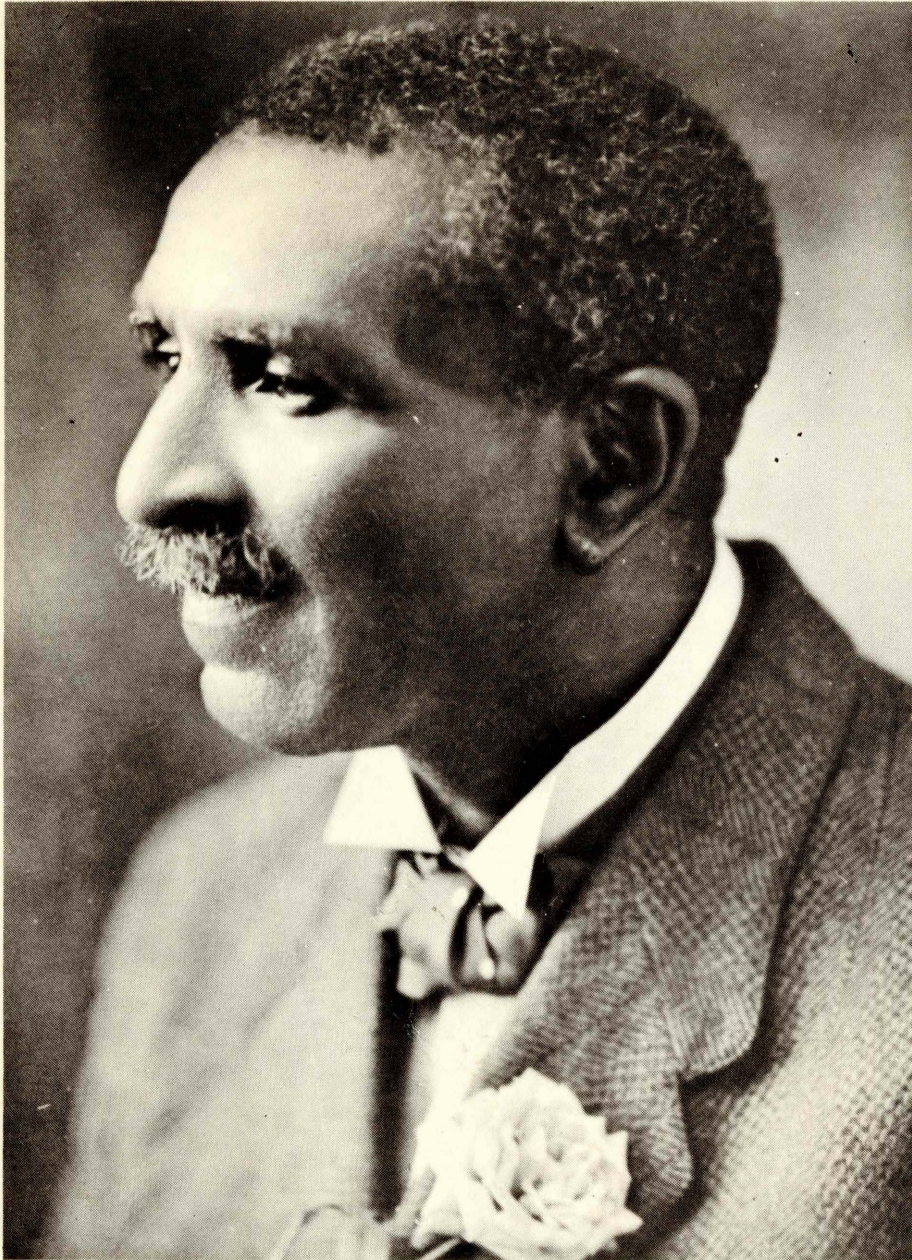


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GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER



Text by Toby Fishbein, University Archivist, based on primary and secondary
source material in the Iowa State University Archives
Bibliography by P. William Hamill and Norine Dawson
April 1976

