



Carver, George Washington (1864?-1943)

by Linda Rapp

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2007 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



George Washington Carver in 1906.
Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston.

Agronomist and educator George Washington Carver is best known for his research on peanuts, for which he found over three hundred uses. During his lifetime, he became a cultural icon, the "Wizard of Tuskegee," an African-American scientist who, in an age of segregation, was not only revered by blacks but also admired by whites. So great was his fame that, in the words of biographer Linda O. McMurry, "by the mid-1930s almost every town in America seemed destined to have a Carver High School."

The story of Carver's rise from humble birth as a slave to international acclaim as a scientist seemed the stuff of legend, and the frequent--if not always accurate--retelling of it in the popular press turned him into an almost mythic figure. "The net result," states McMurry, "has been to make him one of the best-known, and least-understood, blacks who ever lived."

One of the facts of his life that was not well known and that would, especially in his own time, have prevented him from winning widespread esteem, was his homosexuality.

Carver as Folk Saint

Carver's scientific achievements, his humility (or at least the public perception of it), and his deep religiosity turned him into something of a folk saint. His work as an agronomist brought him into contact with people from diverse walks of life--poor Southern black sharecroppers, members of the international scientific community, government officials, and business leaders such as Henry Ford--nearly all of whom were impressed by his intellect and his dedication to serving others.

Carver believed that his intellect was a gift from God, bestowed upon him so that he could help improve the economic lot of poor African-American farmers; therefore, in his research he always stressed the practical applications of science.

Carver also believed in divine revelation and declared that his discoveries in the laboratory came when God "dr[e]w aside the curtain" to let him see what to do. This idea appealed to many religious members of the public but discomfited scientists and other commentators who felt that such statements disparaged the scientific method and could undermine Carver's reputation as a learned African-American.

For the majority of African-Americans, Carver was a person to point to with pride, a professor at all-black Tuskegee who was consulted and held in high regard by prestigious white people. Some, however, complained that Carver's demeanor was unduly deferential to whites and that he did not use his status as a highly regarded figure to engage more strongly in political activity for civil rights.

Views about Carver seemed to depend as much on the observer as on the man himself. Few were aware of all the aspects of his life; for many, he was as much a symbol as a person, the central figure in a dramatic and inspiring life story.

Early Life and Education

The events of Carver's earliest years do indeed sound like the stuff of legend. He was born to a slave named Mary on the Diamond (also known as Diamond Grove), Missouri farm of Moses and Susan Carver shortly before the end of the Civil War. Although his birth date is sometimes given as July 12, 1864, the actual date is not known. While he was just an infant, he and his mother were abducted by slave-raiders. Searchers were unable to discover the fate of Mary, but they recovered the child.

The Carvers, a childless couple who had already raised his brother's three orphaned children to adulthood, took on the role of foster parents to both baby George and his older half-brother, Jim.

A frail and sickly child, George spent much of his time at home with Susan Carver, who taught him such skills as laundering, cooking, and knitting, a hobby that he continued to practice and enjoy throughout his life. The Carvers also taught him to read.

Too fragile for either hard work or games, the young Carver passed much of his free time exploring the fields around his home and quickly became fascinated with flora. Neighbors soon dubbed him the "plant doctor" for his ability to care for growing things and revive ailing specimens.

Unusually for his time and place, Moses Carver was not a church-goer, but he let the children attend the local church, which had no resident minister but rather relied on itinerant preachers of a variety of Protestant denominations. It was there that young George Carver first developed his deep if unorthodox religious faith.

The Carver brothers began their formal education at a school held in the church building but withdrew after complaints from some white families. George Carver was avid to pursue an education, and so his foster father arranged for him to attend a black school in a town some eight miles away. Carver never again lived with his foster parents, but he maintained a warm relationship with them for the rest of their lives.

Carver's quest for schooling led him to several different towns, mostly in Kansas. He roomed with various families--both black and white--and supported himself by doing any odd job that presented itself, often putting his skills at laundering and cooking to good use.

In the mid-1880s Carver successfully applied to Highland College, a small Presbyterian institution in Kansas, only to be turned away when he attempted to register for classes, at which point school officials learned that he was black.

Dispirited by the setback, he moved to Ness County, Kansas, where he bought and worked a 160-acre farm before relocating to Winterset, Iowa and establishing a laundry business.

In 1890 Carver entered Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa. The only African-American at the Methodist school, he found his instructors and classmates encouraging and supportive. "They made me believe I was a real human being," he later wrote.

Carver planned to major in art, and his work impressed his painting teacher, Etta Budd. Once he began showing her plants that he had grafted or cross-fertilized, however, she suggested that he consider getting a degree in botany instead since he would have a better chance for financial security in that field than as a professional artist. She recommended that he attend the Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts (now Iowa State University), where her father was professor of horticulture.

