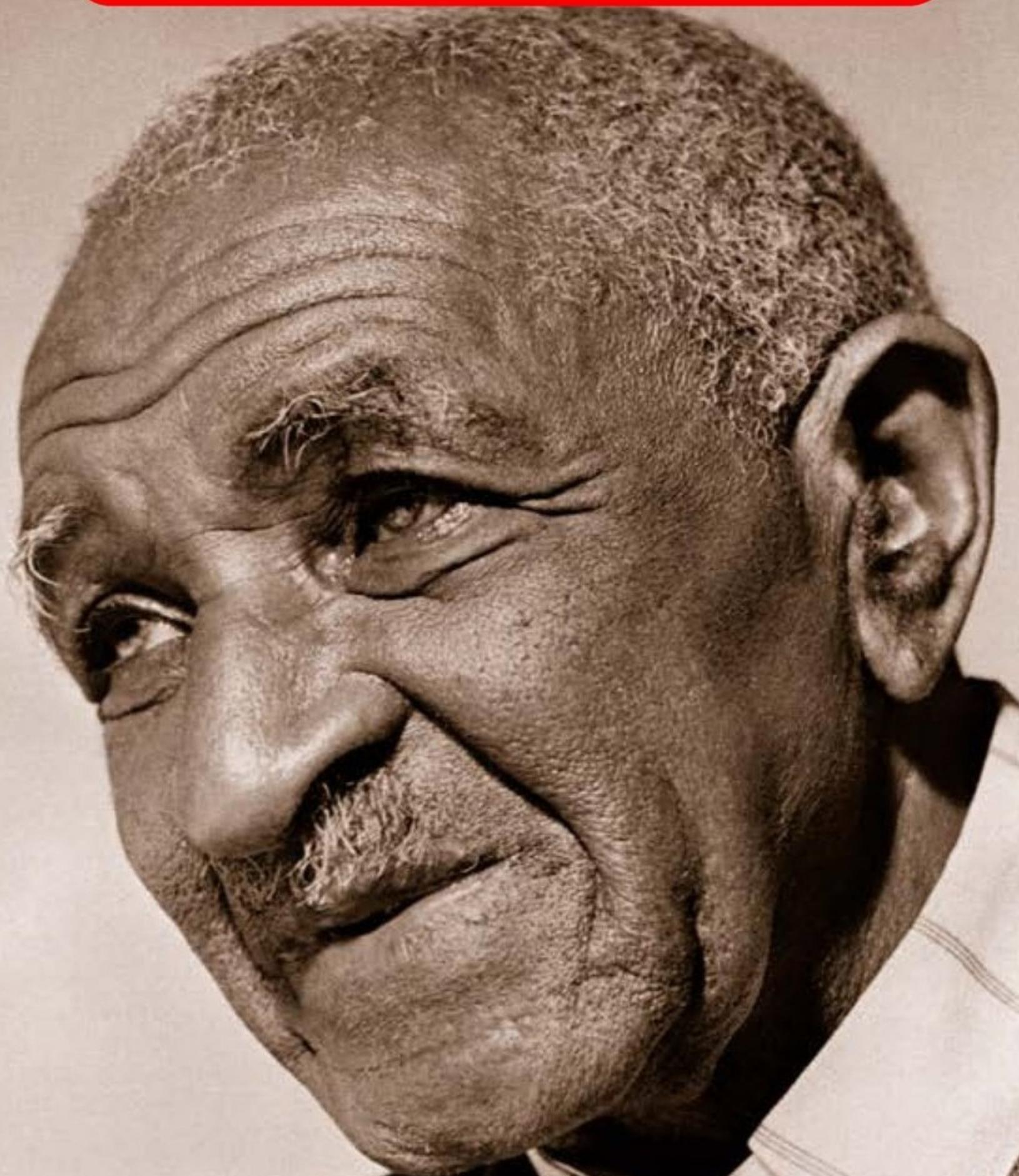


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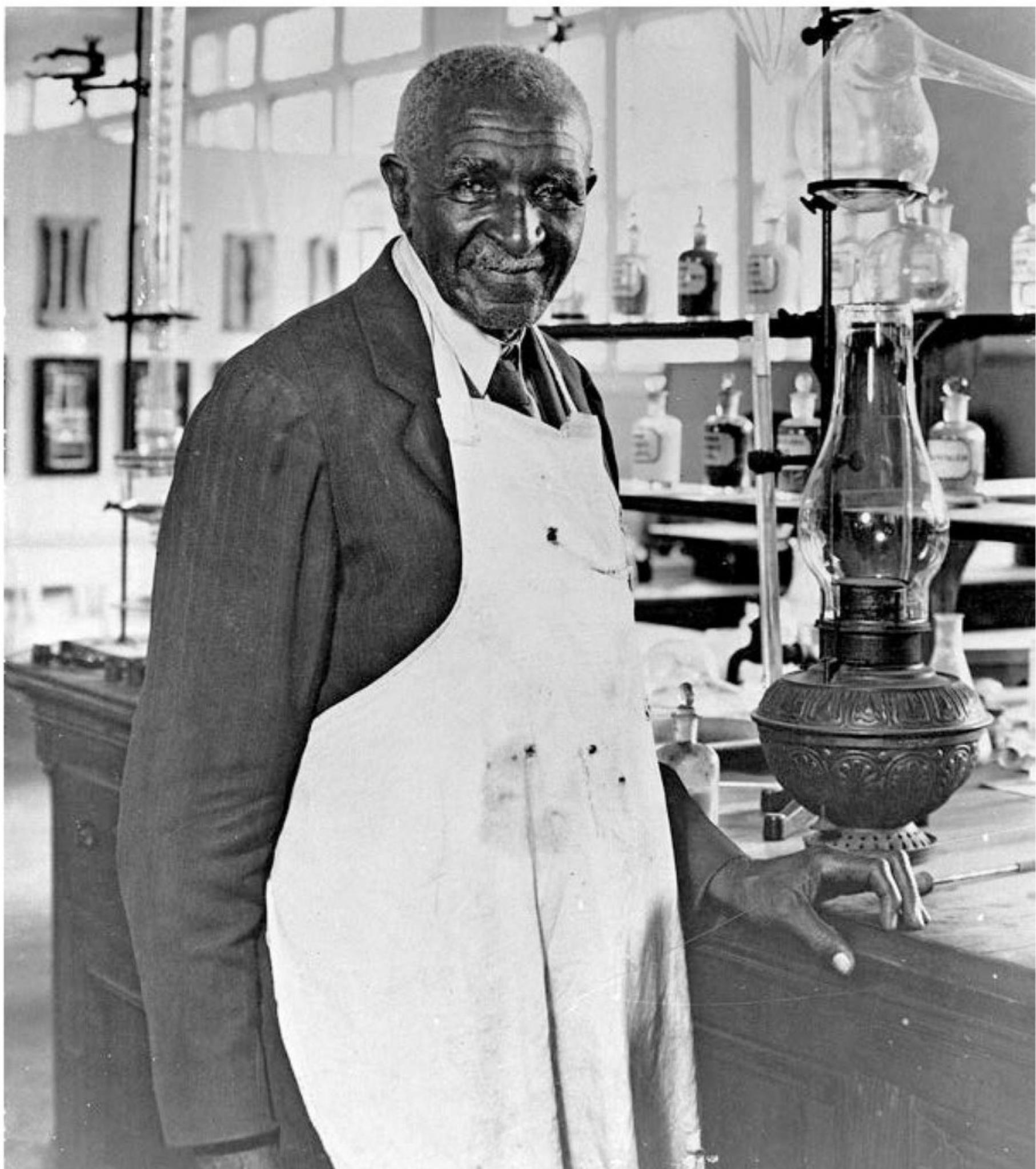


George Washington Carver

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Written by Cynthia Kennedy Henzel

