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The Quest for Education: Racism, Paradox, and Interest Convergence in the Life of George Washington Carver

Ron Wilson and Kay Ann Taylor

Introduction

George Washington Carver is one of the iconic and ironic figures of American history. He experienced severe racism yet rose to international acclaim. He proclaimed a desire to serve the poorest members of his race yet sought and won approbation from the wealthiest of white benefactors. He was a brilliant African American scientist yet in modern times is seemingly more honored by the white establishment than the black community. The challenges and contradictions of his life make a fascinating arena for study.

Carver's paradoxical life and career were influenced strongly by two factors: Racism and interest convergence.¹ We describe this paradox and explore the intersectional impact of those two forces while focusing primarily on his formative years in Kansas. The common thread through Carver's challenging and fascinating formative years was his quest for education and knowledge.

Origins

"From a child, I had an inordinate desire for knowledge."

—George Washington Carver²

In 1838, a farmer of German descent named Moses Carver and his wife Susan emigrated from Illinois to Diamond Grove in southwest Missouri. They homesteaded and expanded the farm through the years. Carver was a Union loyalist and was opposed philosophically to slavery. However, as his farm holdings expanded, he purchased a slave girl named Mary in 1855. His distaste for the degrading nature of slavery was lessened somewhat by the fact that Mary was purchased from a neighbor, rather than through the city slave markets.³ Mary gave birth to a son named James, who was vigorous and strong. She subsequently gave birth to George, who was frail and sickly. The exact year of George's birth is not known, although it is clear that he was born during the Civil War years.

¹ Interest convergence is the idea that whites will do things only to advance the interests of minorities when it serves their own self-interest to do so, most often materially/financially. (See, for example, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

² George Washington Carver as cited in Gary R. Kremer, *George Washington Carver: In His Own Words*. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1987, p. 20).

³ Linda O. McMurry, *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol*. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1981).

Various estimates of his birth year range from 1860 to 1864.⁴ For the purposes of this article, we will consider the date of his birth as July 12, 1864.

George's father was a slave for a neighboring farmer but was killed in a log-hauling accident around the time of George's birth. Shortly after George was born, marauders kidnapped the mother and infant from the Carver farm and rode south into Arkansas with them. In the interest of bringing them back, Moses Carver sought out a local man named John Bentley who had once ridden with the bushwhackers. He sent Bentley to ransom or return Mary and the baby. Bentley came back days later carrying the baby in a tiny bundle, but Mary was gone and never heard from again. In return, Carver paid Bentley one of his best racehorses, valued at \$300.⁵

Susan Carver nursed the sickly infant back to health, but the whooping cough resulting from his ordeal affected his vocal cords for life and left him with a very high-pitched voice. The Carvers became foster parents to Jim and George. Because of George's frail nature, he was assigned to help with chores in the house and allowed to play in the woods while Jim was outside doing farm work. Ironically, George lived to old age, while Jim died in a smallpox epidemic in 1883 in Seneca, Missouri.⁶ As a child, George learned to cook, mend, do laundry, embroider, and perform similar tasks. He also helped Susan tend the garden, which fostered an early fascination with plants for him.⁷

McMurry wrote that George Washington Carver's childhood was similar to that of his white neighbors except for three factors: (1) his frailness, (2) his color, and (3) his genius. Carver was extremely bright and curious. He displayed an ability to nurse sick plants back to health, which earned him the sobriquet of "plant doctor".⁸ He also adopted the Christian faith at an early age and would be a devout Christian and daily Bible reader throughout his entire life.⁹ Carver self-described his early interests in this way:

When just a mere tot in short dresses my very soul thirsted for an education. I literally lived in the woods. I wanted to know every strange stone, flower, insect, bird or beast. No one could tell me. My only book was an old Webster's Elementary Spelling Book. I would seek the answer here without satisfaction.¹⁰

At the age of ten, George left the farm to go to school in the nearby town of Neosho. His quest for education had begun.

The Search for Education

⁴ Jettie Condray, Personal interview, Ottawa County Historical Museum, Minneapolis, Kansas, March 2, 2007. McMurry, 1981.

⁵ Lawrence Elliott, *George Washington Carver: The Man Who Overcame*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

⁶ McMurry, 1981.

⁷ Kremer, 1987.

⁸ McMurry, 1981.

⁹ Peter D. Burchard, *Carver: A Great Soul*. (Fairfax, CA: Serpent Wise, 1998).

¹⁰ McMurry, 1981, p. 19.

“Education is understanding relationships.”

