

# The Legacy of George Washington Carver

## Inspiring Students to Become Their Best

**by Toby Fishbein**

From inauspicious and dramatic beginnings, George Washington Carver became one of the nation's greatest educators and agricultural researchers. He was born in about 1864 (the exact year is unknown) on the Moses Carver plantation in Diamond Grove, Mo. His father died in an accident shortly before his birth, and when he was still an infant, Carver and his mother were kidnapped by slave raiders. The baby was returned to the plantation, but his mother was never heard from again.

Carver grew to be a student of life and a scholar, despite the illness and frailty of his early childhood. Because he was not strong enough to work in the fields, he helped with household chores and gardening. Probably as a result of these duties and because of the hours he would spend exploring the woods around his home, he developed a keen interest in plants at an early age. He gathered and cared for a wide variety of flora from the land near his home and became known as the "plant doctor," helping neighbors and friends with ailing plants. He learned to read, write and spell at home because there were no schools for African Americans in Diamond Grove. From age 10, his thirst for knowledge and desire for formal education led him to several communities in Missouri and Kansas and finally, in 1890, to Indianola, Iowa, were he enrolled at Simpson College to study piano and painting.

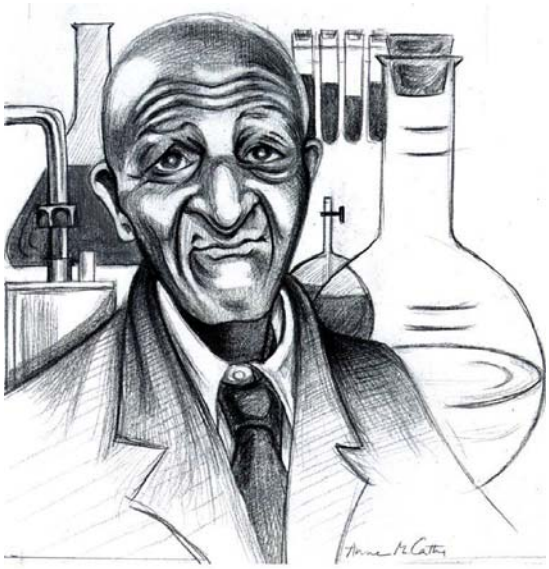
He excelled in art and music, but art instructor Etta Budd, whose father was head of the Iowa State College Department of Horticulture, recognized Carver's horticultural talents. She convinced him to pursue a more pragmatic career in scientific agriculture and, in 1891, he became the first African American to enroll at Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, which today is Iowa State University.

Through quiet determination and perseverance, Carver soon became involved in all facets of campus life. He was a leader in the YMCA and the debate club. He worked in the dining rooms and as a trainer for the athletic teams. He was captain, the highest student rank, of the campus military regiment. His poetry was published in the student newspaper and two of his paintings were exhibited at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago.

Carver's interests in music and art remained strong, but it was his excellence in botany and horticulture that prompted professors Joseph Budd and Louis Pammel to encourage him to stay on as a graduate student after he completed his bachelor's degree in 1894. Because of his proficiency in plant breeding, Carver was appointed to the faculty, becoming Iowa State's first African American faculty member.

Over the next two years, as assistant botanist for the College Experiment Station, Carver quickly developed scientific skills in plant pathology and mycology, the branch of botany that deals with fungi. He published several articles on his work and gained national respect. In 1896, he completed his master's degree and was invited by Booker T. Washington to join the faculty of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute.

At Tuskegee, he gained an international reputation in research, teaching and outreach. Carver taught his students that nature is the greatest teacher and that by understanding the forces in nature, one can understand the dynamics of agriculture. He instilled in them the attitude of gentleness and taught that education should be "made common" --used for betterment of the people in the community.



Carver's work resulted in the creation of 325 products from peanuts, more than 100 products from sweet potatoes and hundreds more from a dozen other plants native to the South. These products contributed to rural economic improvement by offering alternative crops to cotton that were beneficial for the farmers and for the land. During this time, Carver also carried the Iowa State extension concept to the South and created "movable schools," bringing practical agricultural knowledge to farmers, thereby promoting health, sound nutrition and self-sufficiency. Dennis Keeney, director of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University, writes in the *Leopold Letter* newsletter about Carver's contributions:

Carver worked on improving soils, growing crops with low inputs, and using species that fixed nitrogen (hence, the work on the cowpea and the peanut). Carver wrote in *The Need of Scientific Agriculture in the South*: "The virgin fertility of our soils and the vast amount of unskilled labor have been more of a curse than a blessing to agriculture. This exhaustive system for cultivation, the destruction of forest, the rapid and almost constant decomposition of organic matter, has made our agricultural problem one requiring more brains than of the North, East or West."

Carver died in 1943. He received many honors in his lifetime and after, including a 1938 feature film, *Life of George Washington Carver*; the George Washington Carver Museum, dedicated at Tuskegee Institute in 1941; the Roosevelt Medal for Outstanding Contribution to Southern Agriculture in 1942; a national monument in Diamond Grove, Mo.; commemorative postage stamps in 1947 and 1998; and a fifty-cent coin in 1951. He was elected to the Hall of Fame for Great Americans in 1977 and inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame in 1990. In 1994, Iowa State awarded him the degree, Doctor of Humane Letters.