George Washington Carver

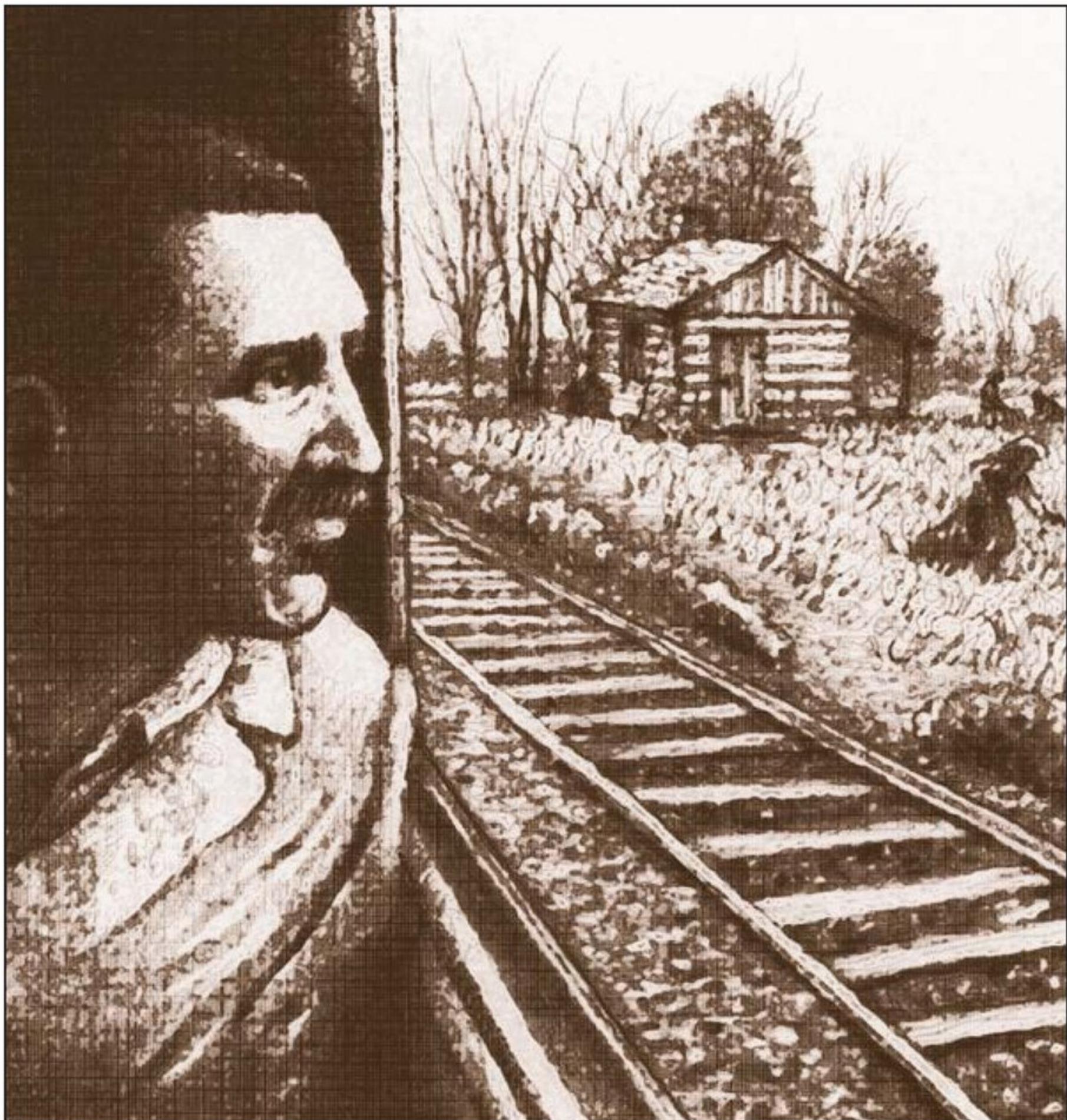


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Table of Contents

A Ruined Land	4
Born a Slave	6
Learning on His Own.....	8
Making a Difference	11
Ideas Are Free	15
Unfair to Farmers	16
A Lasting Legacy.....	18
Glossary	20



In Alabama, George Washington Carver saw cotton—and little else—growing everywhere.