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State Documents Center
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George Washington Carver's exact date of birth is unknown. Biographers give the year as anywhere from 1859 to 1864. When he enrolled in Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (now Iowa State University of Science and Technology) in Ames in 1891, he gave his age as 25, which would make his year of birth 1866. However, in the 1895 census taken in Ames, he listed his age on his 1884 birthday as 27. Dr. Carver was the son of slaves. His mother, Mary, had been purchased by Moses Carver for \$700 when she was thirteen. His father was owned by a neighbor and was killed in an accident soon after George was born. He was born in a log cabin on Moses Carver's plantation near Diamond Grove, Missouri. He had at least one brother and perhaps a sister, but this is not known for sure. George was a very frail baby and when he was about two months old, slave raiders attacked the Carver plantation. Carver managed to hide George's brother, James, but George, his mother and perhaps a sister were carried off, probably to Arkansas. The raiders demanded Carver's money and slaves and when he refused them, he was strung up from a tree by his thumbs, whipped and his bare feet were burned with hot coals. He offered a bushwacker named John Bentley forty acres of land and a race horse named Pacer to bring back Mary and her child (or children). Bentley returned several days later with only the infant, who was near death with whooping cough. Bentley could not accept the land as he had not found Mary, but he did keep the horse, worth \$300, as payment for his effort. Mary was never heard from again. James died in his teens from small pox, leaving George with no known relatives.

Moses and his wife Susan nursed the child, but he was never strong and healthy. The cough had torn his vocal cords and his voice was high all his life. He stammered and did not walk until he was three years old. Because of his honesty, he was given the name George Washington. He was ill throughout the early years of his childhood. His frailty prevented him from working in the fields alongside his brother, so he helped Susan in the house and garden. He was proficient at his household chores and handicrafts. His talents with plants was evident at an early age and he became known as the Plant Doctor.

George constantly sought knowledge. He learned to read, write and spell at the Carvers', as there were no schools for Blacks in Diamond Grove. At the age of ten, George went to Neosho, about eight miles from the Carver plantation, to attend school. He received a certificate of merit from the school in 1876 and continued his education in schools in Fort Scott, Olathe, Paola, Minneapolis and Kansas City, Kansas, supporting himself during this time. His attempts at homesteading in Kansas were unsuccessful and in 1890 he enrolled in Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa. He opened a hand laundry to support himself while studying music and art in addition to the regular courses offered. Etta Budd, his Simpson College art instructor whose father was head of the Department of Horticulture at the State College in Ames, convinced him to give up a career in art and go into scientific agriculture.

He came to Ames in 1891 and lived in North Hall. He held several jobs, including waiter in the college dining room and rubber (masseur) for the athletic teams. He was an active member of the YMCA and the Welch Eclectic Society, an organization for the development of science, literature and public speaking. His artistic talents were in demand and he often entertained by singing, playing musical instruments and reading aloud. He

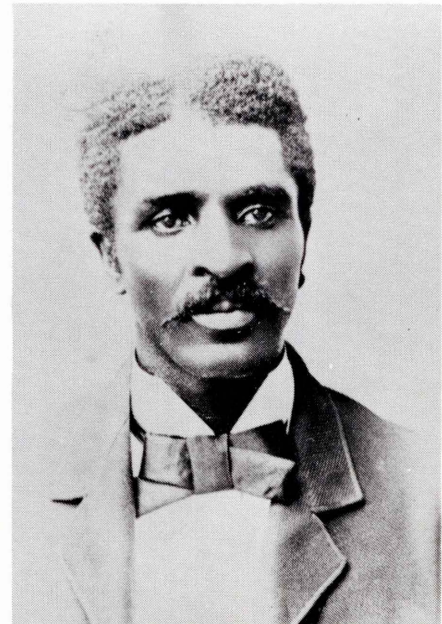


Captain G. W. Carver

also wrote poetry and his class poem, "Legend of the Gourds," was printed in the student newspaper on November 13, 1894. Two of his paintings were hung at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. One of them won an honorable mention. He attained the rank of captain, the highest student rank, in the College military regiment. He received his Bachelor of Agriculture degree in 1894 and his Master of Science in Agriculture degree in 1896. Dr. Carver was not only the first Black to enroll as a student at Iowa State, but was also the first Black to join the faculty. In 1895 he was the assistant botanist in the Experiment Station and worked there until the following year, when Booker T. Washington asked him to join the staff at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The student newspaper, the Iowa Agricultural College Student, printed the following in the October 6, 1896 issue: "On Monday, G. W. Carver '94 left for Alabama where he takes the

