



My Experience with Dr. George Washington Carver

Steffen Thomas
Stone Mountain, Georgia

[1947]

Ever since 1936 I bore this story, or impression, of a great person in my mind, hoping that some day I would learn English well enough to write it down. I am sure that there are many interesting writings about this great man—some excerpts of which I have read—but I have not read about him the way I know him personally.

In the fall of 1936, I was asked by the city of Montgomery to come and model one of Alabama's outstanding men. Between sittings I was induced to drive to Tuskegee and visit the Institute. On the way, some forty miles from Montgomery, I began to think about Dr. Carver who had not entered my mind before. In the course of the thought of him and his great works, I became so violently wrought up that I felt I must do something as a sculptor to commemorate this man. By the time I arrived at the Institute I had completely forgotten about my original idea of visiting the campus of Tuskegee Institute and made straight away for the office of the President, Dr. Patterson. I was fortunate in getting immediate entrance and further in that Dr. Patterson had heard of me before. I relayed to Dr. Patterson the thoughts that had come to me on the way to Tuskegee, and found an interested ear. Without much questioning he said "You are commissioned to do the bust in bronze of Dr. Carver in honor of his fortieth anniversary of service to the Institute, that is providing you can get Dr. Carver to pose for it." I knew that this was difficult, judging from what I had heard. It was almost impossible for a stranger to get him to talk for any length of time, much less to have him sit for hours. However, I felt confident that he would do it.

Arrangements were made for me to stay two weeks at the guest house at the Institute to do the work. A week later I arrived with my equip-

equipment, somewhat anxious because the biggest job, to get Dr. Carver to pose, had yet to be done. After spending a morning on the campus I had my first meal there—in company of some interesting people one of whom was a roving correspondent of a French magazine. The next morning I rose at five and sat on the balcony of the guest house which overlooks part of the grounds and which was on the way to Dr. Carver's laboratory. I knew that he had a habit of walking very early in the mornings. At five-thirty I saw a slim figure walking, wearing a somewhat too short coat and pants that didn't match. I couldn't see his face because a cap sitting sideways on his head pulled almost over one ear hid that side of the face of which I had view.

I quickly got ready to follow him on his journey through the woods. For some time I walked behind some twenty feet, every now and then making some noise like clearing my throat or kicking a stone—he would not turn around—though there was not a soul within a mile. I walked faster and met his left side.

He was carrying in his right arm a couple of tin cans which contained some dirt. I introduced myself and expressed the desire that I would like to talk with him. I was quickly told that he had the whole day scheduled with classes and patients. His voice seemed to me extra high pitched for a man, but very kind in its expression. He gave me permission to walk with him on his way to the lab about a mile away. He would not lead a conversation so I remarked about the multi-colored leaves falling through the fresh morning air. I was able to make conversation because it was unusual for me to get up that early in the morning and to have to summon all my sense at this time. He must have found me sincere in my wanting to talk with him, and it seemed that he was of a curious nature which was a fact I found out later. As we neared the lab he said to come with him to his office and he would give me a few minutes before class. We entered a packed, unorderedly small office one corner of which was filled with some three thousand letters unopened—next to which was another pile of apparently read and answered letters. The most prominent object I saw was the microscope standing on a small table. I wasted no time in coming to the point of wanting him to pose for a bust. I wanted to tell him of some of my work and show him some pictures of work I had done. I was amazed when he said that this was not necessary, that he knew of my work (I had had some publicity on my work, but I would not have thought that people were acquainted with it). People ordinarily weren't acquainted with it nor was I so well known. It was the genius of Carver—this man read every newspaper that was of the least importance and more than that he never forgot

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anything, read or seen. I slowly found my way near to him, and without too much persuading he consented to pose every morning for two weeks. We selected the same little crowded office to do the models. I wanted him to work while I did the modeling because I find that the expression is natural this way. The next morning was the first sitting. In the meanwhile I made modeling stand, armature, and clay ready. During the evening I made a dozen drawings of Carver from memory, expressions which I had already experienced during our walk and talk in the office. When morning came I was definite and knew how to approach a composite face of Carver. He was a good sitter from the outset. He posed like an angel, any way I needed him. I was glad for the first hour of absolute quiet—I had finished the rough expression during this time. The expression I wanted I could see under my fingerprints and in the soft crevices of the soft clay. So could Dr. Carver, for he said "I am pleased." I had not known that he also was an artist, that he did pastels and oils and that some of his work is in the Luxembourg gallery of art. I wanted to meet the man Carver and wanted to be with him as much as possible during my stay, so I asked him if I could more or less follow him around in his work—and he agreed.