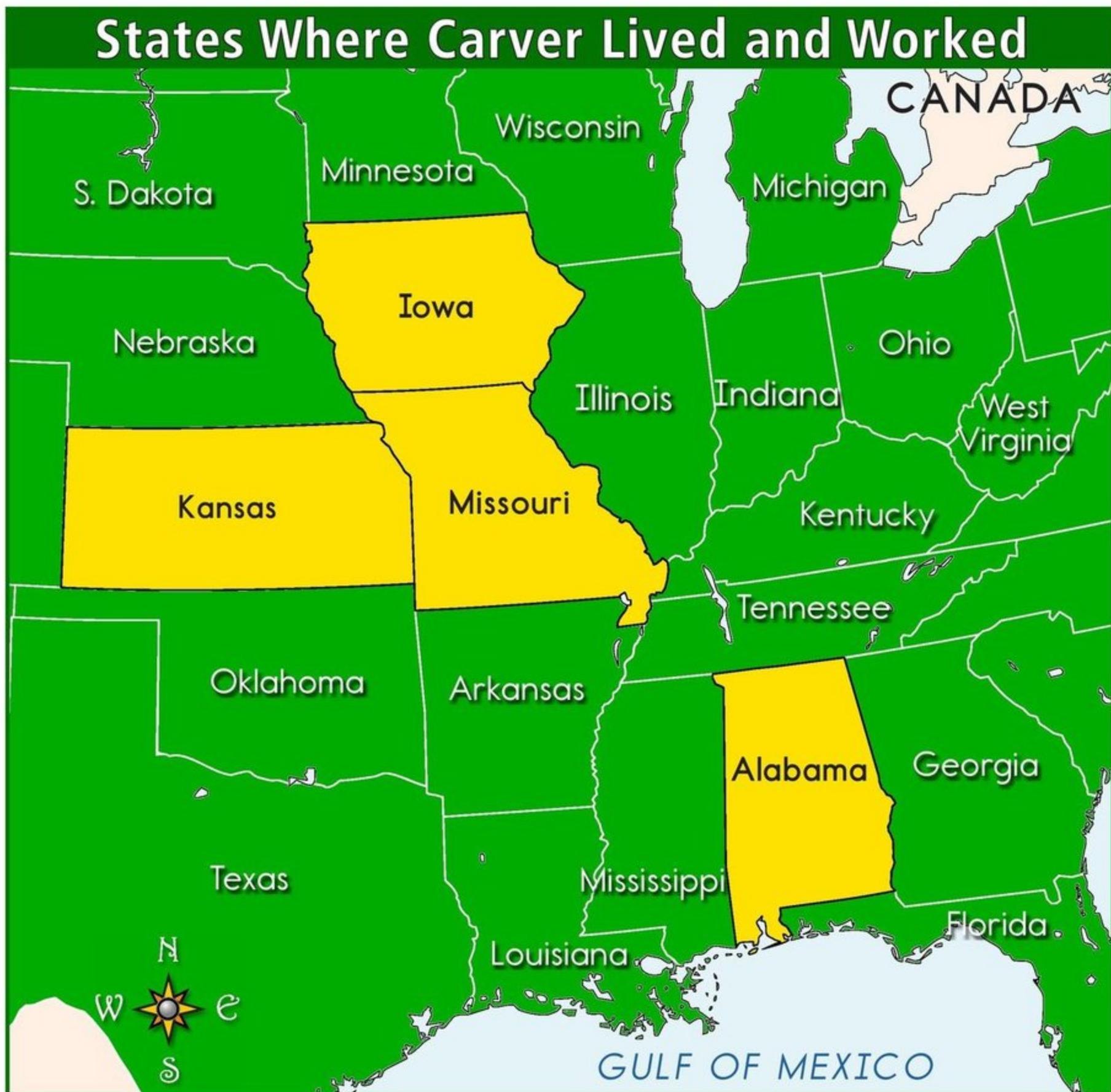
A Ruined Land

George Washington Carver was shocked by what he saw from the window of the train. It was 1896, and families lived in crumbling shacks with cotton planted all the way up to the porch. The Alabama farmland was eroded and cracked. The cotton plants were as skinny and unhealthy as the children.

During the **Civil War** (1861–1865), many of the old plantations of the South had been destroyed. More than 600,000 people had died during the fighting, leaving farms abandoned or not cared for. More than four million slaves had been freed, but most had no education and few skills to make a life for themselves. Thirty years after the war, many of the freed slaves could barely feed their families.

Professor Carver had given up a good job teaching at an Iowa college to come to Alabama to help the struggling farmers. He would help them by teaching that too much of a good thing can become a bad thing. What was ruining their farms was too much cotton.





Carver grew up in Missouri, studied in Kansas and Iowa, and worked in Alabama.

Born a Slave

George was born in Missouri in 1864, during the Civil War. His mother was a slave, so George was born a slave, too. When George was a baby, night riders stole him and his mother. Moses and Susan Carver, the couple who owned them, sent a man to find them. He found George, but his mother was never seen again.

Terror in the Night

During and after the days of slavery, groups of men roamed the countryside terrifying, robbing, and murdering people. These men wanted black people to remain slaves. They hoped to scare or punish black people who tried to escape or improve their lives. The men dressed in sheets to look like ghosts. Because they attacked at night, they were known as *night riders*.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, George and his older brother, Jim, were freed. The Carvers gave the orphaned boys a home. Jim helped Moses in the fields, but George was often sick and stayed at home to help Susan. She taught him to read, write, and sew, but George liked best to garden and explore nature.



Moses Carver



The Carver home in Diamond, Missouri

Learning on His Own

George taught himself about the local plants and animals, but he wanted to go to school to learn even more. Many schools at that time were **segregated**, which meant that white and black students could not attend the same school. The local school did not allow black students, so when George was twelve, he left home to go to school. He lived with another couple, the Watkins, and worked for his meals and room. At thirteen, he moved to Kansas.



