George Washington Carver: An Altruist

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Introduction

The aim of this text is to describe the tempestuous childhood of George Washington Carver, born as an enslaved child to become a prominent educator, scientist, humanitarian, inventor and a symbol of African American achievement. I will elucidate his early childhood and how his admiration for nature influenced his life-long pursuits as an educator and scientist. Furthermore, I will elaborate on Carver’s pursuit of education and his notable achievements, acknowledging the focus of Carver’s work was, seemingly, to improve the conditions of the poorest black sharecroppers¹ throughout the South.

The man: George Washington Carver

George Washington Carver has been described as: mild, soft-spoken, innately modest with a small body frame. Notwithstanding this unpretentious description, Carver was a prominent African-American educator, scientist, humanitarian and inventor. One of Carver’s own quotations may best describe his life as "there is no short cut to achievement. Life requires thorough preparation - veneer isn't worth anything" (as cited in Bagley, 2013, p. 1). G. W. Carver was born circa 1865 on a farm near Diamond, Missouri. His mother, Mary, was owned by a German-American settler, Moses Carver and his wife Susan (history.com, 2018). However, like many enslaved children in Missouri, George W. Carver had no recollection of his father (Gart, 2014). Nonetheless, Carver believed his father was an enslaved African American owned by James Grant, who operated a farm not far from the Moses Carver farm (Gart, 2014). The State Historical Society of Missouri (2018) cites Carver’s father died before his son George was born.

Subsequently, it has been reported by different sources that George, his sister and mother were kidnapped from the Carver farm by partisans possibly in search of money (State Historical Society of Missouri, 2018; Bagley, 2013; History.com, 2018; Biography.com, 2018). However, Gart (2014) elucidates there were pro-Confederate and pro-Union partisans throughout the Civil War and these partisans may have targeted the Carver farm, although the disappearance of George, his mother and sister does correspond to the period of emancipation. Admittedly, there are differing accounts as what actually transpired, nonetheless George was returned to Carvers whereas his mother was never located, leading me to think he (George) had a limited relationship with his mother. One can posit George W. Carver had a tempestuous childhood which was characterized by deprivation and a lack of adequate parental support which fosters confidence, growth and the emotional development of a child (Moges and Weber, 2014).

The story of George W. Carver’s early beginnings may appear to some readers as harsh, however Harper (1846) asserts “slave labor furnished for more than two thirds of our foreign commence” (p. 341). The aforementioned quotation demonstrates the critical role slaves had in agriculture and foreign commerce during the antebellum period¹ and, specifically, to the

¹ A sharecropper can be described as a tenant farmer who gives a part of each crop as rent.
² The antebellum period refers an era of economic growth in the South attributed to slave-supported plantation farming.
Southern economy. One can posit slavery’s popularity in Missouri can be attributed to the central function it played in the economy.

Upon his return to the Carver farm, George, now an orphan, was raised by Moses and his wife, Susan. He learned to read and write as he was allegedly taught at home by Susan which permitted George thereafter to attend the Neosho school for African Americans (State Historical Society of Missouri, 2018). Additionally, during his stay on the Carver farm, George developed a profound intellectual curiosity in nature which, presumably, contributed to forming his beliefs within the landscape of education that endured throughout his life. One can posit Carver’s curiosity in nature led to the publication of “Progressive Nature Studies” in 1897, as a guide for teachers of nature studies (Harbster, 2015).

Between circa ten and twelve years of age Carver attended the Neosho Colored School in Neosho, Missouri which represented his first exposure to a formal classroom setting and as part of an African American community (Johnson, 2012). Thereafter, Carver attended Simpson College, Indianola, Iowa from 1890 to 1891 studying art and piano (Simpson College, 2018). However, it was early 1890s that Carver attended the Iowa State Agricultural College in Ames, where he studied Botany and received a bachelor’s degree in agricultural science in 1894 and a Master of Science degree in 1896 (Simpson College, 2018). According to Biography.com (2018), Carver’s graduate studies encompassed intensive work in plant pathology at the Iowa Experiment Station which contributed to him earning a reputation as a noted botanist. Upon completion of his graduate degree, Carver accepted a position as a teacher at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where Booker T. Washington served as its principal. The Tuskegee Institute provided students with both academic and vocational training, permitting graduates to disseminate their knowledge throughout their rural black communities in the South (Library of Congress, n.d.)

