

George Washington Carver

George Washington Carver was born near the end of the Civil War, in 1864, and lived until 1943. He loved art and was both an artist and a scientist. As a child, Carver was fascinated with painting, though he was unable to afford the proper materials. Instead, he used blackberry juice as his paint, and horse tail hair as his paintbrush. Carver even went on to study art while in college, but he was encouraged to pursue botany -- the study of plant life -- instead.

We are very fortunate that he did. He spent much of his life helping people by showing them better ways to farm. His ideas have improved agricultural productivity in many countries. He was an innovator, someone who thinks of new and better ways to do things.

Carver was in charge of farm research at the Tuskegee Institute, the college founded in Alabama by the important African-American educator, Booker T. Washington. In addition to emphasizing academic studies, Washington encouraged young African-American men to learn skills, such as carpentry and bricklaying. While at Tuskegee, Carver taught agronomy, or the science of soil management, to poor southern farmers. At first, most of these farmers were former slaves. By teaching these farmers how to better use the land, he helped them to become self-sufficient. In the southern part of the United States, most farmers had practiced what is called agricultural monoculture. That means that they grew one crop--in this case, cotton--at the exclusion of other crops. This had the effect of deteriorating the quality their soil. Carver explained the advantages of introducing alternatives to the cotton crop.

Carver suggested farmers grow specific crops, like peanuts, sweet potatoes, and soybeans. While it was clear that these types of crops would help to enrich the soil, farmers were concerned that people wouldn't have uses for these products. To address their concerns, Carver developed over 300 uses for the peanut, alone. For example, farmers could feed the vines to farm animals. They could use the hulls for fertilizer. Carver even found a way to make paper from the peanut shells.

Toward the end of his career, Carver returned to his first love of art, painting decorative cards for friends. Through his artwork, he hoped to inspire people to see the beauty around them, and to do great things, themselves. He taught poor farmers how to make paint from clay, and he encouraged them to decorate their homes.

When Carver died, he left his money to help people to keep working on agricultural research. Today, people from many countries come to the George Washington Carver Foundation at Tuskegee Institute. There they learn more in effective ways of farming. Why is this important to the world today?

Extended Response

What do you think this African American's most important legacy is? Explain why you think that is the most important legacy. Use information from the passage and your own ideas in your extended response.