

Herbarium Finds Specimens Collected by George Washington Carver

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The University of North Carolina Herbarium, located in 401 Coker Hall, documents biodiversity across time and space. Biodiversity across **time**, as we have vascular plant specimens collected from as early as 1830 until ... well, last week! If one considers Dr. Patricia Gensel's fossils, also part of the Herbarium collections, our specimens actually go back to the Devonian (419.2 million years ago). Biodiversity across **space** as we have botanical specimens from every continent. If one considers Dr. Max Hommersand's algae, also part of the Herbarium collections, we have specimens from many of the oceans of the world as well. All of these specimens were collected by people, some obscure and some famous.

We are in the midst of a National Science Foundation funded project to catalog our micro-fungi. Thus far, only about 2,000 of our estimated 17,000 micro-fungi have been finished. (We completed cataloging our macro-fungi – mushrooms -- a year or so ago.) The specimens of micro-fungi are usually plant leaves (the host) with spots of rust or smut (the micro-fungus) in an archival envelope. Each envelope is labeled with the scientific name of the fungus, the person who collected it, the date collected, the host plant, and notes.

In the past week we discovered that we have some micro-fungi specimens collected by a very famous scientist indeed: George Washington Carver. At first I was skeptical that our specimens, collected by "G. W. Carver," were the famous African American scientist known to many Americans as "Mr. Peanut." Most of G. W. Carver's specimens were collected in 1893 in Ames, Iowa. I remembered little about George Washington Carver, only that he was born into slavery, taught at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and developed thousands of uses for peanuts. Did George Washington Carver have *anything* to do with Iowa?

A quick check to The Scholars Tool of Choice (Wikipedia) proved most informative, and bolstered the connection between G. W. Carver on our specimen labels and the famous scientist, George Washington Carver.

According to Wikipedia, George Washington Carver was the first African American student at Iowa State Agricultural College (now Iowa State University) in Ames, Iowa. Most of our specimens were collected in 1893, in the midst of his undergraduate days. Many of our specimens also note "Comm. L. H. Pammel" which means that Louis H. Pammel sent the specimens to Arthur Bliss Seymour for inclusion in Seymour's herbarium of plant pathogens. According to Wikipedia, Dr. Pammel was Carver's advisor for his Masters degree at Iowa State.

<http://storage.idigbio.org/ncu/mycology/NCU-F-0017/NCU-F-0017965.jpg>

In 1896, Booker T. Washington, the first President of Tuskegee Institute, hired George Washington Carver to join the faculty. "Carver taught there for 47 years, developing the [Agriculture] department into a strong research center... He taught methods of crop rotation, introduced several alternative cash crops [peanuts, soy beans and sweet potatoes] for farmers that would also improve the soil of areas heavily cultivated in cotton, initiated research into crop products (chemurgy), and taught generations of black students farming techniques for self-sufficiency." ¹

So far, we have found ten specimens collected by George Washington Carver in our micro-fungi collection, and as cataloging continues, we will likely find more. The latest one is particularly wonderful, as the label is in Carver's own hand.

<http://storage.idigbio.org/neu/mycology/NCU-F-0019/NCU-F-0019240.jpg>

Aecidium epilobii [the micro-fungi]

Oenothera laciniata [the host plant, cutleaf evening primrose]

Tuskegee, Ala. [the collecting place]

4-15-14 [April 15, 1914, the date of collection]

G. W. Carver [collector name]

1. "George Washington Carver. Wikipedia. Accessed on 5 February 2016.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington_Carver