chair of Agriculture in the Normal and Industrial Institute at Tuskegee. Before leaving he was presented with a superb microscope with case complete, the gift of faculty and friends. George gracefully accepted the gift, and, as he leaves us to engage in a new field of labor, he goes forth strong in the assurance that the best wishes of all follow him. We know of no one who failed to be won to friendship by his genial disposition, and we are not guilty of meaningless praise when we wish him God speed."

Dr. Carver began work at Tuskegee on October 8, 1896. He organized the Agricultural Department, planned the first agricultural building, taught classes in chemistry and botany and conducted research. He served as Director of Agriculture, the first Director of the Tuskegee Agricultural Research and Experiment Station and Head of the Department of Research. His work led to the creation of many products made from native materials. These include over 300 products from peanuts (foods, beverages, medicines, cosmetics, paper, household products, dyes, paints, stains, insecticide, gasoline, ink, plastics, lubricants, nitroglycerine, lineoleum, rubber) and over 100 products from sweet potatoes (foods, alcohol, paints, dyes, stains, paste, medicines, paper, ink, synthetic cotton and silk). He also developed many products from Alabama clay, cotton, soybeans, pecans, wood shavings and native and waste materials.



G. W. Carver, B.A., M.S.
Iowa State College, 1894, 1896

During his lifetime, Dr. Carver received a multitude of honors, including election as a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufacturers, and Commerce (London, England, 1916); the Spingarn Medal by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for distinguished service to science (1923); the Iowa State College Alumni Merit Award (1938); the Roosevelt Medal (1939) and the Thomas A. Edison Foundation Award (1943). He received honorary Doctor of Science degrees from the following institutions: Simpson College (1928), University of Rochester (1941) and Selma University (1942). A feature film of his life was made in Hollywood in 1938. In 1940, Dr. Carver bequeathed his estate to Tuskegee Institute and established the George Washington Carver Foundation (now the Carver Research Foundation) to continue his work. Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford dedicated the George Washington Carver Museum the following year. Dr. Carver's collection of paintings and needlework were displayed. Ford established the George Washington Carver Cabin in Greenfield Village at Dearborn, Michigan in 1942 to honor and commemorate Dr. Carver's achievements and contributions to American life.



Dr. Carver at work in his laboratory

George Washington Carver continued to be honored after his death in Tuskegee on January 5, 1943. His birthplace was designated the George Washington Carver National Monument in 1943. In 1944, the governors of Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and West Virginia issued proclamations designating the first week in January 1945 as Carver Week. President Harry S. Truman designated January 5, 1946 as George Washington Carver Day. On January 5, 1948 the 3¢ Carver Commemorative Postage Stamp was sold. In 1949, Christian Peterson, Iowa State College's artist-in-residence, completed a statue of Dr. Carver. The four foot high, bronze-painted statue is accurate in detail down to the flower in the lapel that Dr. Carver wore every day. It presently stands inside George Washington Carver Hall, a \$3.1 million building which houses offices and classrooms for the College of Sciences and Humanities. The building was dedicated on September 27, 1970.



Christian Peterson statue

George Washington Carver has been called the father of chemurgy and was known and respected as a teacher, scientist and humanitarian. The nation was greatly saddened by his death. President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent the following message to Tuskegee Institute: "The world of science has lost one of its most eminent figures and the race from which he sprang an outstanding member in the passing of Dr. George Washington Carver. The versatility of his genius and his achievements in diverse branches of the arts and sciences were truly amazing. All mankind are the beneficiaries of his discoveries in the field of agricultural chemistry. The things he achieved in the face of early handicaps will for all time afford an inspiring example to youth everywhere. I count it a great privilege to have met Dr. Carver and to have talked with him at Tuskegee on the happy occasion of my visit to the institute which was the scene of his long and distinguished labors."

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