

ENOUGH FROM THE PEANUT GALLERY



SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER

As told to Sara Camp Arnold by Mark Hersey

Mark Hersey is a professor of history at Mississippi State University and the author of *My Work Is That of Conservation: An Environmental Biography of George Washington Carver* (University of Georgia Press, 2011). Gravy asked Hersey why he argues that Carver should be remembered as a conservationist and what lessons his work offers for the cultivated South of the twenty-first century.

THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE PEANUT MAN obscured more about Carver than it revealed. It was rooted in what was, in the 1920s, a rather shocking juxtaposition between Carver's race and his abilities as a scientist. Because such an unusual figure could be exploited by various groups representing divergent ends (from the United Daughters of the Confederacy to the NAACP, and from impoverished black tenants to their landlords and merchants), Carver's reputation was stretched in multiple directions until his real accomplishments were lost in a swirl of accolades and tributes. My book argues that there's more to Carver than the myth, and that his conservation work makes him particularly relevant today—the more so as issues related to agriculture are at the center of the national consciousness for the first time in a century. Carver, of course, was hardly alone as an emissary of agricultural conservation, but few of his peers anticipated so clearly the concerns of modern environmentalist critics of production-driven agriculture. I would argue that Carver offers a salient reminder that inhabited areas are no less crucial to matters of conservation than wilderness, and that redressing environmental exploitation requires accounting for social and economic exploitation. 🍷

Dr. Carver was known for wearing a fresh flower on his lapel. Photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston, 1906. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.