A segregated school in Kentucky, 1916

George's Name

George's mother gave him his first name, and he was known as Carver's George. When he moved at age 12, Mariah Watkins, the woman he lived with, told him he was no one's property: He should say his name was George Carver. Later, because there was another George Carver in town, he added the initial W to avoid mix-ups. When someone asked what the W stood for years later, he said "Washington." So, forever after, he was called George Washington Carver.

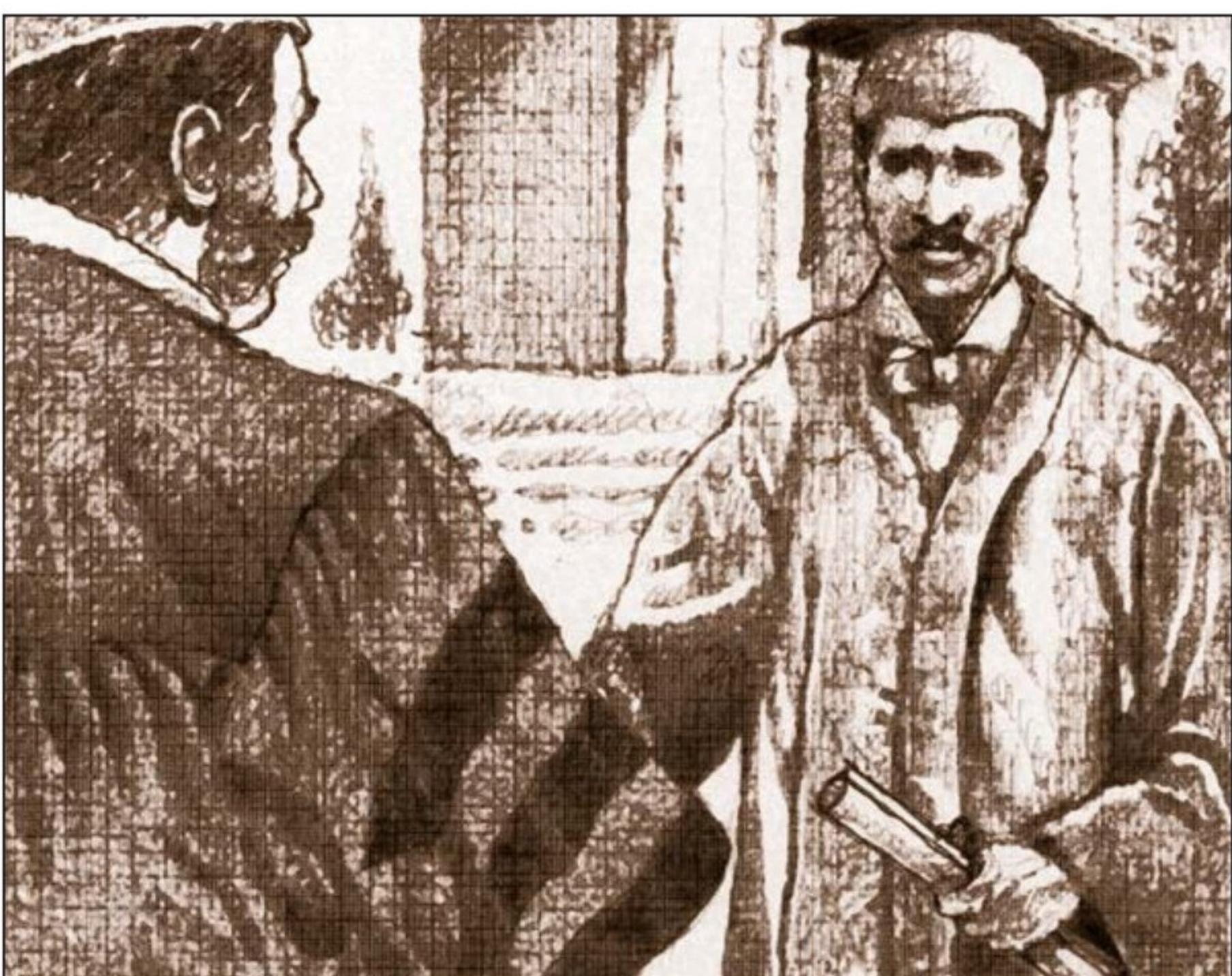


George could not attend college in Kansas because of his skin color.

