

"Received of Moses Carver Seven Hundred Dollars in full consideration for a Negro girl named Mary age about thirteen who I warrant to be sound in body and mind and a slave for life."

This stark statement from a bill of sale for his mother is the first recorded fact directly related to the life of George Washington Carver.

Late in the 1830s Moses Carver and his wife Susan migrated from the eastern United States and settled on 97 hectares (240 acres) in southwestern Missouri near the small community of Diamond Grove. Moses was a good farmer and the land provided an abundant living, but the Carvers, having reared two nephews and a niece, were growing old alone with no children of their own to help with the chores. So Carver made the decision to become a slaveholder, and the black girl named Mary from the neighboring farm had a new home.

In time Mary had several children. Her second son was named George, but his birthdate was not recorded. In later years, Carver said, *"as nearly as I can trace my history, I was about two weeks old when the war closed. . . ."* He usually gave 1864 or 1865 as his year of birth, but some historians have placed it as early as 1860.

Just five and one-half years after Mary came to the Carvers, civil war erupted and forever changed the lives and fortunes of the peaceful farm couple, their slave, and her children. The Civil War brought an end to slavery in America, but in the process it also brought strife and suffering to the people of western Missouri. In the wake of battles and troop movements came renegades and outlaws commonly called bushwackers and led by men like William Quantrill. They claimed allegiance to one side or the other, whichever was convenient at the moment, but in fact they preyed on the hapless and helpless farmers on the Missouri-Kansas border who suffered grievously from their peculiar brand of warfare.

A short time after George's birth, the Carver farm was raided by the bushwackers. They took everything of value, including Mary, George, and probably a sister. George's older brother Jim, who

was about six years old, escaped by hiding in the fencerow. The raiders headed south. Moses asked John Bentley, a soldier in a small Union contingent garrisoned in the area, to track them down and recover the mother and children. Bentley succeeded in recovering the baby George, who had been abandoned in Arkansas. The Carvers never heard of Mary again. Moses gave John Bentley one of his fine horses for his effort.

Now the Carvers were thrust into the role of foster parents. They were, in fact, the only parents the little orphaned boy ever knew. His father, a slave on the neighboring farm, had been killed in a logging accident shortly after George was born. The kidnapping ordeal had left George near death, and for some time he did not fully regain his health. His work on the farm consisted of the lighter chores around the house helping Susan Carver, while Jim worked in the fields with Moses.

The self-sufficient life of the small farmer and his prudent style of living made a lasting impression on George, and he called on those skills and values the rest of his life. Ample leisure time existed and George spent many hours outdoors observing, collecting, and thoroughly enjoying the marvels of the countryside. In later life he wrote: *"day after day I spent in the woods alone in order to collect my floral beauties, and put them in my little garden I had hidden in brush not far from the house, as it was considered foolishness in that neighborhood to waste time on flowers. . . . Rocks had an equal fascination for me and many are the basketfull that I have been compelled to remove from the outside chimney corner of that old log house, with the injunction to throw them down hill. I obeyed but picked up the choicest ones and hid them in another place. . . ."*

Instilled with the perception of a naturalist and the inquiring spirit of a scientist, young George began a search for knowledge. *"I had an inordinate desire,"* he wrote, *"for knowledge, and especially music, painting, flowers, and the sciences, algebra being one of my favorite studies."*

The Carvers encouraged him in his desire for learning, but it was not easy, for the only school in the neighborhood did not admit blacks.



About The Park

From either Neosho or Carthage, take U.S. 71. Alternate to the town of Diamond. Go west 3.2 kilometers (2 miles) on County Highway V and then south about 1.5 kilometers (1 mile).

A self-guiding trail starts at the visitor center and winds along the stream and through the same woods and fields that Carver walked as a boy. On this 1.2 kilometer (³/₄ mile) trail are: the old walnut "hanging tree," from which, according to legend, Moses Carver was suspended by his thumbs by Civil War guerrillas; the birthplace cabin site; the Robert Amendola statue of the boy Carver; the historic spring; the relocated Moses Carver dwelling, dating back to the 1880s; and the rock-walled Carver family cemetery.

Picnic facilities are limited and camping is not permitted on the park grounds.

While every effort has been made to provide for your safety, there are still hazards which require your alertness and vigilance. Poison ivy abounds in the area; learn to identify it.

George Washington Carver National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The superintendent may be reached at Box 38, Diamond, MO 64840.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Carver the Student

When almost a teenager, George heard of a school for blacks in the town of Neosho just 13 kilometers (8 miles) south of the Carver farm, and he decided to leave home. Although never legally adopted by Moses and Susan, he took the Carver name when he left and later added Washington as his middle name.

A black couple, Andrew and Mariah Watkins, made a home for him in their small house next to the school building. A deeply religious person, Mariah greatly influenced George's philosophy on life and living with her teachings from the Bible. Her attitudes stayed with Carver all his life, and in later years he was fond of saying that *"I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting system, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in."*

After spending almost two years in Neosho and receiving a certificate of merit from his teacher, Stephen S. Frost, George went to Fort Scott, Kans., where he stayed only a short while. He attended school and supported himself by cooking, laundering, and other odd jobs. Then he went on to Olathe, Paola, and finally Minneapolis, Kans., where he completed his high school education, still earning his livelihood using the domestic skills he had learned on the Carver farm.