—George Washington Carver¹¹

Carver’s first school was in Neosho, Missouri with a Negro teacher named Stephan Frost, but he quickly found that Frost knew little more than he did. As McMurry wrote, no provision was made for black education prior to the Civil War, and demand for teachers in Reconstruction outstripped those provided by the Freedmen’s Bureau and others.¹² In the late 1870s, after Carver learned of the limits of Frost’s teaching, he heard about a family moving to Fort Scott, Kansas so he hitched a ride with them in the hope of finding a better opportunity for education. Instead, what he found was his first direct contact with violent, brutal racism.

Carver found work in Fort Scott doing cooking, laundry and other domestic chores while attending school. Then came March 26, 1876. A black man was accused of raping a twelve-year-old white girl. He was found hiding in an abandoned mine and brought to the county jail. That night a crowd of about a thousand people gathered to watch thirty masked men seize the prisoner, tie a rope around his neck, drag him five blocks, and then roast him over a fire of dry-goods boxes and coal oil. The acceptance of such violence by the general population demonstrates the deep climate of racism. In a tone so mild that it could have been referring to something as innocuous as the enactment of a local parking ordinance, the editor of the Fort Scott Daily News wrote, “Had this been done quietly . . . no one could have been found to censure, but the unnecessary savagery of burning might well have been omitted.”¹³ The message to black people was clear: Get out and stay out. George Washington Carver fled the town immediately. More than sixty years later, he wrote, “As young as I was, the horror haunted me and does even now.”¹⁴

Carver hurried north to the community of Olathe, outside Kansas City. For a year, he attended the Old Rock school or stone school at the corner of Lulu and Water Street in Olathe. The colored school was not really a school but an old building that had been used by a man cutting tombstones, who subsequently leased the lower floor out for classes. Carver lived with a black family doing laundry, cooked for a local barber, and eventually taught Sunday School at the Methodist Church. A contemporary described Carver as

a tall, lanky kid, but he didn’t care to play many games . . . He and I would be playing marbles, and he’d say, Oh! Rash, look what a beautiful leaf. Look at these trees, and I waited many times. Come on and shoot. And he’d say, look at this, look at the edge of this leaf. And in that way, he found clover leaves and things like that.”¹⁵

Carver was demonstrating his fascination with nature. Carver became acquainted with a black family named the Seymours who then migrated westward. So, after living briefly in

¹¹ McMurry, 1981, p. 97.

¹² Wayne J. Urban, and Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., *American Education: A History*. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2004).

¹³ McMurry, 1981, p. 23.

¹⁴ George Washington Carver as cited in McMurry, 1981, p. 23.

¹⁵ M. F. Isaacs, Personal interview, Johnson County Museum, Overland Park, Kansas, April 10, 2007.

the community of Paola, Carver followed them out West to the place where they had settled: Minneapolis, Kansas.

Flowering (and Floundering) in Kansas

“Education is the key to unlocking the golden door of freedom.”

—George Washington Carver¹⁶

Carver’s education eventually reached a high point in Minneapolis, Kansas. He lived with the Seymour family, worked at Ewart’s store, and then established himself doing laundry in a ravine in the center of town popularly referred to as Poverty Gulch. Carver lived in a little shack made over from a chicken house and built his laundry business. On July 29, 1883, he became a member of the local Presbyterian church, which the Seymours attended.¹⁷ Ben Seymour was farming and Lucy Seymour was nursing patients of a local doctor for whom Carver also did odd jobs. The doctor was so impressed with young Carver that he lent him books.¹⁸ Carver could paint, knit, tat and crochet. Musically, he could play the accordion and mouth harp at the same time. Carver’s teacher was Miss Helen Eacker, who would later become the county’s first female superintendent of schools. She strongly encouraged Carver and he flourished. He finished his high school requirements and was reported to have perfect deportment.¹⁹

Many years later after Carver was in Alabama, Mr. Ewart, the store owner, wrote Carver to see if he was the same Carver who lived in Minneapolis. Carver replied,

Yes, this is the original Geo. W. Carver who lived in Minneapolis so long and who remembers you and Mrs. Ewart so pleasantly and helpfully. How I should like to see you and the other dear people at Minneapolis, which is almost or quite a city now and in which I fear I would find no familiar haunts.²⁰

Interest convergence is demonstrated in Carver’s life by his willingness to do laundry for the whites of the community. By accepting what some saw as a subservient task and earning his way in the process, his interests converged with those of the white majority. Carver’s quest for knowledge now led him to aspire to higher education. He applied by mail to Highland College, a small Presbyterian college in northeast Kansas. In summer 1885, Carver received the exciting news that he had been admitted to Highland. The admission letter was signed by the Reverend Duncan Brown, D.D., Principal. Carver was euphoric. He spent the balance of the summer in Kansas City, studying typing and shorthand at a business academy started by a classmate, and used the remainder of his meager savings to travel to Highland.²¹

¹⁶ McMurry, 1981, p.43.

