We know George Washington Carver as a botanist, chemist, inventor, plant doctor, and famous lecturer who learned about farming in Kansas. Called the peanut man, Carver was a pioneer in agricultural research.

Born into slavery in southwest Missouri shortly before the end of the Civil War, George Carver was an infant, when he and his mother were abducted. He was found, sick with whooping cough, and returned to the farm of his birth; his mother was never found. The illness left him weak, unable to do heavy manual labor. Instead he learned laundry, sewing, and weaving. He loved to sketch wild plants, using any available material.

“I literally lived in the woods,” he said. “I wanted to know every
strange stone, flower, insect, bird, or beast.”

Schooling options were limited, so at age 12 he moved to Fort Scott, Kansas, studying and working to pay expenses. When he witnessed a lynching, he was so frightened he moved north to Olathe. There he found room and board with a family, worked in their laundry business, and became involved in the local church. The family moved to Minneapolis, Kansas, and Carver followed. He thrived in high school, studying and playing the accordion in programs. Carver adopted the middle name, Washington, to distinguish himself from another student. While in school, he became active in the local church, and opened his own laundry business. After graduating from high school, he applied and was admitted to Highland College in northeast Kansas, but when he arrived at school, he was refused admission because of his race.

Carver moved west to Ness County and applied for a homestead. He built a sod house, planted crops, and collected 500 plants to study.
Today the homestead site is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Two years later, his desire for education still unfulfilled, he moved to Iowa to attend college. With his ability to sketch plants, instructors guided him from art to a more practical path in agriculture. After earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees he accepted an offer from renowned educator, Booker T. Washington, to head the new agricultural department at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

Washington called Carver “a great teacher, great lecturer.” Building on his farming experience in Kansas, he conducted testing and research, and developed an outreach program for farmers. His recommendations to rotate cotton with soil enriching crops, like sweet potatoes, soy beans, and peanuts, helped to improve the cotton crop, and boosted farm industries. While he didn’t invent peanut butter, Carver did develop more than 300 uses for the crop, making peanuts a dietary staple.
Carver spent his entire career at Tuskegee, and became a popular and respected lecturer, known for his words of wisdom.

“When you can do the common things in life in an uncommon way, you will command the attention of the world.”