

# George Washington Carver, Date Unknown

## George Washington Carver

Born into slavery at the end of the Civil War, George Washington Carver became one of the best-known and widely loved African-Americans in the world. Presidents and poor black farmers alike heaped praise on him. He was honored on postage stamps, naval vessels, U.S. coins and public buildings. His birthplace was designated a national monument, and the date of his death was declared an official day of remembrance.

## An Unlikely Start

Carver's journey to fame began on a Missouri farm owned by Moses and Susan Carver. It is uncertain whether the year of his birth was 1864 or 1865. Both his parents were slaves. His father died about the time of his birth. His mother, Mary, was given her freedom by the Carvers, and she adopted their name. Before George was one year old, he and his mother were kidnapped and taken to Arkansas.

George was eventually found and returned to the Carvers, but his mother was never seen again. The Carvers took George into their home and raised him as their own. He was unusually talented at almost everything he tried to do. He had a raging curiosity to learn everything he could about "every strange stone, flower, insect, bird or beast."

By the time George reached his teenage years he had left the farm to attend a school for black children in Neosho, Missouri. For the next ten years, Carver wandered from town to town in Missouri and Kansas in search of a better education. He supported himself by taking in laundry and doing household chores.

## Iowa Becomes Home

Carver won admission to Highland College in Kansas, only to be turned away because of his race by school officials once he arrived. He walked to Iowa, where it was suggested he apply to Simpson College in Indianola.

Carver wanted to be an artist, a painter, and capture the beauty of nature that so fascinated him. It took only a few months for his art teacher, Etta Budd, to realize she had nothing else to teach him. At her urging, Carver transferred in 1891 to the Iowa State College of Agricultural and Mechanical Arts in Ames, where her father was a professor of horticulture.

Carver remained at Iowa State for five years and was the school's only black student. He went on to become the first black to earn a master's degree and the first black faculty member. He was an active participant in debating and agricultural societies, the Young Men's Christian Association and the National Guard. He was the first trainer of the Iowa State football team. One of his paintings was selected to represent Iowa in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Carver planned to obtain a doctorate at Iowa State. And the school wanted very much to keep him on its faculty. Then, in 1896, a letter arrived that would change everything. "I cannot offer you money, position, or fame," it said. "The first two you have. The last, from the place you now occupy, you will

no doubt achieve. These things I now ask you to give up. I offer you in their place work—hard, hard work—the task of bringing a people from degradation, poverty and waste to full manhood.” It was signed by Booker T. Washington, the principal of an industrial and teacher training institute for black students in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Washington was determined to make the Tuskegee Institute the leading black educational institution in the South. He wanted to establish an agriculture department. There were five million black farmers in the South. Most lived in poverty and ignorance of scientific agriculture. But to establish such a department, Washington knew he needed a black man with an advanced degree in agriculture. And in all the country there was only one such man: George Washington Carver.

### **Alabama Calls**

Carver accepted Washington’s offer. In 1896 he left Iowa to become director of agriculture and director of the agricultural experiment station at Tuskegee Institute. There he would remain until his death 47 years later.

Carver had never been in the Deep South or any of the old Confederate states. Almost everything about Alabama’s system of agriculture was new to him.

Carver’s classrooms at Tuskegee were non-existent. In order to establish some sort of laboratory, he had to root through junk heaps to find usable bottles and other items. The problems confronting him were enormous and the workload Washington assigned him was crushing.

Improving the practice of Southern agriculture and the lot of poor farmers immediately became Carver’s chief duty. He began urging farmers to rotate crops and to use organic fertilizers. He preached the value of planting soil-restoring crops such as peanuts, sweet potatoes, black-eyed peas and soybeans. He wrote articles using terms that uneducated farmers could understand.

He devised hundreds of uses for peanuts and other crops—everything from medicine to soap to diesel fuel to candy. He traveled dusty country roads to teach small groups of farmers how to improve their lives. He began holding “short courses” at Tuskegee to give farmers a taste of the scientific methods he taught to students. He set up fairs where he could show black families how to produce more of their own food.

After 20 years at Tuskegee, George Carver was known and respected throughout the South and among agriculturalists in other areas of the country. Then, in 1915, an event took place that put Carver on the path to international stardom: Booker T. Washington suddenly died.

### **Carver, the Celebrity**

The famous “Tuskegee Machine” built by Washington needed a new celebrity to attract money and publicity. Carver filled the bill. Within a year he had been elected to the board of the National Agricultural Society. He became the first black man to be elected a fellow in Britain’s Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts. Two years later, in the midst of World War I, he worked with the U.S. Department of Agriculture as a consultant on food and nutrition.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Carver gained fame. His lectures drew hundreds of listeners. He gave piano concerts to raise money for Tuskegee and assembled exhibits of his artwork. He was featured newspapers and magazines. There was a movie produced about his life.

Carver seldom spoke about race. He almost always brushed aside the racial slights and humiliations he had to endure. But when Carver did address race, it was within the context of his religious views. “Race and creed find no recognition in the eyes of the Deity when He bestows His generous gifts,” Carver said.

### **The End of a Remarkable Life**

In the late 1930s, Carver was diagnosed with pernicious anemia and gradually his health weakened. He continued to conduct experiments in his laboratory. He worked to establish the George Washington Carver Museum and Foundation at Tuskegee. He donated his entire life savings—\$60,000—to the foundation. His fortune was made through simple living. Carver never personally profited from his experiments.

He died in 1943 around age 77. He is buried on the Tuskegee campus. “He could have added fortune to fame,” his tombstone reads, “but caring for neither he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world.”

*Credit:*

*Written for Iowa Pathways by John Hyde.*