From then on he talked willingly and answered all the curious questions I asked. The letters in the corner were from people all over the world, including patients of infantile paralysis, scientists, nurses, and doctors. This stream of letters arrived when it became public that he discovered a fattening and a reducing oil from the peanut which had been used for years before in massaging the crippled limbs of his young patients at Tuskegee. He said that he would attempt to answer them all over a period of years. I saw some of his patients—a boy of approximately fifteen who came for his treatment one day—Dr. Carver remarked to me that this boy had been coming for two years and that he could not walk at all at first but I saw him myself walking with only the slightest support on a cane, walking without much difficulty.

As I knew Carver, I sensed that his personality had much to do with his treatment. He seemed saintly, a man possessing extraordinary powers, which were not noticed because of his soothingly kind talk in a girlish high tone of voice. One day while I was working, a man knocked on the door and talked in a pleading manner to Dr. Carver. Of what I overheard he wanted to be treated by Carver. I was amazed hearing the kind voice of Carver talk in very firm words, refusing him treatment, though the man came from California on a special trip to see him. After we resumed work he told me that he could not do a thing for the man—though the man wanted to offer him money for the service. Carver went

on in his natural kind voice telling me how very sorry he was for the man, what great sympathy he had for him in his misery, but explaining that he could not bring himself to touch a man in whom he sensed an evil nature. He seemed to have the ability of feeling at the outset whether or not he could be helpful. When he had divined this, there was no power on earth that could persuade him to change his mind, and he would not lose a minute's time in discussions of persuasion. He would even employ harsh tones to get rid of such people.

I watched him in his class one day. Among his students he reminded me of a hen keeping her chicks close by. As they roamed through the woods in search of specimens he was like a mother with her flock who has one or two favorites whom she keeps always close by her side. He told me of one occurrence in his class when he made the statement, after inspecting some specimen of minerals, that both were alkaline. After taking them to the lab and putting them to the proper test he found instead that both were acid. "Just think of it," he said to me, "not a bubble came, not a single one." He told me of his embarrassment and how he had to call the class together the same day to explain his mistake, to clear his conscience. He ate his meals in the dining room of the Institute with the students. They sat like disciples around the wizard. Sometimes he would serve a meal entirely made of peanuts and consisting of several courses—each tasting different. If Carver's work would not have brought him fame in science he surely would have become famous as a cook.

In his laboratory he was the housewife with all the pots and gadgets one needs to prepare a meal. He would stand by his work table with an apron tied around his waist, among a dozen liquids, add and subtract and taste with his tongue each one, he would shake his head, saying not yet right and add some more and then taste again. I asked him if he would not get sick tasting these poisonous looking concoctions. He assured me that our body is made out of the same and that it would not hurt him.

At times a boy or girl would come with an urgent request for some material such as powder, paste, or medicine, which was needed somewhere on the campus. Dr. Carver would first say that he would send it later, but then he would set about and prepare the finished product in the very shortest time, humorously remarking that it was ready for use.

One day at lunch I was asked by one of some twenty ladies if I would let them see the bust I was doing of Dr. Carver. I said that I would not mind but that he would have to be asked. The real object was their

meeting Dr. Carver. While he was sitting the next morning the ladies came. Answering the door, he would shut it quickly and say, "I am very busy. I can see no one." He was very shy, it seemed to me. After a few minutes his assistant, young Austin, came back and asked if he would not see them—the ladies had made a pilgrimage from Eastern states to meet him, he said. "You will have to ask Mr. Thomas. I am at his service." So one after the other of the ladies would walk through the crowded office, look at Dr. Carver who sat in the chair without moving or saying a word. Some of them would touch his hand with a finger and remark "I just want to touch you." Another would say, "He sits there like an angel." I could see extra illumination of joy in their faces as they passed on in a procession.

One late afternoon he invited me to visit his apartment, a suite of rooms in the boy's dormitory. When we approached the door he searched for the key in his pocket, with much commotion. I began to wonder. His face took on another atmosphere from what I had seen so far. He fumbled with his fingers trying to find the keyhole as he turned the knob slowly he said most tenderly "I am bringing a friend—can we come in? I thought that someone was in there, and then in my mind I hastily tried to justify why such a kind man would lock someone living in the room. I just waited, without inquiring, with greatest curiosity. He stuck his head in first, then carefully opened the door only wide enough to squeeze in. At first I was at a loss because I couldn't see anything living, like a dog or a person. I saw a room full of stones of all description, some in a glass case. In the windowsills were a hundred or more tin cans containing plants with which I was not familiar, though many of them were native. Those plants he told me were recovering from their disease. I saw books and numerous newspapers. I saw an easel with a painting in progress, a still-life which I thought some famous artist had given him, done in pastels. He told me that he was merely trying out some new pigments which he completed recently from clay—clay coming from a certain spot in Alabama—but that the people living in that region would not allow anyone there to get the clay. He had procured only a small amount with great difficulty, and out of it he made radiant shades and molded them into sticks with which he did this remarkable piece of work. The canvas, he assured me, he had made of sweet potato peeling so his room was a sanctuary for recovering plants which he had gathered in the early morning hours on his strolls through the woods. Some he would nurse for years until he saw improvement—then he would transfer them to his laboratory and compile the notes on the method of cure. These sick plants, stones,

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lumps of clay, and the paintings in the room were his children, and to them he was talking as we entered the room.

