Activity
The Story of George Washington Carver
Grades: 6–8

Overview:
A script with many speaking parts reenacts the life and accomplishments of George Washington Carver

George Washington Carver The Scientist Who Saved the South
by Adam Grant

Characters (in order of appearance):
NARRATORS 1-2
AUNT SUSAN CARVER
UNCLE MOSES CARVER
GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER
MRS. KAYDEN: A neighbor
SCHOOLTEACHER
BOOKER T. WASHINGTON
STUDENTS 1-3
FARMERS 1-2
COMMUNITY LEADER
ACT 1
SCENE 1: 1870s. On the Carver farm in Diamond Grove, Missouri.

NARRATOR 1: George Washington Carver was born into slavery in 1864 during the Civil War. He lived in Missouri on a small farm where his mother Mary was a slave to the Carver family.

NARRATOR 2: Near the end of the war, Mary and her children were kidnapped. A search party found George but no one else. The Carvers took George, who was a small and sickly baby, and raised him. He called them Uncle Moses and Aunt Susan. The Carvers cared for George as if he were their son. Soon he grew into a healthy, intelligent little boy. Almost from the time he could talk, George showed a keen interest in plants and flowers.

AUNT SUSAN: Moses, have you seen what George has done to my geraniums?

UNCLE MOSES: What do you mean?

AUNT SUSAN: A few days ago, I saw him crouching over those scrawny little plants by the back porch. Just look at them now! I swear they're the most beautiful flowers in the county.

UNCLE MOSES: Well, how about that? George, come on out here a minute!

(George comes out the front door of the farmhouse.)

GEORGE: Yes, Uncle Moses?

UNCLE MOSES: What have you been doing to these flowers out here?

GEORGE: Loving them.

UNCLE MOSES: Loving them! What do you mean?

GEORGE: They looked lonely, so I went over and talked to them. While we were talking, I noticed some bugs under the leaves, so I took them off. I think the geraniums feel a lot better now.

UNCLE MOSES: While you were talking to the plants . . . ?

GEORGE: The flowers talked to me, not with words exactly, but I could hear them. You could hear them too, if you listened close.

AUNT SUSAN: Well, whatever it is you did, George, my geraniums have never looked better. You come out here and talk to them all you want. (looking around the yard) Hmm, maybe you should have a word with my roses.
SCENE 2: 1870s. Mrs. Kayden's front yard. She is a neighbor of the Carvers.

NARRATOR 1: Soon George was known around the area as “the plant doctor.” He spent most afternoons at neighbors’ houses, tending to their plants for nickels or for small treats.

MRS. KAYDEN: George, how come my roses aren't as pretty as you all's?

GEORGE: They're in the wrong place. Roses love the sun.

MRS. KAYDEN: Show me where I should put them. Then we can have some hot blueberry turnovers before we transplant those rosebushes.

(George lifts his face to the sky and walks to a sunny spot in the yard. He stops.)

GEORGE: If I were a rose, I'd be happy right here.

ACT 2

SCENE: Diamond Grove, Missouri. George and Uncle Moses are standing in front of the schoolhouse.

NARRATOR 2: George loved to spend time studying plants in the woods, learning all he could about them. He wished he could do nothing but learn all day long. When he saw the town school, George couldn't believe his eyes. He wanted to attend more than anything in the whole world.

GEORGE: I can't wait till I'm big enough to go to school. Do you think they'd let me in next fall, Uncle Moses?

UNCLE MOSES: George ... you can't go to that school.

GEORGE: Why? What do you mean?

UNCLE MOSES: It's for white children. You can't go there.

GEORGE: Where do I go to school then?

UNCLE MOSES: I'm sorry, George. There's not a school for you. I wish you could go here, but it's against the law.

GEORGE: But I want to go to school! I want to learn how to read and write and do sums!

UNCLE MOSES: Tell you what—I can teach you to read and your Aunt Susan can teach you your sums. How about that?
GEORGE: Can you teach me everything the white kids learn?
UNCLE MOSES: Well . . . I'm pretty sure we can.
NARRATOR 1: George couldn't understand why he couldn't attend the white school. There were red roses and yellow roses, but the color didn't matter. Everybody knew that they were all roses. Why was it any different with people?

ACT 3

SCENE 1: Small house in rural Missouri, the site of a school for black students. George and the schoolteacher are standing in front.
NARRATOR 2: Despite the Carvers’ lessons, George knew the only way he was ever going to get an education was to find schools that were for black people. Most of the schools he discovered had little money and were very small. It took George only a few years to outgrow each school. He'd learn everything he could, and then he'd have to leave to find another school.
NARRATOR 1: Sometimes George had to work years at a time, doing laundry or cooking, just to make enough money to pay for the next school. Sometimes, when he went to a new town, the racial prejudice was so strong that he would be chased out before he could even settle down.
SCHOOLTEACHER: I'm sorry to lose you, George. You're my best student. You keep me on my toes.
GEORGE: I appreciate all you've taught me, sir. I'll miss our talks.
SCHOOLTEACHER: I don't know how my tomatoes are going to hold up with you gone.
GEORGE (laughing and waving good-bye): Don't forget to stake them up, and they'll be fine.