Recognizing the practicality of Budd's advice, Carver followed it, transferring to Iowa State after a year at

Simpson. He continued painting as an avocation, however, and when he entered several artworks in a state-wide show in 1892, one of them, "Yucca and Cactus," was chosen for inclusion in the exhibit representing Iowa at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

At Iowa State, Carver was once again the only black student, and his initial experience there was not as positive as it had been at Simpson: he was subjected to derogatory taunts and forced by the dining hall manager to take meals with the help in the basement. Nevertheless, he soon took an active role in campus life, joining the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and serving as its missionary chairman for two years.

He was also a member of the art, debate, and German clubs and was among the organizers of the Agricultural Society. He appeared in school plays--once dressed in drag--and was, in addition, the first "rubber" (i.e., masseur) for the football team.

Carver's early work in botany was impressive. Prior to his graduation in 1894, he had already published an article, "Grafting the Cacti" (1893), in the *Transactions of the Iowa Horticultural Society* and presented a paper on bulbs at the group's annual meeting (1894). Because of Carver's academic excellence, his professors urged him to pursue a Master's degree.

Agronomist and Teacher

Carver received his first teaching assignment when he was a graduate student. In his freshman biology classes he quickly acquired a reputation as an excellent teacher who inspired his students by his keen interest in his subject and who encouraged them to make their own discoveries.

While Carver was still doing graduate work at Iowa State, he received several job offers from other institutions, including one from Booker T. Washington of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (now Tuskegee University). Although it was not the most lucrative or prestigious, Carver accepted it because he believed that it was at Tuskegee that he could fulfill "the one ideal of my life to be of the greatest good to the greatest number of 'my people' possible."

When Carver began his career, the agricultural economy of the American South was largely dependent on a single crop, cotton. However, long years of growing it had left the soil depleted of nutrients. Carver understood the importance of crop diversification and therefore undertook experiments on plants that would not only enrich the soil but also be viable cash crops.

He focused in particular on sweet potatoes, soybeans, and peanuts. Carver stressed the practicality of these crops. His work on their cultivation, he wrote in the bulletin of the experiment station in 1905, had been conducted "keeping in mind the poor tenant farmer with one-horse equipment." He also called attention to the value of peanuts and soybeans as sources of protein, and included recipes in his bulletins to teach people how to use them.

By 1914 Southern cotton-growers were facing a crisis not only from the nutritional depletion of the soil but also from an infestation of boll weevils. Largely because of Carver's work, many turned to the cultivation of peanuts. Not even considered a crop--much less a cash crop--at the turn of the twentieth century, peanuts were, by 1940, second only to cotton in the agricultural economy of the American South.

The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) awarded Carver its Spingarn Medal in 1923 in recognition of his contribution to improving the economic condition of Southern farmers.

By that time Carver had already gained a reputation as the "peanut man." In 1921 he had made an

impressive presentation to the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee in support of a protective tariff on peanuts, showing the congressmen a wide array of products made from peanuts and their hulls, mostly comestibles but also other items such as dyes. Carver's demonstration won the day, and the tariff prevailed.

Carver became much in demand as a speaker and, while he chafed a bit at the label of the "peanut man," which hardly did justice to the breadth of his research, he put up with it because his fame on that score redounded to the prestige of Tuskegee.

Sexuality

While Carver's renown was certainly helpful in raising the profile of Tuskegee and attracting donations to the always underfunded college, administrators worried about potential scandal from another source: the persistent rumors of Carver's homosexuality.

Carver apparently considered marriage in 1905, but the identity of the prospective bride is not known. In any event, no engagement took place, and in subsequent years, Carver politely rebuffed all match-making efforts by well-meaning friends.

Carver formed deep and often long-lasting friendships with male students, who came to be known as "Carver's boys." He wrote them affectionate letters that were flowery rather than explicit, and so it is not known to what extent--if at all--he acted upon any romantic feelings that he may have had for them.

McMurry speculates that "if such feelings did exist, it is doubtful that they were recognized by Carver," but rather "were transmuted into a feeling of spiritual oneness with his friends," and she concludes that "Carver's emotional needs appear to have been met through his religion and his religious friendships."

While it may be true that Carver sublimated his sexual feelings for his students, it is unlikely that he was unaware of them and their significance. Such a view attributes a kind of ignorance and naïveté to a man who was very widely read and deeply introspective.

McMurry does, however, note that Carver was wont to engage in "not very dignified" horseplay with "his boys," an activity that fueled the suspicion of some of his colleagues that he was homosexual.

Carver's habit of giving therapeutic massages--sometimes with a peanut-oil-based product that he had developed--sparked the rumors even more. "Most of his male friends received at least one massage from the professor," writes McMurry. Whether Carver found the opportunity for physical contact with another human being therapeutic for himself as well remains unknown.