The same evening he spoke at chapel to the student body. He was sitting in a chair at one end of the stage until all was quiet. I wondered why he would not get on his feet and begin. He sat there several minutes like someone from another world. He rose, took a few steps, not looking at the crowd at all. He walked fast several paces then stopped abruptly, turned to the audience and said with his right finger pointing to them, "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he." He repeated it time after time during the forty minutes. Every word he said was so extraordinary in its timing and choice that it made a lasting impression on me. He frequently sat down during his talk and would not continue for several seconds which seemed like hours. He would rise again and quote Tennyson with an inspiring verse. He always had a message for youth which he delivered in dramatic perfection.

The clay model was progressing to my satisfaction. I was getting a good likeness I was told. When I got ready for the plaster cast, after finishing the clay model, I noticed that I had forgotten some red dye which I use in the first layer of the plaster mold. I mentioned it to Dr. Carver, who was most interested in the process. He disappeared for about five minutes and returned with two vials in his hands, one containing some bluish liquid and the other some indifferent yellowish. He poured both together and it appeared red—to my amazement. He remarked casually, "You will find that this will do what you want." I found it the best dye and easiest mixed with plaster that I had used.

With the plaster model of Dr. Carver I left Tuskegee to do the bronze casting in my Atlanta studio. I told him that I would return with the bronze cast in three months. Carver had inspired me beyond words, and while driving I would repeat the words he said when he first pondered over the lowly peanut, when he stood in the field holding several of them, wondering what they were good for. He carried them in his pockets for weeks and one day on his predawn stroll in the woods, he stopped and asked God "You gave us this peanut, dear God, what can I do to make it useful?" He said that he asked in this manner many times until the answer came to take it apart. He said that he took it apart and then asked again and the answer came again, "Take it apart." He had the flesh of the peanut in one hand and the hull in the other. And so he took it apart and produced more than three hundred useful products of the peanut and more than a hundred of the sweet potato. These included bread, butter, paints, pastes, perfume, wallboard, canvas, and medicine. I was overcome with what one man can do in a

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lifetime. But only the wizard of Tuskegee could do it. Then I remembered when he told of the failure of the banks when many people lost most of their life savings and killed themselves in despair. Carver lost his savings too, but it did not stop his work for one minute—he was the inspiration to his community to continue work and to save again. His salary was never used by him. This fund was used to put some worthy boy through Tuskegee Institute. He lived with the merest necessities.

I made him a gift of the first potter's wheel I had made and sent it to him. In a letter to me he wrote "My esteemed friend Mr. Thomas: I mounted the wheel in the corner of my laboratory and have done several vases which I would like for you to see on your return." Had Carver lived longer, he would have solved the problem of full use of Southern clays. He would have speeded the industrialization of the South in clay ware. I corresponded with him while I was casting the bust in bronze. In one letter, after I had poured the bronze, I wrote him that I didn't particularly like the newness of the cast (It takes age to give bronze the real mellow glowing patina). He worked in fact with me to finish this work and to prepare acids for me to use on the bronze to give it the aged color in short time. He was an expert also in metals.

The late Thomas A. Edison begged him for years to come and work with him with an offer of \$100,000.00 a year—but he preferred to stay at Tuskegee. He told me of his speech in Congress that five minutes were allotted to him to state his wishes for the South. He said that he stopped after five minutes proper but heard the voices shouting to continue one hour and one half (I have read of this speech that he spellbound the audience during this time).

I carved the words he repeated so often "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he" into the marble pedestal of the bust which stands in front of the science building of Tuskegee Institute. During the unveiling exercise he sat by me. While others talked about his achievements, he told me the story of his boyhood, when he operated a laundry in Iowa to make money for his education at Iowa State College. He told me that the very suit he was wearing was the same suit in which he had graduated so many years ago.



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Letters to Steffen Thomas

TUSKEGEE NORMAL AND INDUSTRIAL INSTITUTE
Founded by Booker T. Washington
FOR THE TRAINING OF COLORED YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN

RESEARCH AND EXPERIMENT STATION
George W. Carver, Director
Tuskegee Institute, Alabama

November 7, 1936

Mr. Steffen Thomas
1209 Williams Street
Atlanta, Georgia

Dear Mr. Thomas:

How happy I am to get your splendid letter which in itself is an inspiration. Your letterhead is interesting and significant.