¹⁷ Condray, 2007.

¹⁸ McMurry, 1981.

¹⁹ Condray, 2007.

²⁰ As cited by Condray, 2007.

²¹ Elliott, 1966.

Once again, racism intervened. It has to be one of the saddest moments in Kansas educational history. On September 20, 1885, Carver arrived by train at the Highland campus, only to be told by Principal Duncan Brown, “You didn’t tell me you were a Negro. Highland College does not take Negroes.”²² Carver’s hopes were dashed, and he was nearly penniless.²³

After his rejection by the college, Carver found work with a family named Beeler who ran a fruit farm south of Highland and did odd jobs to rebuild his savings. Young Frank Beeler had gone West to homestead in Ness County, Kansas, and opened a store at a trail crossing there. The town that developed at that crossing became known as Beelerville, but because of the similarity to the existing town of Belleville, the town name was shortened to Beeler.²⁴

In 1886, Carver followed Beeler to Ness County. On November 20, Carver filed on a homestead one and a half miles south of the town of Beeler where he built a sod house. The homestead was in the southeast quarter of section 4, township 10, range 26 west of the sixth principal meridian of Kansas. As one might guess, Carver experimented with alternative crops in his fields. He developed an interest in art, taking his first lessons from Clara Duncan, a black woman who had taught at Talledaga College in Alabama before becoming a missionary for the African Methodist Episcopal church. He played the accordion for local dances and joined the Ness City literary society.²⁵ In the manuscript, *Bits About Beeler*, one of the local families reminisced about Carver:

During the terrible winter months George often spent the night at our place. He would work for his food, and he also was good at amusing us children. I remember one time he made a violin for us out of an old cigar box and rubber bands. On leaving Kansas we lost track of George. Once or twice we heard it was thought that he had become rather “queer” because he had made a vat of muck in his back yard using cow manure (probably compost). He was painting pictures and gathering every flower and weed in the country and improving the variety.²⁶

Today, Beeler is an unincorporated town of perhaps 58 citizens. On a prairie hilltop overlooking the town, a four foot tall monument of native stone was dedicated to Carver on October 11, 1953 with a thousand people in attendance. The plaque on the stone reads:

Dedicated to the memory of George Washington Carver, Citizen - Scientist - Benefactor, who rose from slavery to fame and gave to our country an everlasting heritage. Ness County is proud to honor him and claim him as a pioneer. This

²² As cited in Elliott, 1966, p. 55.

²³ In 1996, Highland Community College issued an official apology and symbolically conferred upon Carver an honorary associates degree. Condray, 2007.

²⁴ Margery Frusher, Personal interview, Ness County Historical Museum, Ness City, Kansas, April 27, 2007.

²⁵ McMurry, 1981.

²⁶ F. L. Houghton, *Bits About Beeler*, 1954.

stone marks the northeast corner of the homestead on which he filed in 1886. Erected by friends and the Ness County Historical Society, 1952.²⁷

Such acclaim would not have been envisioned when Carver was actually living in Beeler. Carver was a struggling homesteader in a sod house. According to a 1960 report, one historian believes that Carver's time in Ness County was a necessary, pivotal point in his career. Robert Fuller reported,

It seems that it [his time on the Ness County homestead] was a necessary period of quiet reevaluation or thinking things through. It probably contributed to Carver's later achievements in much the same way that a period of lying fallow contributes to the productivity of a field.²⁸

In any event, Carver's dream of a higher education had not been realized. He eventually drifted East in search of his destiny.