Carver taught and conducted agricultural research at the Institute until his death. A central theme of Carver’s research focused on the development of new innovative uses for crops. For example, Carver is cited as one of the founders of the chemurgy movement and forerunner of bioeconomy. The chemurgy movement refers to a field of applied chemistry whereby agricultural products are utilized to produce industrial products (Finlay, 2008). Moreover, asserts Finlay (2008), the experiments conducted by Carver are also considered bioprocesses, as many experiments were derived from raw materials (e.g. plants) and contributed to reducing energy use. Notwithstanding the aforementioned extraordinary achievements, Carver devoted substantive effort to impart knowledge to his students on the benefits of sustainable farming such as rotating crops which contributed to conserving soil. Additionally, Carver taught his students how decomposing organic matter can be recycled as compost to improve soil quality.

Another example of how Carver influenced the development of agricultural education can be attributed to his research and experimentation which led to new crops replacing the dominant

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3 Chemergy can be described as a branch of applied chemistry that yields agricultural products from agricultural raw materials.

4 Bioeconomy refers to the use of fermentation and bio-catalysis, as opposed to traditional synthesis for the development of bio-based products. This process contributes to reducing energy and water and GHG.
crop cotton. For example, the boll weevil, a beetle which feeds on cotton buds and flowers nearly destroyed the Southern economy. Concisely, as a result of the emergence of the agricultural pest (boll weevil), cotton yields declined substantially, which threatened the livelihoods of numerous farmers. Carver advocated the transformation from the single dominant cash crop cotton to diversified crops such as peanuts and sweet potatoes in Alabama and other Southern States (Merritt, 1929; Lange, Olmstead & Rhode, 2009). Carver stressed the importance of planting peanuts to upgrade the quality of the soil, which had been depleted from decades of planting cotton. Furthermore, the cultivation of peanut plants contributed to improving the depressed Southern economy while the nutritional components (e.g. protein) contained in peanuts led to improving the overall health of farmers. (Penn State, 2018).

To encourage farmers to adopt the new sustainable practices, Carver and his students developed an abundance of industrial uses for both peanuts and sweet potatoes. For example, a few inventions using peanut by-products include: soaps, massage oil, lotions, creams, shampoo, glycerin, dyes and wood stains (boiled-peanut-world, n.d). Additionally, a partial list of by-products from the sweet potato include: flour, meal, starch, molasses, dyes, breakfast food, synthetic rubber and candies (Merritt, 1929). Furthermore, Carver developed a mobile classroom, allowing him to provide lessons to farmers at their locations (Biography.com, 2018). The Carver classroom became known as the “Jesup wagon” after the Tuskegee donor Morris Ketchum Jesup (Biography.com, 2018).

During the later years of his life he became an honorary fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in London, England (Sanders and Hwang, 2014; Biography.com, 2018). Also, Carver provided advise to world leaders, for example “in the late twenties (1929), began a correspondence between George Washington Carver in Tuskegee, Alabama and Mahatma Gandhi (“my beloved friend, Gandhi” as Carver called him) on the kind of food that he, Gandhi, should include in his diet that would provide him with the nutrients essential to build his physical endurance as he embarked on his strenuous struggle for India’s freedom” (Rao, 2013, p. 1).

**Conclusion**

Carver was born enslaved and suffered the loss of both parents at a very early age. Notwithstanding a tempestuous youth, Carver succeeded in obtaining a bachelor’s degree and a Master of Science degree. Thereafter, he became a professor of agricultural pedagogy at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Among his notable achievements, he is cited as a founder of the chemurgy movement and forerunner of bioeconomy. Additionally, through his experiments, students and mobile classroom, Carver contributed to influencing farmers in Alabama and the South to transition from a monocrop, cotton, in favor of crop diversity. This transition or initiative contributed to improved earnings with the emergence of new alternative cash crops such as peanuts and sweet potatoes. Moreover, Carver is credited with numerous innovations utilizing by-products of peanuts, sweet potatoes and other products. Carver devoted his life to serving humanity, drawing no distinction between individuals based on their race. Arguably, the focus of Carver’s work was to improve the conditions of the poorest black sharecroppers which, in turn, improved the quality of life for residents throughout the South.


Literature Consulted


