**George Washington Carver's life, work on display at Field Museum** January 30, 2008|By William Mullen, Tribune reporter

George Washington Carver, born as a slave in the middle of the Civil War, rose to become one of the most famous scientists in the early 20th Century and a friend to presidents and captains of industry.

Carver was a **visionary** so far ahead of his time he might well have felt at home in today's world.

"He was an **ecologist**, he was the ultimate **conservationist**, he was a powerful proponent of nature-centered education, his scientific ethics were **impeccable**, he was a visionary who worried about man **exhausting** the Earth's natural resources.



All of the causes and concerns Carver often spoke of almost alone in his day are now **mainstream** social and economic **issues.**

The Field Museum is taking a deep bow of appreciation to the African-American genius. Carver will be the first American honored in a series of exhibits **devoted** to great scientists, including Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Gregor Mendel and Charles Darwin.

His story is told through photographs, exact **replicas** of his working environment and 150 **artifacts** from his life, from childhood needlework to laboratory equipment.

"Of all the great American historical figures we might single out to study right now, I can't think of a better one than him.

Perhaps no other major scientific figure in history had more **humble** and unlikely beginnings than Carver, who was born in 1864 to a slave on the farm of a prosperous horse trader in southwest Missouri. Carver was separated from his mother and found by a skilled trader.

The trader, Moses Carver, and his wife, Susan, were childless and **doted** on young Carver and his 6-year-old brother, raising them almost as their own after the war.

Carver was allowed to ramble through the woods and fields, where he showed an early **precocity** for observing and learning from nature. He was quick to learn from books, an **avid** student of household arts from cooking to **crocheting**, and a natural talent at guitar and fiddle.

When Carver was 13, he left the farm with the blessing of his stepparents, who recognized he was "special" and should seek more education. Carver spent years wandering in and out of towns in Missouri, Kansas and Iowa, doing odd jobs and picking up what schooling he could in rural communities. He learned to use patience and charm to overcome prejudice.

Carver's talent and intelligence were so evident that he turned doubters into admirers who helped him become the only black student at Iowa State College, where he studied **botany.** Carver received a master's degree and a teaching position, and his **reputation** for brilliance grew.

As a scientist, Carver had world-class skills as a **plant breeder** and could have succeeded anywhere, said Walter Hill, dean of the College of Agricultural, Environmental and Natural Sciences at Tuskegee University.



In 1896, Booker T. Washington, another giant of African-American history who founded Tuskegee in the heart of Alabama as an all-black school, **lured** Carver to his faculty. Carver had long harbored a dream of using his skills to help improve the lives of African-Americans, and saw his chance at Tuskegee.

"He had all kinds of skill sets coming in, and Tuskegee needed every one of them," Hill said. "He knew the science, he knew how to do outreach to farmers, he was a great teacher and natural observer of the environment, and he had ideas."

The school was in the middle of the Cotton Belt, where many decades of growing only cotton had **exhausted** the soil, leaving black tenant farmers and sharecroppers impoverished by ever-diminishing cotton crops.

"**Crop rotation** was far from a new idea, in those days," said Michael Dillon, the Field's botany curator. "The Egyptians had been rotating crops in the time of the pyramids, but it hadn't been tried in the Cotton Belt."

Carver studied the soil and decided it could be **revived** to good health if farmers planted **nitrogen-fixing legumes** like peanuts and soybeans instead of cotton. He also found the soil, poor as it was, suitable for growing other crops, such as sweet potatoes.

The problem was, no market then existed for peanuts, soybeans or sweet potatoes.

Contrary to popular lore, Carver didn't invent peanut butter, but he worked to popularize it. He also worked to develop hundreds of other economic products from peanuts, including peanut oil, peanut flour, candies, dyes, cereal milk, ice cream flavorings -- even "marble" tiles made from peanut husks.

He developed similar products from soybeans, sweet potatoes and even lesser crops like chinaberries, publishing his lessons in simple-to-understand bulletins and using a horse-drawn wagon as a mobile school for Alabama **sharecropping** families.

It took decades, but his vision took hold. Markets for **alternative crops** grew, and the soil and the lives of the sharecroppers improved. A spellbinding speaker, "the Wizard of Tuskegee" was in constant demand for lectures and as a **consultant**. He participated in a new branch of chemistry devoted to finding industrial uses for agricultural crops, such as ink from soybeans, and found himself idolized by powerful men, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt and automaker Henry Ford.



Carver refused to cash in on his work or his fame, other than to raise money for causes he deemed worthy. He kept his life as simple. "He never married, but he was never lonely. He was a committed **humanitarian** who thought all human needs could be met by things that grow."