

George Washington Carver

Diamond Grove, Missouri | Iowa State College | Tuskegee, Alabama

In Sixty Seconds

Origins. Born around 1864 on the Moses Carver farm in Diamond Grove, Missouri, to an enslaved woman named Mary. As an infant, he and his mother were kidnapped by night riders. A neighbor recovered him in exchange for a racehorse. His mother was never found. He was raised by Moses and Susan Carver, the people who had held his mother in bondage, and walked ten miles to the nearest school that would take him.

Work. Iowa State Agricultural College admitted him in 1891. He earned a BS in 1894 and an MS in 1896, the first Black student and then the first Black faculty member in the college's history. That same year Booker T. Washington recruited him to Tuskegee. Carver stayed for 47 years as director of agricultural research, documenting 300 uses for the peanut, 100 for the sweet potato, and teaching Southern farmers a rotation system that rebuilt exhausted cotton land.

Impact. Southern agriculture had been locked into cotton for a century. Cotton had stripped the topsoil. Carver's crop-rotation curriculum, taught through Tuskegee's movable school wagon, put nitrogen-fixing legumes and sweet potatoes into rotation with cotton. He gave farmers, Black and white, a way to eat and a way to sell what grew. The peanut shifted from a hog feed into a national cash crop on the strength of his bulletins.

Legacy. The George Washington Carver National Monument in Diamond, Missouri was dedicated on July 14, 1943, the first national monument established for a non-President. His portrait appeared on a U.S. commemorative stamp in 1948. The Tuskegee University Carver papers remain a working research archive. Every peanut butter jar, every sweet-potato bulletin from a county extension office, every nitrogen-fixing rotation plan in Alabama carries part of the method he taught.

The Network

Booker T. Washington

Recruiter and first Tuskegee principal. Wrote the 1896 letter that brought Carver to Alabama: "I cannot offer you money, position, or fame." Protected his research budget and his teaching load for nineteen years, through the founding of the Jesup Agricultural Wagon program.

Thomas Edison

Would-be employer. Offered Carver a position at the Edison Laboratories in West Orange, New Jersey at a reported salary of \$100,000 a year in the early 1920s. Carver declined and stayed at Tuskegee for a teaching salary that never exceeded \$1,500 annually.

Henry Ford

Late-career supporter and friend. Funded a new Carver research laboratory at Tuskegee in the late 1930s and installed an elevator at Carver's dormitory when his health declined. Pursued with him a soybean and peanut plastic program for the automobile industry.

Mahatma Gandhi

Correspondent. Exchanged letters with Carver on soil fertility, vegetarian nutrition, and the agricultural foundation of a self-governing rural population. Gandhi asked him for crop-rotation advice suited to Indian village conditions.

For Discussion

1. Carver filed only three U.S. patents in his entire career and abandoned even those. His bulletins went out free by mail. What is the economic argument for refusing patents when an inventor's audience is working farmers, and what is lost to the inventor when the work enters the public domain immediately?
2. Carver and his mother were kidnapped by night riders when he was an infant. Only he was recovered. He was later raised by the family that had held his mother in bondage. What did it take for Carver to walk that biographical ground productively, and what other paths have survivors of comparable losses taken?
3. His January 1921 congressional testimony transformed the peanut from hog feed into a national cash crop. Scientific expertise met protectionist tariff politics in a single hearing. What does the Carver testimony illustrate about the role of a single expert witness in rewriting a commodity's commercial definition?
4. The George Washington Carver National Monument was the first national monument to a Black American, dedicated six months after his death during the Second World War. What does the wartime timing of that dedication reveal about the uses of Black scientific achievement in federal symbolic politics?
5. Carver corresponded with Mahatma Gandhi on soil fertility and on vegetarian nutrition suited to Indian village conditions. What kinds of problems move productively across national and cultural lines between two figures working on parallel movements, and what is the present-day infrastructure for such direct exchanges?

Primary Sources

1. McMurry, Linda O. *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol*. Oxford University Press, 1981.
2. Kremer, Gary R. *George Washington Carver: In His Own Words*. University of Missouri Press, 1987.
3. Tuskegee University Archives. *George Washington Carver Papers*. Tuskegee, Alabama.
4. National Park Service. *George Washington Carver National Monument historical records*. Diamond, Missouri.



5. Burchard, Peter D. George Washington Carver: For His Time and Ours. National Park Service Special History Study, 2005.