Off to Iowa

"We are the architects of our future and the hewers of our destiny."
—George Washington Carver²⁹

Carver's restless searching led him to Winterset, Iowa in 1889. He took a job as a head cook at a hotel and later opened a laundry.³⁰ At a local church, he met a white couple named Milholland, who took him under their wing and helped him reacquire his sense of direction in life. They encouraged him to enter Simpson College, twenty miles away in Indianola. Simpson was a small Methodist college with an open door for all ethnic groups, and Carver flourished again in this setting.³¹

Carver had developed his skills as an artist and painter by this time. He came to Simpson primarily to study art, so he was enrolled in Miss Etta Budd's art class. He would bring Miss Budd his paintings as well as his needlework and even plants that he had cross-fertilized or grafted. Miss Budd became convinced of his artistic ability but was not sure about his making a living as an artist. In one of the more fortuitous connections of education history, Miss Budd's father was a professor of horticulture at Iowa State College in Ames. Upon seeing Carver's love of plants, she encouraged him to pursue a career in botany and to study at Ames. Meanwhile, Carver had been reevaluating his career choices with a higher calling in mind. He had begun to believe that his God-given talents were meant to be used in the elevation of his people, and in the short run he could be of more practical service as a trained agriculturalist rather than as an artist. In 1891,

²⁷ Frusher, 2007.

²⁸ Martha Swearingen, Detour in Scientist's Life Led Him to a Ness County Sod House. (*Salina Journal*, May 22, p. 25, 1960.)

²⁹ National Park Service, George Washington Carver National Monument. Retrieved from <https://www.nps.gov/gwca/index.htm>

³⁰ Kremer, 1987.

³¹ Elliott, 1966.

he was the first African American to enroll at Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts.³²

Carver went on to earn bachelor's and master's degrees in agriculture from Iowa State. He was a leader in the YMCA and the debate club. He worked in the dining rooms and as a trainer for the athletic teams. He was captain, the highest student rank, of the campus military regiment. His poetry was published in the student newspaper and two of his paintings were exhibited at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago. Carver's interests in music and art remained strong, but it was his excellence in botany and horticulture that prompted professors Joseph Budd (Etta's father) and Louis Pammel to encourage him to stay on as a graduate student after he completed his bachelor's degree in 1894. Because of his proficiency in plant breeding, Carver was appointed to the faculty, becoming Iowa State's first African American faculty member.³³ He was given charge of the greenhouse, bacteriological laboratory, and the laboratory work in systematic botany.³⁴ During the next two years as assistant botanist for the College Experiment Station, Carver quickly developed scientific skills in plant pathology and mycology, the branch of botany that deals with fungi. He published several articles on his work and gained national respect.³⁵ Then a new voice came calling from the South.

Tuskegee and World Fame

"It is simply service that measures success."

—George Washington Carver³⁶

Booker T. Washington was the nation's foremost black leader in the post-Reconstruction era.³⁷ As one of the leading black educators of his time, Washington organized what would become Tuskegee Institute in 1881. He became infamous for the policy of racial accommodation which he espoused in his address at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta in 1895. His viewpoint would essentially be that of assimilation in the taxonomy of modern critical race theory.³⁸ At Tuskegee, Washington sought to establish an agricultural school with an all-black faculty, and he attracted Carver to come head the faculty.

Carver's move to Tuskegee demonstrated the paradox of Carver's life. Carver went to Tuskegee with a sense of mission, of leaving "security, success and happiness to uplift a backward people."³⁹ But missionaries are sometimes not well accepted by those they come to proselytize. The transition to Alabama was not easy for Carver had spent most of

³² McMurry, 1981.

³³ The Legacy of George Washington Carver. Retrieved from <https://digitalcollections.lib.iastate.edu/george-washington-carver/biography>

³⁴ Kremer, 1987.

³⁵ Legacy, 2018.

³⁶ Cited in Kremer, 1987, p. 17.

³⁷ Urban & Wagoner, 2004.

³⁸ Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

³⁹ McMurry, 1981, p. 44.

his years in the company of white people. He had never lived in the deep South. He was resented by the existing faculty and possibly behaved like a prima donna. His scientific genius was not matched by a talent for administration, which created rifts with Booker T. Washington.⁴⁰

While relations were stormy on his home campus, Carver made his mark in the field of agricultural research and outreach. He pioneered the use of the Jesup wagon, named for its funder, a New York philanthropist named Morris K. Jesup.^{41, 42} The wagon was a moveable school, i.e., a wagon fully equipped with agricultural equipment that could demonstrate new practices out in the fields and farms. This enabled Carver to demonstrate modern agricultural technology of the time. Perhaps Carver's most famous accomplishments were the development of new uses for the peanut and the sweet potato, some 500 industrial and household applications of these products.⁴³