George worked for several families in Kansas until he graduated from high school. He received a scholarship to attend a Kansas college. Yet when George got to the college, he was not allowed to stay because the college did not accept black students.

George was unhappy, but he did not give up learning. He farmed and taught himself to paint. His friends encouraged him to try a different college. He went to Simpson College in Iowa to study art, and this time, the college let him stay.

George was happy at Simpson College, but he believed that he could help others more by studying **agriculture**, the science of farming. He moved to Iowa State Agricultural College and became the first black graduate there as well as the first black professor.



George received his diploma from Iowa State Agricultural College.

Making a Difference

In 1896, when Professor Carver arrived in Alabama, he quickly realized what was wrong with the cotton crop. Years of growing only cotton had worn out the soil. The farmers barely made enough money to buy food, so there was no money to buy **fertilizer**. Each year the crop was smaller, and the farmers were poorer.



Children helped pick cotton on a Mississippi plantation in the late 1800s.



Carver held a chunk of soil from a worn-out field.

Professor Carver taught the farmers that dead leaves and swamp muck could be added to the soil—like fertilizer, but free. Planting sweet potatoes, peas, or peanuts in the fields after the cotton was picked also helped the soil. These crops put nitrogen, an important **nutrient** that the cotton crop used up, back in the soil.

What's more, these new crops were foods that farmers could eat. Carver sent out information about how to grow them and included recipes for tasty, new dishes. Now farmers could spend less money buying food from stores.



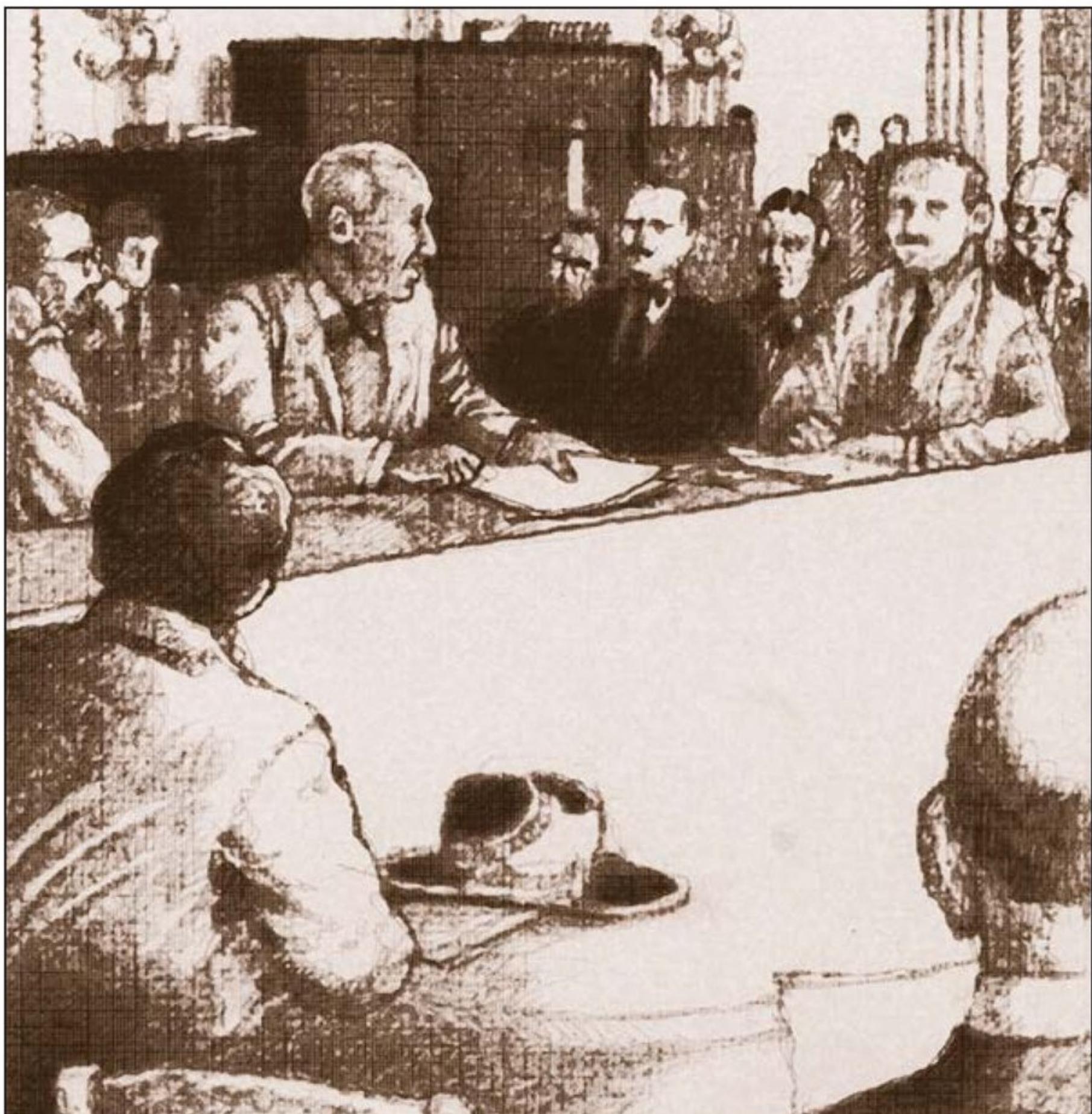
Carver put Southern crops to work in his laboratory.

