



George Washington Carver

# George Washington Carver: A Scientist of Faith and Vision

by Daphne Myers

*“All my life, I have risen regularly at four o’clock and have gone into the woods and talked with God. How I thank God every day that I can walk and talk with Him.”*

George Washington Carver helped change the course of America’s agricultural and scientific landscape. He lived out his faith as a scientist who saw God’s hand in everything in creation.

Carver was born into slavery on the farm of Moses and Susan Carver in a one-room log shanty in Diamond Grove, Missouri. His exact birthday is unknown, but is believed to be in 1861 or 1864. Carver’s childhood was traumatic—he and his mother, Mary, were kidnapped by raiders and sold. Moses Carver was able to find George and buy him back, but George’s mother was not found. George and his older brother James were raised by their owners until slavery was abolished in 1865.

The Carvers taught George to read and write, but at the age of 11, he left their home to attend the Neosho, Missouri, school for black children approximately eight miles away. Although his only childhood book was *Webster’s Elementary Spelling Book*, George was fascinated by music, painting, flowers, science, and especially algebra. George stated, “Day after day I spent in the woods alone in order to collect my floral beauties and put them in a little garden I had hidden in brush not far from my house . . . and strange to say that all sorts of vegetation succeed to thrive under my touch until I was styled the plant doctor, and plants from all over the country would be brought to me for treatment. At this time, I had never heard of botany and could scarcely read.”

Frail and sickly, Carver was not expected to live to the age of 21, but in his biographical writings he said, “I trusted God and pressed on (I had been a Christian since about 8 years old).” As his health improved, Carver moved across Kansas to attend several schools until completing high school in Minneapolis, Kansas, where he learned that his brother James had died of smallpox.

For the next two decades, Carver worked odd jobs to pay for his education. In 1891, he enrolled in Simpson College to study art and piano, but transferred the next year to Iowa State Agricultural College (now Iowa State University), where he earned a Bachelors of Agriculture in 1894 and a Masters of Agriculture in 1896. That year, Booker T. Washington invited him to join the faculty of the Tuskegee Institute, a trade school for blacks in Alabama, as its Director of Agriculture.

At Tuskegee, Carver devoted his attention to projects to improve the quality of life for poor Southern farmers—black and white. He wanted to create new food products for them to grow and sell and taught crop rotation to improve the soil. He conducted experiments with organic fertilizers and the peanut, and his research suggested hundreds of products that could be made from peanuts—products such as cooking oil, paint, stains, and peanut oil massages. Carver’s research also suggested hundreds of uses for crops such as sweet potatoes, soybeans, and pecans. In 1916, Carver’s fame as a chemist and agriculturalist earned him an election to a Fellowship in the English Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts.

In 1921 Carver appeared before the Congressional Ways and Means Committee to support a tariff tax on imported peanuts. His lecture and demonstration of the many uses of peanuts elevated him to national and international fame. Carver then toured the country lecturing to promote the numerous benefits of the peanut.

Carver struggled with prejudice in society. Many of his close friendships were with whites. He often spoke to white groups, but he stayed in poor “coloreds only” accommodations when he traveled. Carver wanted white Americans to be aware of the creativity and talents of blacks. He particularly wanted all young people to catch a “vision” of everyone working together to solve the world’s problems, especially through science and agriculture. God, he said, had made him a “trail blazer” in casting this vision.

Carver said his faith helped him see truths about creation that God had left for him to find. Throughout his life, he said he had visions that he took as direction from God. Carver spent many hours teaching and mentoring his students, and not just on agriculture. He taught a Bible study class because he wanted his students to “find Jesus, and make Him a daily, hourly, and momently part of themselves. I want them to see the Great Creator in the smallest and apparently the most insignificant things around them.”

In his final years, Carver often traveled to promote Tuskegee, peanuts, and racial harmony. He met with three American presidents—Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, and Franklin Roosevelt—and the Crown Prince of Sweden studied with him. From 1923 to 1933, Carver toured white Southern colleges for the Commission on Interracial Cooperation.

Carver died January 5, 1943, at the age of 78. He was buried next to Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee. He once wrote to a friend, “No, I am not for sale. God has given me what He has in trust to make of it a contribution to the world far greater than money can for myself.” Reflecting this, his gravestone says,

*He could have added fortune to fame, but caring for neither, he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world.*



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