He learned typing and shorthand in a business school in Kansas City. *"I was here to have a position in the Union Telegraph office as stenographer and typewriter, but the thirst for knowledge gained the mastery and I sought to enter Highland College at Highland, Kans. Was refused on account of my color."*

With his hopes for higher learning crushed, Carver headed west. He staked a claim on 65 hectares (160 acres) of rolling grassland in western Kansas and settled down to farming. But successive droughts doomed his homestead in Ness County. Carver, then in his mid-twenties, drifted to Winterset, Iowa, and was working as head cook in one of the large hotels when his dream of gaining an education started to become a reality. Dr. and Mrs. Milholland had become good friends of Carver, and, recognizing his talents, insisted that he enter art school. In 1890

they helped Carver enroll at Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa.

Given the chance to pursue his education seriously and under normal conditions, he excelled at his studies. A painting of a yucca plant he remembered from his days in western Kansas won honorable mention at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Though torn between art and agriculture, he decided to transfer to Iowa Agricultural College, now Iowa State University, at Ames, and begin studies that would continue the rest of his life. He never completely abandoned art, however, for even after his move to Tuskegee he continued to think—perhaps wistfully—of a career in art.

He was the first black man to study at Iowa State and after earning a B.S. in 1894, he was appointed to the faculty as an assistant in botany. In the fall of 1896, he received an M.S. with a major in botany.

Just a few months before getting his M.S. he had received an intriguing offer. Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee Institute at Tuskegee, Ala., was searching for qualified instructors for his struggling school, and Professor Carver was everything he hoped for. Booker T. Washington could offer little to compare with the fine facilities and the prestige of Iowa State, but otherwise Carver liked the offer. *"Of course it has always been the one great ideal of my life,"* he wrote Washington, *"to be of the greatest good to the greatest number of 'my people' possible and to this end I have been preparing my life for these many years; feeling as I do that this line of education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom to our people."*

Carver at Tuskegee

In the fall of 1896, George Washington Carver moved for the last time. He accepted the position of director of the Department of Agriculture at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, and Alabama became his new home.

Carver's work at Tuskegee Institute was varied. In later years he concentrated on his research, but in the early years, his work with students and local farmers was of prime importance. As teacher, he gave his students not only the benefit

of his scientific knowledge and understanding but subjected them to strong moral and character building influences. His ability to inspire those closely associated with him may well have been one of his greatest lifetime contributions.

When Carver arrived in Alabama he found that years of unsuitable farming methods had worn out the soil. Total dependence upon cotton tied the impoverished Alabama farmers, black and white, to the cyclic ups and downs of the market. Using his knowledge of the latest scientific advances and improvements in agriculture, he started writing bulletins to be published by Tuskegee and distributed free to local residents. These concise, easily understood bulletins were a great help to the farmers who knew little about crop rotation, natural fertilizers, and a host of other good farming methods. Carver established a concentrated extension service and took new plant varieties from the experimental farm out to the small farms and hamlets around Tuskegee to show local farmers the benefit of diversifying their crops. Although he worked with cowpeas, sweet potatoes, native clays, and a host of other plants and minerals, after 1916 he became associated with the peanut. While promoting the growing of peanuts, he compiled a list of about 300 uses and by-products of this ordinary legume. His fascination with the peanut led to much of his later fame and "popularity" and actually has come to overshadow his greater contributions.

Working in the lab, he always directed more effort to finding practical uses for products than to purely basic research. His philosophy was simple: *"Look about you. Take hold of the things that are here. Let them talk to you. You learn to talk to them."* His advice to his students was equally to the point: *"Learn to do common things uncommonly well; we must always keep in mind that anything that helps fill a dinner pail is valuable."* He urged them on in their studies with the admonition that *"there is no short cut to achievement. Life requires thorough preparation—vener is n't worth anything."* Commenting on his own successful life, he said that *"it is not the style of clothes one wears, neither the kind of automobile one drives, nor the amount of money one has in the bank, that counts. These mean nothing. It is simply service that measures success."*



Carver served at Tuskegee for more than 40 years, and when he died on January 5, 1943, he had garnered an impressive array of honors. Among the awards he received were: the Theodore Roosevelt Medal for distinguished service to science; the Spingarn Medal for distinguished achievement by an American Negro; appointment as Fellow, Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, London; honorary Doctor of Science degrees from Simpson College and the University of Rochester; and the Honorary Birthday Award, Thomas A. Edison Foundation.

Carver bequeathed his art collection and life savings of \$33,000 to the Tuskegee Institute, which provided for the establishment of the George Washington Carver Foundation.

Carver Today

Carver should not be judged by today's standards. In fairness he must be judged in the context of his time—a time of racial inequality with inadequate impetus to correct the imbalance that existed. Always quiet and non-violent, the many racial injustices that Carver personally suffered or heard about no doubt strengthened any inherent tendencies to accommodation that he may have had. One biographer, Rackham Holt, has suggested that Carver "knew he could not even dwell upon [racial injustice] in his mind without losing energy which he believed might be put to a better use. And for him this better use signified a wordless service which would speak loud in accomplishment. The public plea for his race he would leave to others who were more fitted for the duty."

Carver's work in agriculture, through his bulletins and lectures, had considerable influence in transforming the Deep South from a one-crop—cotton—region to one of agricultural diversity. Though he began by helping his fellow blacks in the area around Tuskegee, his work also aided whites.

The George Washington Carver Foundation established by his bequest has engaged in many research projects in fields of natural, applied, and social science—a most fitting tribute to the man who overcame so many obstacles in his search for knowledge. This is the true legacy of the man.