earned him national attention, and he became an unofficial spokesman for the peanut industry. Carver wrote 44 practical agricultural bulletins for farmers.

In the post-Civil-War South, an agricultural monoculture of cotton had depleted the soil, and in the early 1900s, the boll weevil destroyed much of the cotton crop. Much of Carver's fame was based on his research and promotion of alternative crops to cotton, such as peanuts and sweet potatoes. He wanted poor farmers to grow alternative crops as both a source of their own food and a cash crop. His most popular bulletin contained 105 existing food recipes that used peanuts. His most famous method of promoting the peanut involved his creation of about 100 existing industrial products from peanuts, including cosmetics, dyes, paints, plastics, gasoline and nitroglycerin. His industrial products from peanuts excited the public imagination but none was a successful commercial product. There are many myths about Carver, especially the myth that his industrial products from peanuts played a major role in revolutionizing Southern agriculture.^{[3][4]}

Carver's most important accomplishments were in areas other than industrial products from peanuts, including agricultural extension education, improvement of racial relations, mentoring children, poetry, painting, religion, advocacy of sustainable agriculture and appreciation of plants and nature. He served as a valuable role model for African-Americans and an example of the importance of hard work, a positive attitude and a good education. His humility, humanitarianism, good nature, frugality and lack of economic materialism have also been widely admired.

One of his most important roles was that the fame of his achievements and many talents undermined the widespread stereotype of the time that the black race was intellectually inferior to the white race. In 1941, "Time" magazine dubbed him a "Black Leonardo," a reference to the white polymath Leonardo da Vinci^[5]

Early years

He was born into slavery in Newton County, Marion Township, near Diamond Grove, now known as Diamond, Missouri. He was born on July 12, 1864^[6]. His owner, Moses Carver, was a German American immigrant who had purchased George's mother, Mary, from William P. McGinnis on October 9, 1855 for seven hundred dollars. The identity of Carver's father is unknown but he had sisters and a brother, all of whom died prematurely.

When George was an infant, he, a sister, and his mother were kidnapped by Confederate night raiders and sold in Arkansas, a common practice. Moses Carver hired John Bentley to find them. Only Carver was found, orphaned and near death from whooping cough. Carver's mother and sister had already died, although some reports stated that his mother and sister had gone north with the soldiers. For returning George, Moses Carver rewarded Bentley with his best filly that would later produce winning race horses. This episode caused George a bout of respiratory disease that left him with a permanently weakened constitution. Because of this, he was unable to work as a hand and spent his time wandering the fields, drawn to the varieties of wild plants. He became so knowledgeable that he was known by Moses Carver's neighbors as the "Plant Doctor."

One day he was called to a neighbor's house to help with a plant in need. When he had fixed the problem, he was told to go into the kitchen to collect his reward. When he entered the kitchen, he saw no one. He did, however, see something that changed his life: beautiful paintings of flowers on the walls of the room. From that moment on, he knew that he was going to be an artist as well as a botanist.

After slavery was abolished, Moses Carver and his wife Susan raised George and his brother Jim as their own children. They encouraged George Carver to continue his intellectual pursuits and "Aunt Susan" taught him the basics of reading and writing.

Since blacks were not allowed at the school in Diamond Grove and he had received news that there was a school for blacks ten miles (16 km) south in Neosho, he resolved to go there at once. To his dismay, when he reached the town, the school had been closed for the night. As he had nowhere to stay, he slept in a nearby barn. By his own account, the next morning he met a kind woman, Mariah Watkins, from whom he wished to rent a room. When he identified himself "Carver's George," as he had done his whole life, she replied that from now on, his name was "George Carver." George liked this lady very much and her words "You must learn all you can, then go back out into the world and give your learning back to the people," made a great impression on him.

At the age of thirteen, due to his desire to attend high school, he relocated to the home of another foster family in Fort Scott, Kansas. After witnessing the beating to death of a black man at the hands of a group of white men, George left Fort Scott. He subsequently attended a series of schools before earning his diploma at Minneapolis High School in Minneapolis, Kansas.

After high school, George started a laundry business in Olathe, Kansas.

College

At work in his laboratory

Over the next five years, he sent several letters to colleges and was finally accepted at Highland College in Highland, Kansas. He travelled to the college, but he was rejected when they discovered that he was an African American.

Carver's travels took him to Winterset, Iowa in the mid-1880s, where he met the Milhollands, a white couple whom he later credited with encouraging him to pursue higher education. The Milhollands urged Carver to enroll in nearby Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa, which he did despite his reluctance due to his previous rejection at Highland College.

In 1887, he was accepted into Simpson as its second African-American student. While in college at Simpson, he showed a strong aptitude for singing and art. His art teacher, Etta Budd, was the daughter of the head of the department of horticulture at Iowa State: Joseph Budd. Etta convinced Carver to pursue a career that paid better than art and so he transferred to Iowa State. The encouragement Etta Budd gave Carver to seek a better-paying career was well-warranted, at least for Etta. She died a poor retired art teacher in a Boone, Iowa retirement home.

He transferred in 1891 to Iowa State Agricultural College, where he was the first black student, and later the first black faculty member. In order to avoid confusion with another George Carver in his classes, he began to use the name George Washington Carver.

At the end of his undergraduate career in 1894, recognizing Carver's potential, Joseph Budd and Louis Pammel convinced Carver to stay at Iowa State for his master's degree. Carver then performed research at the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station under Pammel from 1894 to his graduation in 1896. It is his work at the experiment station in plant pathology and mycology that first gained him national recognition and respect as a botanist.