

GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER

C. 1864 - 1943
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BIG HISTORY PROJECT

COTTON TRANSFORMED THE SOUTH AND ACCELERATED INDUSTRIALIZATION AROUND THE WORLD AS FERTILE SOIL AND ENSLAVED LABOR LED TO HUGE PROFITS FOR SOME. YET, AFTER DECADES OF OVERPRODUCTION, "KING COTTON" CREATED MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS, DEVASTATING SOIL AND TRAPPING FARMERS IN A CYCLE OF POVERTY.



GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER WAS BORN INTO SLAVERY IN RURAL MISSOURI AT THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR. THOUGH HE FACED RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, CARVER ENROLLED AS THE FIRST BLACK STUDENT AND, LATER, BECAME THE FIRST BLACK FACULTY MEMBER AT IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY.

When my train left the golden wheat fields of Iowa for the acres of cotton, nothing but cotton, my heart sank a little... EVERYTHING LOOKED HUNGRY: the land, the cotton, the cattle, and the people."

IN 1896, HE MOVED TO ALABAMA TO TEACH AT THE TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE. AS AN AGRICULTURAL SCIENTIST, CARVER'S AMBITION WAS TO HELP POOR BLACK FARMERS IN THE SOUTH BECOME MORE ECONOMICALLY STABLE.

MOST BLACK FARMERS IN THE SOUTH WORKED AS TENANT FARMERS ON LAND OWNED BY WHITE LANDLORDS. BUT THE COTTON THEY GREW EACH YEAR FOR MONEY DEVASTATED THE SOIL QUALITY. MANY FARMERS ENDED UP OWING MONEY TO THEIR LANDLORDS AS THEIR FARMS PRODUCED LESS AND LESS.

"This exhaustive system for cultivation... [has] made our agricultural problem one requiring more brains than of the North, East or West."



"The soil has no life left for growing"

CARVER WANTED TO BREAK THIS CYCLE. HE TAUGHT FARMERS TO ROTATE COTTON WITH CROPS LIKE SWEET POTATOES, SOYBEANS, AND PEANUTS, WHICH ADDED NUTRIENTS BACK TO THE SOIL. HE ENCOURAGED USING NATURAL FERTILIZERS LIKE SWAMP MUCK AND COMPOST, WHICH ARE MORE SUSTAINABLE AND LESS EXPENSIVE.



"My work is that of keeping every operation down so that the farmer and the man farthest down can get a hold of it."

HIS IDEAS WERE NOT JUST GOOD FOR THE LAND, BUT GOOD FOR THE FARMER AS WELL, AS THEY HELPED THEM SPEND LESS MONEY TO GROW MORE FOOD.



CARVER'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS A SCIENTIST ARE MATCHED BY HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM, EDUCATING THE PEOPLE AND REGIONS OFTEN LEFT BEHIND IN AN ACCELERATING WORLD.