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**Slave, Scholar, Scientist: Explore the History and Legacy  
of George Washington Carver in New Exhibit at Henry Ford Museum**

*Discover the Life and Work of This Extraordinary American,  
November 6, 2010 through February 27, 2011 at Henry Ford Museum*

**The Life of George Washington Carver**

Carver's life, a journey from slavery to science, from obscurity to legend, was a series of challenges – physical, financial, social, and racial.

Born into slavery, kidnapped and later orphaned when he was still just a baby, young George was rescued by his owners, Moses and Susan Carver, who raised him and his brother. Moses was a farmer in a Missouri frontier town, a frugal man who abhorred waste of any kind. George was a sickly child, unable to help much on the farm, so Susan taught him handiwork such as embroidery, knitting and crocheting. George also spent a lot of his time outside, collecting rocks, observing nature and creating a “secret garden.” His sensitivity and curiosity were apparent, and even as a child he was known throughout the area for his remarkable skill with plants.

“I wanted to know the name of every stone and flower and insect and bird and beast. I wanted to know where it got its color, where it got its life – but there was no one to tell me,” Carver later wrote. His foster parents had no formal education, and there were no schools close to their home – only a Blue-back speller in which George found few answers to his endless questions.

So at the age of 13, with the Carvers' blessings, George left home in search of the education he could not get as a black child in that frontier town. Through rejection and welcome in different towns, he worked his way through elementary and high school, eventually coming to Simpson College in Iowa.

At Simpson College, Carver was the only black student on campus. There he pursued his first passion, painting, and took music classes as well. Carver loved his studies, but what he wanted most of all was to enter a field where he could succeed as a black man and do the greatest good for others. To pursue that dream, he transferred after one year at Simpson to Iowa State College at Ames, where he studied science and agriculture and eventually became the first black member of its faculty.

Given his drive and education, Carver could have become a theoretical chemist, an academic botanist or an inventor. But that wasn't his bent. Carver held a strong belief that God had called him to do important things – not for academic science, but for people. He had decided early on that his calling was to help “the man farthest down.” So when Booker T. Washington offered him a position at the all-black Tuskegee Institute, Carver willingly left behind the substantial resources of Iowa State.

On the way to Alabama, Carver had seen the endless fields of scraggly cotton that for decades had been sucking the life out of Southern soil. He had what he called a “mighty vision” – of barren fields turning green with crops, whitewashed farmhouses gleaming in the sun, gardens sprouting with vegetables and flowers. He knew that measures such as crop rotation were key to the economic survival of Southern farmers, and he knew that legumes, such as peanuts and peas, had a symbiotic relationship with bacteria that could take inert nitrogen molecules from the atmosphere and convert them into a form plants can use.

It was the desire to make these alternative crops more useful to farmers and others that led to Carver's famous work with peanuts, cow peas (black-eyed peas) and sweet potatoes – which, though not a legume, grow easily with little or no fertilizer. He sought many other practical solutions as well, experimenting with seeds, soil enrichment, natural fertilizers and more.

Carver had great respect for nature. He believed it could give people everything they need – a belief that led him to a practice we tend to think of as very modern: organic gardening. Carver knew that alternative crops such as peanuts, sweet potatoes and soy beans could save the soil. But could they also save the people? Southern farmers typically thought of these plants as animal feed; few believed they could bring much income, much less revitalize Southern economy.

Carver found hundreds of new uses – from buttermilk to bleach, automobile fuel to glue, shoe polish to shaving cream – created from these three simple plants. Though he took out a few patents, his interest was not in money but in public good. His passionate testimony on the potential of peanuts moved Congress to pass a tariff protecting American peanut farmers.

In every aspect of his research, Carver sought to make his findings accessible to the communities around him. His simply-written “bulletins,” on subjects ranging from composting to home beautification to canning, were geared to people with little money and no formal education, and he took the Jesup wagon to farms and public spaces, demonstrating farming and composting techniques, cooking, canning and even home makeovers with paints, furniture and decorative items made from plants and minerals.

By the 1930s, others were picking up on Carver's ideas – particularly the use of agricultural materials to make industrial products. This came to be called the Chemurgy Movement, and Carver was seen as its father.

Henry Ford also had a strong interest in soybeans, experimenting with making plastics and foods, and the two developed a deep friendship through their mutual interest in chemurgy. Ford invited Carver to several Dearborn chemurgical conferences and visited him in Tuskegee, later installing an elevator in the Tuskegee Institute building where Carver lived so that the increasingly frail scientist could reach his laboratory. The two met several other times in the late '30s and early '40s, corresponding in the times between on the possibilities of producing plastics, biofuel and other industrial products from plants.

In 1942, Henry Ford built a log cabin in Greenfield Village – loosely based on Carver's recollections of the Missouri cabin in which he was born – to honor Carver. Ford also paneled it with wood donated by the governors of each of the then 48 states. The 77-year-old Carver attended the cabin's dedication that summer, just six months before his death.

Learn more about this extraordinary figure in American history in The Henry Ford's newest exhibit, *George Washington Carver*, on display November 6, 2010 through February 27, 2011 at Henry Ford Museum. Organized by The Field Museum in collaboration with Tuskegee University and the National Park Service, more than 100 artifacts bring to life his remarkable achievements as a scientist, conservationist, educator and humanitarian.

Henry Ford Museum is open seven days a week, 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$15 for adults, \$14 for seniors and \$11 for youth; members and children under five are free. For more information please call (313) 982-6001 or visit [thehenryford.org](http://thehenryford.org).

**The Henry Ford**, in Dearborn, Michigan, is the world's premiere history destination and a National Historic Landmark that celebrates American history and innovation. Its mission is to provide unique

educational experiences based on authentic objects, stories and lives from America's traditions of ingenuity, resourcefulness and innovation. Its purpose is to inspire people to learn from these traditions to help shape a better future. Five distinct attractions at The Henry Ford captivate more than 1.6 million visitors annually: Henry Ford Museum, Greenfield Village, The Ford Rouge Factory Tour, The Benson Ford Research Center and The Henry Ford IMAX Theatre. The Henry Ford is also home to Henry Ford Academy, a public charter high school which educates 485 students a year on the institution's campus and was founded in partnership with The Henry Ford, Ford Motor Company and Wayne County Public Schools. For more information please visit our website [thehenryford.org](http://thehenryford.org).

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The *George Washington Carver* exhibit is organized by The Field Museum in collaboration with Tuskegee University and the National Park Service, and is supported at Henry Ford Museum by Ford Motor Company Fund. Entry to this limited-engagement exhibit is free with Henry Ford Museum admission or membership.