SCENE 2: The grounds of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.
NARRATOR 2: Finally, after being turned down by many colleges, George was accepted to study at Simpson College in Iowa and then at Iowa State College. Soon, he was renowned as a teacher and a scientist. Carver's specialty was inventing and teaching new farming techniques. His greatest challenges came when he agreed to teach at the new Tuskegee Institute, a college for black students in Alabama.
NARRATOR 1: When Carver arrived at Tuskegee, the school's president, Booker T. Washington, showed him around the small school. There was little to see except for a building in bad shape sitting on a dirt lot.

WASHINGTON: Welcome, Dr. Carver. We're very honored to have you here. We're very poor, as you can see. One day Tuskegee will be a great university, but right now we'll all have to pitch in to make it grow.

CARVER (kneeling down and taking a handful of soil): The soil is quite poor here, but I can fix that once I've had time to study it in the lab. The harder we work here, the better off our people will be. (The two men walk toward the building.)

WASHINGTON: I knew you were just the man we needed here! We need your spirit! Well, here we are. Welcome to your new laboratory.

NARRATOR 2: Dr. Carver looked inside the building. There was only one room, and it was empty.

CARVER: This is going to be quite a challenge.

SCENE 3: Inside Carver's classroom and lab at Tuskegee.

NARRATOR 1: On the first day of class about thirteen young men walked into the empty room where Dr. Carver was to hold his lectures.

STUDENT 1: I'm sorry, sir. I'm looking for the farming science class.

CARVER: This is it. Don't sit down yet. We're going on a scavenger hunt.

STUDENT 2: Sir? A scavenger hunt? What are we looking for?

CARVER: A laboratory!

STUDENT 3: I don't get it.

CARVER: I want you all to go out and bring back everything you find that you think we can use. When you get back, we'll see what we've got.

NARRATOR 1: When the students returned, they had all kinds of things including pots and pans and old tin cans and soda bottles.

CARVER: You all found some terrific stuff! We can use these bottles for test tubes, and this old pot can be our stove.
NARRATOR 2: Soon, Dr. Carver and his students had made their own lab, and they could get down to the business of farming science. Dr. Carver taught them how to grow certain crops that would replace the nutrients that years of cotton farming had taken from the soil. The students learned how to make the most of the crops they grew so that more people could be fed.

NARRATOR 1: Before long, Dr. Carver and his class were able to take their lessons on the road. They traveled all over Alabama and the rest of the South, helping farmers and learning more and more. By now, George Washington Carver was the most respected farming scientist in the country. His fame was so widespread that two presidents, William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, visited him.

ACT 4

SCENE 1: Carver's experimental fields at Tuskegee Institute.

NARRATOR 2: Farming was the biggest industry in the South, and most southern farmers grew cotton. Suddenly, the cotton fields were hit by a mysterious ailment. So many plants died that it looked as if the farmers would go broke and their families might starve.

NARRATOR 1: It was soon discovered that the cotton was dying because of tiny bugs called boll weevils, which ate cotton and laid millions of eggs in the plants. Panic spread across the land. The South was headed for disaster.

CARVER: Those boll weevils aren't going anywhere. Everybody's trying to figure out how to get rid of them, but that's useless. Most of the cotton is already dead. What I've got to do is find another crop that people can grow—a crop the boll weevil won't eat.

NARRATOR 2: Dr. Carver looked at his own fields planted with experimental crops. The peanuts were healthy and robust and showed no signs of boll weevil damage.

CARVER: Peanuts! How am I going to get people to grow peanuts? Nobody eats them unless they go to a circus. Then the elephant gets most of them. Peanuts! What uses can I find for them?

NARRATOR 1: Dr. Carver shut himself in his lab and learned everything he could about the peanut. What he found out pleased him, and soon he called several important farmers together to tell them about his discovery.
FARMER 1 (looking at the peanut field): Are you crazy? You expect some stupid nut to replace King Cotton? Can you wear them? No! Can you sit down and make a meal of them? No! Sure, we can grow 'em, but who'll we sell 'em to?

CARVER: You can't sit down and eat cotton, either. Peanuts aren't nuts, they're from an herb family. They're very nutritious—

FARMER 2: They may not be nuts, but you sure are! I'm not plowing my cotton under to make room for any peanuts.

SCENE 2: The faculty dining room at Tuskegee Institute.

NARRATOR 2: Dr. Carver knew that if he and the peanut were going to save the South, he was going to have to find many more ways to use and sell the new crop. He went back to his lab and worked for months. No one was allowed to visit him or see what he was working on. At last, Carver invited community leaders and farmers to a special dinner to unveil his project.

