



Scientists and Inventors

George Washington Carver, Scientist

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George walked down the steps of the United States Capitol after testifying about tariff protections before the House of Representatives on behalf of the United Peanut Association of America. He had convinced Congress of the importance of the peanut plant, and his audience had given him a standing ovation. In 1921, few black men were given an audience before the House of Representatives, much less had their message met with applause.

“Sir,” a group of school kids approached him on the sidewalk below the Capitol. “Are you the Peanut Man?” they asked.

“Well,” George mused. “I guess I am!”

George had an unlikely journey to get to this place.

He’d been born in Diamond Grove, Missouri just a year before slavery became outlawed in that state. At a week old, he and his mother, Mary, were kidnapped by slave raiders and taken to Kentucky. Moses Carver, the white farmer who owned the land where George was born, was able to get the baby back, though without Mary. Moses and his wife, Susan, raised George, teaching him to read and write.

“How’d you get to know so much about peanuts?” one little boy asked.

George replied, “I teach agriculture at the Tuskegee Institute. So, I know a lot about plants. I left Neosho High School in Missouri after being disappointed in my schooling. I moved to Kansas, where I graduated high school and applied to and was accepted at Highland College.”

“So, you went to Highland College and learned all about peanuts?”

“No,” George answered. “They rejected me when they found out I was black. So, I attended Simpson College, a school that admitted all qualified applicants. Then I went to Iowa State Agricultural School to study botany. I graduated with my Bachelor of Science degree

in 1894, followed by my master’s degree in 1896.”

“And then you were the Peanut Man!” the boy shouted.

“Well, my education did help me learn about plants. That’s why it’s important to study hard and learn as much as possible! I worked at Tuskegee alongside educator Booker T. Washington. I taught farmers how to replenish worn down soil introducing nitrogen-fixing plants like peanuts, soybeans, and sweet potatoes. I came up with countless uses for these crops by creating recipes and commercial products. I showed farmers how to use compost to enrich their soil. These sustainable methods of farming helped small farmers grow more food.”

George reached in his pocket and pulled out a bag of peanuts which he offered to the children.

“And now,” George told them. “You can call me the Peanut Man,” he said with a laugh.

The kids may have seen only the Peanut Man. But Carver was an agricultural scientist and inventor, who revolutionized the farming industry with his soil depletion studies. The George Washington Carver National Monument opened in 1953, the first national monument dedicated to a black man.

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