Still, farmers needed a way to sell these new crops. So Professor Carver became an **inventor**. He developed more than a hundred ways to use sweet potatoes and three hundred ways to use peanuts!

The Truth About Peanut Butter

Carver invented up to 300 uses for the peanut: pavement, grease, medicines, peanut coffee, peanut mayonnaise, peanut flour, peanut milk, shoe polish, bleach, sandpaper, and more. Contrary to popular belief, however, he did not create peanut butter. The Aztecs are known to have eaten a paste made from peanuts. Peter Pan and then Skippy were the first companies to make the creamy, tasty goo we eat today.





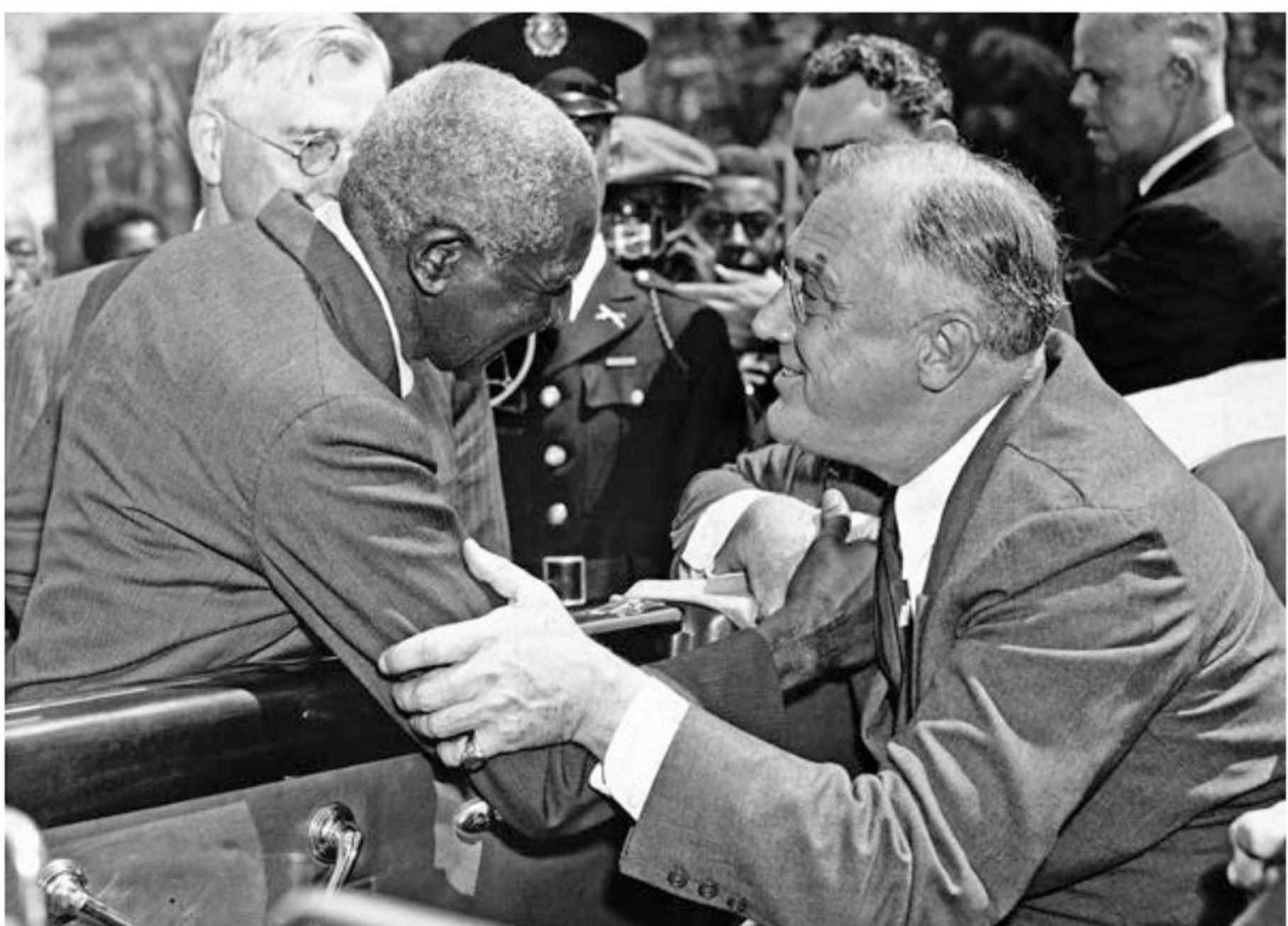
Carver spoke to members of Congress about peanuts.

