

George Washington Carver

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b'

By 1864, the American Civil War was almost over. This war was fought because states disagreed over how the government should work. Near the end of the Civil War, slavery became an important issue as well. Slavery is the practice of owning another person. Enslavers do not pay enslaved people for their work. Enslaved people first arrived in the United States after being captured from their homes in African countries. The children of enslaved people became enslaved, too. By the 1860s, states that made money from farming wanted to continue using enslaved people to work on their farms. In other states, people believed that the practice of owning another person was unfair and that the president should end it for the entire nation. George Washington Carver was born just before the end of the Civil War. He was born on a farm in Missouri, and his parents were enslaved. The farm belonged to Moses and Susan Carver.

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2. b'

When George was very young, his mother was kidnapped by raiders from the Confederate Army. After that, Moses and Susan Carver raised George and his brother James. The boys learned to read. Because George was often sick as a child, he did not work in the fields like James did. Instead, he helped Susan in the garden. This was when George first became interested in plants. Even though the Civil War had ended and enslaved people were freed, life was still very hard for Black Americans in the United States. George wanted to attend school, but the school nearby was for White students only. He moved several times in search of a good education. He applied and was accepted to a school in Kansas. However, he was not allowed to attend after they found out he was Black American.

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3. b'

For a time, George Washington Carver attended Simpson College where he studied painting. However, his love of farming and knowledge about agriculture led him to apply to another school. He was accepted at Iowa State College of Agricultural and Mechanic Arts. This school is now called Iowa State University. At Iowa State, Carver was the only Black American student on campus. He became the first Black American student to graduate from this college. Later, he taught there and was the first Black American faculty member at Iowa State as well.

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4. b'

In 1896, Booker T. Washington invited Carver to teach at his school, the Tuskegee Institute. Booker T. Washington was a famous Black educator. The Tuskegee Institute was a private school for Black students in Alabama. It was founded to give educational opportunities to Black American students. After struggling to find a good education as a Black student himself, Carver now was able to teach Black scholars at Tuskegee. In Alabama, Carver saw that many Black farmers were very poor. He saw that cotton, which had been the main crop grown on farms for years, had harmed the soil. Carver committed his time and work to helping these struggling farms and farmers.

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5. b''

In Alabama, Carver saw that cotton had taken nutrients out of the soil. Nutrients are substances needed for growth. Carver knew that other plants put those same nutrients back into the soil. Sweet potatoes and peanuts are two of these plants. Carver encouraged farmers to rotate their crops, switching between cotton and sweet potatoes and peanuts. That would leave the soil healthy and improve the farmers' harvests. To teach farmers his methods, Carver used a movable school. He brought this school out into the fields and was able to teach the farmers where they worked.

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Carver believed that cotton was behind many Southern farmers' poverty. Poverty is the state of being very poor. Carver's crop rotation helped farmers escape that poverty. The farmers found that their soil became healthier. They also found that they had a lot of peanuts and sweet potatoes on their hands! Carver came up with many ways farmers could use those crops. He invented 300 uses for peanuts and hundreds of others for sweet potatoes. He came up with cooking oil, a type of peanut butter, soaps, paper, and glue from peanuts. Some of his inventions from sweet potatoes were chocolate, 14 types of candy, coffee, paints, and ink. Thanks to Carver, farmers didn't have to buy these expensive products.

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7. b''

We can learn many important lessons from George Washington Carver. He knew the importance of education. After struggling for his own education, he dedicated his life to teaching others in the classroom and on the farms. In a letter to Booker T. Washington, Carver described his view of education. It is, he wrote, the key to unlock the golden door of freedom. Carver's life also shows the value of being curious and seeing wonders in the natural world. From a very young age, he was fascinated with plants and learned all that he could about them. In addition to being curious, Carver was a well-rounded learner. He was a student of art before he pursued agriculture, and he continued to paint as an adult.

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