I regret to state that I have not had time to finish setting up my [pottery] wheel. I have made a little progress with it, but my time has been drawn so heavily upon that I have been obliged to let it go.

Last night I appeared before the Woman's Club—the first number of the anniversary program. I did not know that it was going to take on such large proportions. I understand that the end is not yet. With all this demand on my time, I do not know when I shall get to the wheel and the study of clay.

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I wish so much that you could have been here last night, as I gave to the Woman's Club a demonstration on the history of art from the very beginning up to the present time. I showed how art was an expression of the soul, and how it began with the simplest of knots and then on and on to the various classifications which we have today. I showed a few of my paintings and most of my needlework.

I am so glad that you are making another wheel. You have such a remarkable power of adaptation and utilization of native products that you will never lack for things to work with, for if a way does not present itself you will make one.

I wish so much that I could get some more of the blue [clay] myself, but I have been trying for more than two years and have not been able to get any. I am indeed anxious to get some to do some work with, as it is the strangest clay that I have ever gotten hold of and I am very certain that it would be very valuable in ceramic work. I understand that there is a deposit of this kind in New Jersey and in California. If I can find out just where they are I would be willing to pay a reasonable price for four or five pounds and maybe more. Certainly enough to run a number of tests. Of course, I have you in mind in all of it.

I am going to let my secretary and assistant answer you in their own way. They are lovely young people and capable of getting much out of the inspiration and information that you will give them, and they are constantly talking about you and the work that you are doing.

Very sincerely yours,

G. W. Carver, Director
Research and Experiment Station

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IN RECOGNITION OF FORTY YEARS OF CREATIVE
RESEARCH AND ACHIEVEMENT OF
GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER
1896 - 1936
CARVER FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY
TUSKEGEE NORMAL AND INDUSTRIAL INSTITUTE
TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE. ALABAMA

February 16, 1937

Mr. Steffen Thomas
1209 William Street
Atlanta, Georgia

My beloved friend, Mr. Thomas:

This is just to extend to you and Mrs. Thomas greetings, and to thank you most sincerely for the autographed booklet. It is really a treasure. The pictures of yourself came out quite as splendidly as the marvelous samples of your work. I wish you knew how much I prize this fine booklet. I have been trying to dictate this letter for some time, but you will notice how very disjointed it is, because I am reading and enjoying the booklet instead of dictating the letter, so you will have to take the will for the deed.

Very sincerely yours,

G. W. Carver, Director
Research and Experiment Station

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TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE
Tuskegee Institute, Alabama

September 25, 1937

Mr. Steffen Thomas
1209 Williams Street
Atlanta, Georgia

My esteemed friend, Mr. Thomas:

How happy I am to get your splendid letter.

I regret to say that I have not been at all well since the unveiling of the bust. In fact, I have been so far down that they would not permit people to see me, except those who looked after my needs. I am pleased to say, however, that I feel that I am on the upward trend now, and that I am going to be myself again.

The young man whose letter you send me is quite interesting. He is at an age now when he ought to know what he wants. He should write to the Institute for a catalog and such information as they send out to those wishing to enter. He has waited rather long now, as we are pretty well crowded out, so I hear, as we have about 1300 or 1400 students already on the grounds, and they are still coming in.

I am so glad that you can make the investigations you are making in pottery. My other work and lack of physical strength will not permit me to do any work with clays. I have, however, done some work in cement that is rather interesting, and I believe, has some striking possibilities. I will show you them when you come down. I can just imagine the beautiful things that you are turning out.

You have made some very warm friends here, and they send to you their greetings, and of course, you know very definitely what I think.

With kindest regards to Mrs. Thomas, I am

Very sincerely yours,

G. W. Carver, Director
Research and Experiment Station

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TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE
Tuskegee Institute, Alabama

February 26, 1940

Mr. Steffen Thomas
Federal Security Agency
10 Forsyth Street Building
Atlanta, Georgia

My esteemed friend, Mr. Thomas:

Thank you so much for your letter which I am compelled to answer very briefly as I have been rather seriously ill for a little more than two years and this last attack five months ago was unusually severe. I was not expected to recover from it, but strange to say I am able to walk a little now but the doctor does not permit me to see visitors yet except occasionally for about five minutes if the heart is working. My heart is so very weak that they are trying to give it rest.

With very best wishes, I am

Very sincerely yours,

G. W. Carver, Director
Agricultural Research
and Experiment Station



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