Ideas Are Free

By 1921, people were listening to Carver's ideas. He was asked to speak before members of the U.S. **Congress**. Some of the members from the South, who were shocked to see a black man speaking to Congress, laughed and made fun of him. Still, he had been given ten minutes to talk, and he made the most of them.

Carver began to talk about all the things that could be made with the tiny peanut. The men fell silent. When his ten minutes were up, they gave him more time. In the end, Congress passed a law to help U.S. peanut farmers.

Over the years, Carver became as famous as many rock stars are today. Crowds gathered to hear the famed scientist speak. The inventor Thomas Edison offered him a high-paying job in his lab, but Carver didn't want it. He wanted to help people more than he wanted to make money. He believed that ideas were free, so they should be freely given.



Carver greeted President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, around 1936.



An Alabama sharecropper family, 1902

Unfair to Farmers

Carver spent forty-seven years helping poor farmers. There was a limit, though, to what one man and his science could do. He could not change the unfair conditions that kept many farmers in the South poor.

Many were **sharecroppers** who could not afford to buy land. Sharecroppers grew cotton on someone else's land. Many of those who owned land in the South cheated their tenants by lending them money to buy supplies at high interest rates. The farmer's share of the crop went to pay the landowner, so the farmer was left with nothing.

Other farmers rented land. If a farmer worked hard to improve the land, the landowner could raise the rent. The farmer had to pay more or move.

Math Minute

Interest is the amount of money people are charged when they borrow money from other people or banks. If someone borrows \$100 at an interest rate of 25% per year, that person will owe \$125 after one year.

If you borrowed \$200 with a 10% interest rate, how much interest would you owe after one year?



A Lasting Legacy

Other scientists during Carver's time invented ways to use oil to make fuel, fertilizers, and plastics. Carver realized that oil was a resource that would someday be used up. He experimented with fuel made from plants. He encouraged farmers to use natural fertilizers instead of expensive, unsafe chemicals that polluted the land and water. He taught recycling, telling his students, "Save everything. From what you have make what you want."



Carver knew natural compost would feed the soil, as in this community garden.



Not long before he died, Carver donated \$33,000 to the Tuskegee Institute to carry on the agricultural work he began. (That would be about \$450,000 today!)

George Washington Carver believed that people should treat each other with respect. He won the respect of a nation at a time when few black people got much respect at all.

Carver also believed that people should respect and care for the Earth. If they did, nature would provide the things they needed. Many years later, we are discovering that he was right.

Glossary

agriculture (<i>n.</i>)	the science of farming and raising livestock (p. 10)
Civil War (<i>n.</i>)	the war between the northern and southern states of the United States of America (1861–1865) (p. 5)
Congress (<i>n.</i>)	the highest lawmaking body of the U.S. government, which includes the Senate and the House of Representatives (p. 14)
fertilizer (<i>n.</i>)	a natural or chemical substance that promotes plant growth (p. 11)
inventor (<i>n.</i>)	a person who creates, designs, or builds something that did not exist before (p. 13)
nutrient (<i>n.</i>)	a substance that living things need to live, stay healthy, and grow (p. 12)
professor (<i>n.</i>)	a college or university teacher who teaches in a specialized field (p. 5)
segregated (<i>adj.</i>)	kept apart based on group differences, such as race (p. 8)
sharecroppers (<i>n.</i>)	farmers who work on lands owned by others in return for part of the profit from the crops (p. 17)

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