Tuskegee administrators were no doubt not the only ones made uneasy by the prospect of Carver's homosexuality being exposed. Carver himself likely experienced anxiety in this regard as well. Indeed, his reluctance to take a lead in the political movement for greater civil rights for African Americans may be related to his homosexuality and his fear that it might be revealed were he to assume a high-profile, confrontational position, thereby not only destroying his career but also damaging the movement.

This fear, if it did indeed exist, would have been altogether justified, as the experience of later African-American homosexuals who took part in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s attests. Bayard Rustin and James Baldwin, for example, were attacked on the basis of their sexuality, and their political effectiveness thereby limited to a certain extent.

Uneasiness about Carver's homosexuality continues to this day. Historian Horace L. Griffin reports that, just

a few years ago, while watching a film at the George Washington Carver National Monument, he became curious about "an attractive young man who would occasionally appear with Carver" and who he thought might "be Carver's housemate or possible companion." When he inquired about him, however, the previously voluble park ranger "became visibly uncomfortable with [his] questions about" the young man. The ranger further "admitted that other visitors had raised questions about Carver's sexual orientation."

Carver and Curtis

Carver's frequent companion from 1935 on was his assistant, Austin W. Curtis, Jr., a Cornell graduate in chemistry who had taught at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College (now State University) before coming to Tuskegee. Carver had been less than enthusiastic about having an assistant appointed and had turned down a number of applicants prior to meeting Curtis, but with him he quickly developed a strong bond.

In 1943, Rackham Holt described the relationship between the two men: "At last someone had been welcomed not merely into Dr. Carver's laboratory, but also into his heart. He believed that there was something providential in the coming of this young man, so intensely serious about his work and extremely competent at it, who was at the same time a genial companion; he was proud of him and loved and depended on him as his own son And the affection was returned in full measure. Mr. Curtis accompanied him everywhere, seeing to his comfort, shielding him from intrusion, and acting as his official mouthpiece."

Holt also noted that Carver "would tuck his hand into the arm of 'my dear boy'" when the two set off to inspect experiments.

In likening the rapport between them to that of a father and son, Holt was echoing Carver's own, possibly guarded, words.

Fame and Honors: Last Years

By the time that Curtis arrived, Carver was around seventy years old and had retired from teaching but was still doing research. Although the work of his last years was not among his most significant, from the late 1930s onward, his earlier research, especially with regard to the diverse potential uses of peanuts, came to public attention, and he was honored with, as McMurry puts it, "what became a deluge of awards." His fame continued to grow as he was the subject of many radio programs and a guest on several broadcasts.

Among Carver's admirers was Henry Ford, who invited him to speak at a 1937 conference on the application of chemistry and other sciences to the farming industry that Ford had organized in Dearborn, Michigan. Like Carver, the automobile magnate favored the development of nutritious crops that could be an economic boon as well. Ford was particularly interested in soybeans.

Because of his esteem for Carver, Ford founded a school for African-American children on a portion of the grounds of his plantation in Ways, Georgia and named it in the scientist's honor. Carver was present at the dedication in 1939 and had a standing invitation to visit Ford when he was at the plantation, where guest rooms were always kept prepared for Carver and Curtis.

Declining health limited Carver's ability to travel, but he made such trips as were meaningful to him, including one in 1941 to Simpson College, where he gave the sermon at the graduation ceremonies.

The following year Carver went to Dearborn, where Henry Ford had erected a replica of his birthplace (based on Carver's recollection of the cabin) in Greenfield Village, a collection of buildings assembled by

Ford to represent Americana.

At the same time, Ford founded a nutritional laboratory in Carver's honor. Carver's extended stay in Michigan on that occasion led to rumors that he would quit Tuskegee and finish his career at the new lab.

Carver returned to Alabama, however, and briefly continued his duties at Tuskegee until he suffered a fall while trying to open the door of his building on campus. He died some two weeks later on January 5, 1943 and was buried in the churchyard of the college chapel.

Expressions of sympathy poured in to the Tuskegee mailroom from a wide variety of people--heads of state, scientists, sharecroppers, and schoolchildren, as well as celebrities from assorted fields, all of whom felt that he had touched their lives in some way.

The National Park Service now owns 210 of the 240 acres of the farm where Carver was born. The George Washington Carver National Monument includes buildings from his lifetime and nature trails to help visitors try to see what he saw in the plant life of the area. Photos and videos present the story of Carver's life, at least that portion of it that he was free to live openly, a story that is, at best, incomplete.

Bibliography

Brodie, James Michael. *Created Equal: The Lives and Ideas of Black American Innovators*. New York: William Morrow, 1993.

Griffin, Horace L. *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians & Gays in Black Churches*. Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2006.

Holt, Rackham. *George Washington Carver: An American Biography*. New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1943.

McMurry, Linda O. *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.