

George Washington Carver

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CHAPTER 4

Time for a Change

Simpson College gave George a warm welcome. And they charged him a \$12 fee. This left him with exactly 10 cents! Was he worried? Not George! He looked around and found an old empty shack. Just what he needed to set up a laundry business! All of the washing and ironing he had done through the years was now a great help. He began by washing his classmates' clothes. He soon had enough customers to eat three meals a day and to buy school books.

Now, what to study? George chose art. His teachers at Simpson felt he could be a fine artist. But George was not sure. Yes, he loved to draw and paint. But to spend a whole life drawing pretty pictures? He felt he had more to give to the world than that.

What about growing things? George knew that after the Civil War farmers in the South were in deep trouble. Once huge cotton crops had made them rich. Now cotton plants were brown and scrawny. What was wrong? There had to be a reason. George thought he might be helpful. But he felt he needed to know a lot more.

Then he heard about the Iowa State College of Agriculture. Agriculture! A big word that

covered a lot. Everything to do with things that grew was taught there. George got himself into Iowa State just as fast as he could. Once there he took class after class. He learned about plant diseases. He learned how to “cross” one plant with another. He learned about worn-out soil. There was so much to learn. And he vowed to learn it all.

George graduated from Iowa State in 1894. His teachers there asked him to stay on. They needed someone to be head of the college greenhouses. It was the chance of a lifetime. George grabbed it. It meant he could keep on with his studies. It also felt good to stay with the many friends he had made.

It was about this time that George found a way to share his ideas. He spent his free hours writing pamphlets. In these he told farmers how to make their crops better. The little baby who had been thrown into a ditch was becoming well-known all over the country. Agriculture had found a new leader.

George most likely would have been happy to stay at Iowa State for the rest of his life. But then one day a letter came for him. It was from a man named Booker T. Washington. George knew that name. Years before, Booker T. Washington had started a school in Tuskegee, Alabama. It had only one goal. That was to teach free black people the skills they needed to earn a living.

Washington and his school were now quite famous.

His letter read:

I cannot offer you money or fame. I offer you in their place work – hard, hard work – the task of bringing people from poverty and waste to full manhood.

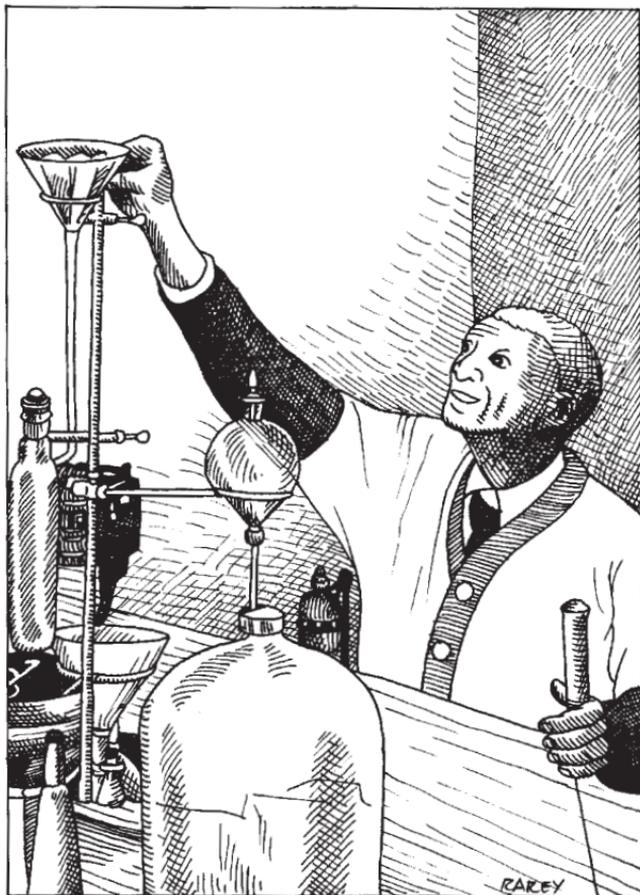
It did not take George long to make up his mind. Tuskegee was where he had to be!

CHAPTER 5

A New Post

George left for Tuskegee with high hopes. He had heard so much about Booker T. Washington. Surely Tuskegee would offer a chance to try out new ideas. His hopes sank as soon as he got there! He had thought there would be a lab with lots of supplies. He was shown an empty room. He had thought there would be a dairy. Instead he found just one cow. He had thought there would be a greenhouse. Wrong again!

What did he find? A few bare buildings.



Then he started to test the Alabama soil.

Hard-packed soil with nothing growing on it. Poor families with hungry children. Fields of dry, dusty cotton plants. It was clear that George had a lot of work to do.

Where to begin? First, he had to do something about a lab. The school had no money. George rounded up some students. “Let’s see what we can find,” he said.

People stared when they saw George and his students searching rubbish heaps for jars and bottles. They also found old pots and pans and bits of rubber. Somehow George was able to turn this junk into useful lab items. Then he started to test the Alabama soil. And it wasn’t long before he got results.

The problem with the cotton crops was very simple. This is how George explained it to the poor farmers, both black and white: Cotton plants drain all the rich minerals out of the soil. After a few years the fields are useless for cotton. But farmers have kept on planting cotton because they didn't know what else to grow.

A lot of forests were burned by men seeking new land. But these new lands would last for only a few plantings of cotton. Then they, too, were no good.

What was the answer? George thought he had it: Make the soil rich again. But how does one do that? By planting crops that can put the minerals back in the soil.

George's first crop was 20 acres of cowpeas. His students thought their new teacher was slightly mad. No one ate cowpeas. They were fed to hogs.

“Just wait,” said George with a smile. When the cowpeas were ripe, he picked them and turned them into a tasty meal.

“Now we will plant sweet potatoes in the same field,” said George. This time his students said not a word. The sweet potato crop grew and grew.

“Now I will tell you what we have been doing,” George told his students. “First we planted cowpeas. Then we planted sweet potatoes. Those two crops put the rich minerals

back in the soil that cotton had used up. Now we can plant cotton again. This is called ‘crop rotation.’ All you are doing is giving your soil a rest.”

People came from miles around to see George’s cotton crop. No one had seen fluffy white cotton bolls like that for years. They looked at one another with new hope in their eyes.

They came for another reason, too. George had not forgot Mariah’s skills with plants and herbs. He brewed teas from local plants and herbs. His brews seemed to ease people’s pain and to heal their sores. Some people thought they had more pep after drinking his tea. These days we think that George’s plants and herbs were full

of vitamins. That may be why people felt so much better after they took them. At that time vitamins were unheard of – even by George. All he knew was that after using the herbs, people didn't hurt anymore. So he kept on gathering plants and drying them and giving them to his neighbors.