CARVER: Welcome, welcome. Glad you could all come. I hope you all are hungry! I've prepared a very special meal for you. We have soup, chicken, ice cream, and cookies!

(Everyone sits down and begins to eat. Carver watches the leaders closely to see how they like the food.)

LEADER: Great chicken! But what does all this have to do with your project? Something about peanuts, wasn't it?

CARVER: Yes. In fact, everything you're eating has been made with peanuts. That's all I used. Even the “chicken” is really made with peanuts. There are hundreds of other uses for the peanut, too. I've taken apart the peanut chemically and found hundreds of things that you can make from the different parts—metal polish, new building materials, shampoo, paper, varnish, paint even milk! The peanut is going to create so much new business that you won't even miss cotton.

LEADER: The soup? That's made out of peanuts, too? What do you know! Now listen here, Dr. Carver, I know you're sold on the peanut, but—

FARMER: Why are we eating something a boll weevil won't even touch?

CARVER: The best news for you, sir, is that the peanut plant is so good for the soil you can plant it year after year!
FARMER: Well, why didn't you say so? Pass that chicken!
NARRATOR 1: George Washington Carver had done it! He had used science to save the South. In later years, he went on to invent hundreds of other things and to enrich the lives of thousands of young people as a teacher.
NARRATOR 2: Dr. Carver was very old when he died. All over America, people mourned him. Carver had improved the world more than almost any other person of his generation. At a time when ignorance and misunderstanding created racism and cruelty in America, he used his enormous talents and strength of character to better the lives of all people.

George Washington Carver
Teaching Guide
George Washington Carver was born a slave on a farm in Diamond Grove, Missouri, in 1864. The exact date of his birth is unknown. His mother Mary was kidnapped from the farm during the Civil War. George was raised by the Carvers, his former master and mistress, almost as a son. A potential victim of the Jim Crow system in the antebellum South, Carver had to work diligently to receive an education. He attended college in Iowa, first at Simpson College and then at Iowa State. Carver became a professor of science at Iowa State, but soon moved on to Booker T. Washington's new Tuskegee Institute, a black university in Alabama. Carver was invited to speak in Congress and he met several presidents. His greatest contributions were in teaching poor southern farmers how to avert starvation through farming science. He revitalized the boll-weevil-ridden South with the introduction of the peanut and the myriad synthetics that could be created from it. After a long life of selfless service to his community and the world, Carver died in his eighties at Tuskegee.

Book Links
George Washington Carver: Agricultural Scientist by Sam and Beryl Epstein (Dell Yearling, 1991)
EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Talk About It
CONSIDERING CARVER'S CHILDHOOD: George Washington Carver's last name came from the people who owned him and his mother. Talk about the circumstances in which Carver was brought up. How do students feel about Aunt Susan and Uncle Moses? Were they surprised that the Carvers took in and cared for George after his mother died? What kinds of advantages and disadvantages do students think George experienced because of growing up as an accepted member of a white household? How might that have made life easier for him? Harder?

WHEN TWO CAREERS CONVERGE: People deal with prejudice in many different ways. Carver chose to work as hard as he could and make an example of himself to all whom he encountered. Booker T. Washington established a school for African American students. What would have happened if either man had chosen a different path? Ask students to create verbal scenarios about what might have happened to Carver if there had not been a Tuskegee Institute and what might have happened to Washington if Carver had not come to Tuskegee.

Write About It
NATURE LEARNING LABS: George Washington Carver began his education at an early age. White schools might have barred him, but the woods never did. Let students create a nature learning lab in the classroom. They may plant flower seeds in a paper cup filled with potting soil or another medium; wrap dried pinto or lima beans in a wet paper towel and then place the towel inside a glass jar; or stick toothpicks in a sweet potato or avocado pit and suspend it in a jar of water. Ask students to keep a journal of their plants' progress. Encourage them to incorporate drawings into their entries.

Report About It
APPRECIATING TUSKEGEE: Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee Institute played an important role in George Washington Carver's career and life. What is the history of Tuskegee Institute and how did Booker T. Washington come to found it? Ask students to find out more about Washington or Tuskegee Institute and prepare a report. Encourage creativity in the way in which the material is presented; for example, some students may wish to write a play based upon Washington's life or the period of time...
when he founded Tuskegee or they may present a pictorial essay using photographs and their own drawings to chronicle the growth of Tuskegee and some of its graduates.

**CARVER SCIENCE FAIR:** Carver's work substantially affected people's lives. What are some of his other discoveries? After in-depth research, ask students to select one discovery on which to report; they may work in pairs or small groups. Hold a George Washington Carver Appreciation Day and Science Fair in your classroom. To emphasize the hands-on, scientific aspect of this activity, you may wish to ask a science teacher to serve as a consultant. If other classes are invited to the event, encourage students to perform the play so guests will learn more about Carver.

- **Subjects:**
  - American History, Agriculture, Biology and Life Science, Social Studies, Justice, Drama, Theater
- **Skills:**
  - Listening and Speaking