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George Washington Carver: A Life Wrapped Up in Flowers

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George Washington Carver,
a life wrapped up in flowers

IT IS WELL KNOWN that at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, George Washington Carver’s work brought about major economic and agricultural improvements in the rural South, through erosion control, crop rotation, composting, and research (especially with peanuts and cotton).

But it was at Iowa State College in Ames where his career began. He was the college’s first African American student and faculty member and an assistant botanist at the College Experiment Station before he left for Tuskegee in 1896.

While Carver’s scholarship and research at Iowa State focused on pathology and breeding of plants, he saw spirit as well as science when he looked at nature. It is not difficult to imagine Carver strolling with supreme pleasure and respectful curiosity through fields and woodlands, gathering plants to mount as herbarium specimens. And, as the 1896 article on the right suggests, we can almost hear him lecture, with quiet passion, to women whose “hunger for flowers is keen, and [whose] desire to learn regarding the sciences that relate to flowers, is pronounced.” The Adams County Union summed it up: “Prof. Carter’s whole life is wrapped up in flowers.”

Carver’s strong connections to Iowa are made clear in a traveling exhibit from the Field Museum. Titled “George Washington Carver,” the exhibit is at the State Historical Building in Des Moines through November 2, 2008.

Plant specimens mounted by Carver over a century ago are in the collections of the Ada Hayden Herbarium, Iowa State University.