

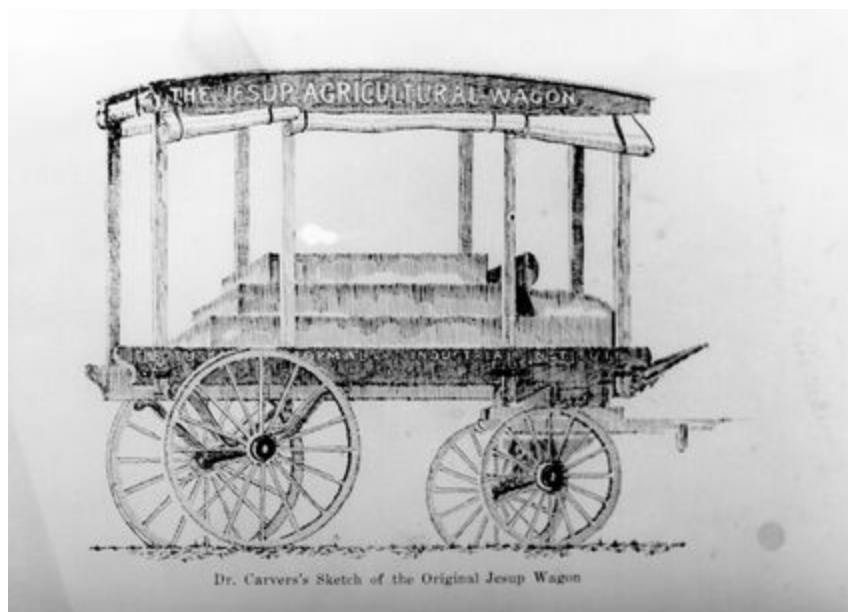
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Carver: A man ahead of these times

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By Alex Féthière



The first Jesup Wagon, a touring demonstration of agricultural tools and techniques, was conceived, equipped, and given a curriculum by polymath agronomist George Washington Carver in 1906. It was the precursor of County Extensions. (*Public domain*)

This week, as I raked two hogsheads of dead leaves into pens for composting and producing leaf mold, it was nice to discover that a mainstream agronomist recommended this wintertime activity over a century ago. George Washington Carver was a lot more than the "peanut man" to which he's been boiled down.

Sure, he found over 300 uses for peanuts. In 1921, he testified before Congress so capably that, initially granted 10 minutes, he was given "unlimited time" to expound a the properties of and purposes for the peanut.

For all that, Carver observed that 17 years after his first peanut bulletin, few were being grown in Macon County, Georgia. Furthermore, most of his peanut inventions arrested at the experimental stage, not even graduating to pilot programs and testing.

The same could be said of his other astonishing discoveries: a synthetic rubber, developed with Henry Ford, made from goldenrod; another rubber synthesized from sweet potato latex and pigments made from Alabama clay that attracted the interest of investors, but ultimately came to nothing.

"I am not a finisher," Carver said, "I am a blazer of trails, new trails. Little of my work is in books. Others must take up the various trails of truth and carry them on."

This truth he spoke of was a revelation from God. This faith-science syncretism was deeply confusing to many in the establishment, as when Carver proclaimed "all of nature ... is a vast broadcasting system" for God's voice.

Reverence for the natural environment came from his childhood walks in Missouri's forests, in which he discovered an interconnectedness of all life. He later called it an "organic unity," adopting a botanist mentor's description. This same distinguished botanist said Carver was "a brilliant student, the best collector and the best scientific observer I have ever known."

This observer saw no disjunction between the built environment and the natural one, advising poor farmers to supplement their diets with wild foods in bulletins like "Nature's Garden for Victory and Peace," to help support the war effort through foraging, and "Some Choice Wild Vegetables That Make Fine Foods" to convince rural housewives that their farm meals could be delightfully provisioned from just beyond the tree line.

And why should foods for wild animals be any different from those for the domesticated? Carver encouraged feeding livestock with acorns, which has long been used in Spain to produce the finest hams. Perhaps he was also aware that it benefits oak trees, both with pig manure and by breaking the pest cycle of acorn weevils.

Organic unity was a driving principle even as he worked at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. Carver had been trained to revere inorganic, chemical fertilizers, and his department worked hand-in-glove with industries that produced and bureaucrats that promoted them. He conducted his share of trials and wrote reports dutifully.

But as his career progressed he developed a personal preference for organic materials such as swamp muck, forest leaves and pine straw to enrich soils. These amendments, available to even the poorest tenant farmers, constituted the "natural fertilizer factory" of forests.

In soil building, he nurtured a concern for those who worked the land on the tightest of margins. "Many thousands of dollars are being spent every year here in the South for fertilizers that profit the user very little, while Nature's choicest fertilizer is going to waste."

A most subtle turn of his beliefs led to a surprising indictment of agribusiness' fertilizers. The organic unity of the universe would be

violated by application of chemical fertilizers because they imply nature cannot provide for itself.

Toward the end of his life, he was worried about chemicals on food crops, observing that chemicals put on fields end up in our bodies.

"Nature has been so lavish in its wealth of native food stuffs for both man and beast that we could not only live but thrive if all of our cultivated plants were destroyed," he wrote in the Montgomery Adviser.

And he had never seen the Pacific Northwest!

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