On January 21, 1921, at the behest of peanut industry groups, Carver testified before the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee. The committee was considering protective tariffs for peanut growers. Carver spoke not about tariffs but about the many and varied uses of the peanut, complete with various samples, which he demonstrated. The committee found his knowledge and demonstrations fascinating. His ten-minute time limit was repeatedly extended until the chairman told him that he had all the time he would want. One observer wrote, "He not only pleased the committee, but convinced them in no uncertain way that the peanut industry was worth protecting and preserving for American farmers."⁴⁴ It was a case of interest convergence, where Carver's interests as a scientist converged with the interest of the peanut industry. In less than an hour, Carver had won a tariff for the peanut industry and national fame for himself.⁴⁵

Carver went on to be honored with numerous books, honorary degrees and awards, such as the Roosevelt Medal for Outstanding Service, the Springarn Medal, and the British Royal Society for the Arts.⁴⁶ He was selected by *Popular Mechanics Magazine* as one of fifty outstanding Americans and was inducted into the National Agricultural Hall of Fame and the Hall of Fame for Great Americans. Carver had a nuclear submarine as well as science buildings at Simpson College and Iowa State named in his honor. In 1952, a fifty-cent coin was issued with the likenesses of Carver and Booker T. Washington in profile on the obverse.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ McMurry, 1981.

⁴¹ Elliott, 1966.

⁴² White philanthropic support for African American education provides another classic example of interest convergence, i.e., education for African Americans according to the level deemed appropriate by Whites. See William Henry Watkins, *The White Architects of Black Education: Ideology and Power in America 1865-1954*. (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2001).

⁴³ Condray, 2007.

⁴⁴ Cited in McMurry, 1981, p. 174.

⁴⁵ McMurry, 1981.

⁴⁶ Kremer, 1987.

⁴⁷ Condray, 2007.

After a long and illustrious career, George Washington Carver passed on January 5, 1943. His epitaph read, “He could have added fortune to fame, but caring for neither, he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world.”⁴⁸

Conclusion

George Washington Carver’s life demonstrated the paradox of American education and American society in the post-Civil War era. Carver experienced the bitterness of racism, yet found ways to learn and form interests that would converge with the white establishment.

One of the interesting contrasts in the record of George Washington Carver has to do with the portrayal of his accomplishments through time. In 1943, Rackham Holt’s biography (with the full complicity of Carver himself) depicted Carver as a flawless, superhuman hero.⁴⁹ In 1976, a very different picture of Carver was written by essayist Barry Mackintosh in “The Making of a Myth.”⁵⁰ It drew upon a long-suppressed National Park Service report from 1962, which described Carver’s discoveries as greatly overrated. In 1981, Linda McMurry wrote a balanced book, which depicts a more complete picture of this complex man in the context of his times.⁵¹

Another paradox has to do with Carver’s relationships with the poor and, at the other extreme, with the wealthy. Carver wrote, “The primary idea in all of my work was to help the farmer and fill the poor man’s empty dinner pail . . . My idea is to help the ‘man farthest down.’”⁵² In his outreach efforts and his teaching, he clearly benefited the downtrodden. But he also sought and cultivated the blessing of the rich and famous, such as Henry Ford and Thomas Edison. The self-effacing servant “undoubtedly relished and courted publicity.”⁵³

Finally, there is the paradox of his relationship with African Americans. Carver was a great black scientist, but he gravitated to the company of whites. He sought to help his people but his accommodationist approach earned him the disdain of followers of W.E.B. DuBois or more militant black leaders. His accomplishments enabled him to be used by the white establishment to show black people what is possible. The very qualities that made him a hero to Americans of the 1940s and 1950s made him suspect among blacks and liberal whites in the 1960s and early 1970s.⁵⁴ He was dismissed by modern blacks as an Uncle Tom and Booker T. bedfellow, yet he served and inspired several generations of African American youth.

⁴⁸ Elliott, 1966, back cover.

⁴⁹ Rackham Holt, *George Washington Carver: An American Biography*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1943.)

⁵⁰ Barry Mackintosh, “George Washington Carver: The Making of a Myth,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 507-528.

⁵¹ McMurry, 1981.

⁵² Cited in Kremer, 1987, p. 102.

⁵³ McMurry, 1981, p. 177.

⁵⁴ Kremer, 1987.

While demonstrating these paradoxical elements, Carver's life showed the impact of both racism and interest convergence. Changing attitudes will be needed to rise above these factors or to work with them. As the Lieutenant Governor of Kansas said at the dedication of the Carver memorial in Beeler, Kansas in 1953:

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and its amendments, the laws of Congress, the constitutions and laws of the states cannot in themselves secure freedom. . . .Complete freedom would come only through the thinking and attitudes of fellow men.⁵⁵

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⁵⁵ Frusher, 2007.