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Guide to the Robert L. Shurr Script and Scrapbook for the Motion Picture "George Washington Carver"

NMAH.AC.0133

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Robert L. Shurr Script and Scrapbook for the Motion Picture "George Washington Carver"
Date:	1939-1940, 1968
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0133
Creator:	Parker, Ben (scriptwriter) Shurr, Robert L. (scriptwriter) (Creator)
Extent:	0.2 Cubic feet (2 boxes)
Language:	English .
Summary:	The film, George Washington Carver, starring Carver himself, was filmed in 1939 and released in 1940. Ben Parker was the director and Robert L. Shurr wrote the screenplay.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The collection was donated by Robert L. Shurr in October 1984.

Provenance

The collection was transferred to the Archives Center from the Division of Community Life (now the Division of Home and Community Life) in 1997. The W. C. Handy Collection (NMAH.AC.0132) forms part of same gift from same donor.

Processing Information

Processed by Franklin A. Robinson, Jr., archives technician, November 2008; supervised by Vanessa Broussard Simmons, archivist.

Preferred Citation

Robert L. Shurr Script and Scrapbook for the Motion Picture "George Washington Carver", 1939-1968, Archives Center, National Museum of American History

Restrictions

Collection is open for research but is stored off-site and special arrangements must be made to work with it. Contact the Archives Center for information at archivescenter@si.edu or 202-633-3270.

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Biographical / Historical

The film, *George Washington Carver*, was an independent production of Bryant Productions, directed by Ben Parker and written by Robert L. Shurr. An article on Dr. George Washington Carver in *Life* magazine reportedly inspired the original idea for Parker. After a personal visit by Parker, Carver consented not only to approve the film but to appear in it. Parker engaged Robert L. Shurr to write the screenplay, originally titled *Devil Cotton or the Story of Dr. Carver*. The screenplay combined both a documentary and fictional narrative style. The screenplay detailed Carver's early life including a fictitious romantic relationship. The cast included: Ralph Edwards, Raye Gilbert, John J. Marvin, and Milton Sprague.

Raising funds for the project and making the film were both difficult. Parker eventually raised \$2,000 from Allen McDowell who is listed as one of the film's producers. The film, which reportedly cost \$14,000, was shot in Alabama with a small crew and very basic equipment. The film crew and those helping with the filming experienced violence from the white community which reportedly stoned McDowell and two of the film's local white participants. The film was released independently and played in a few RKO owned theatres but apparently never recouped its cost. In 1940, \$10,000 was taken in at the film's premiere at Tuskegee Institute. Most likely, this was the film's largest audience.

We have no further information about the production or producer, our initial research has been unable to locate any further details concerning this film. A print of the film in its entirety is not known to exist, but portions of it are seen in a thirty minute video from Schlesinger Video Productions entitled *Black Americans of Achievement: George Washington Carver*.

Carver, a world famous agrichemist, was born near Diamond Grove, Missouri, circa 1864 to a woman named Mary. In 1896, he went to Tuskegee Institute as the head of the Agricultural Department and stayed there until his death on January 5, 1943.

Carver found many uses for the peanut, sweet potato, pecan, soybean, and cotton stalk. His important contributions to the Southern economy were: to diversify, utilize the land more efficiently, and in an ecologically friendly way, build up the soil, cope with plant diseases, and utilize research results in farm activities.

Among the many honors he received were: fellow, British Royal Society of Arts, 1916; Spingarn Medal from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), 1923; and the Theodore Roosevelt Medal, 1939. He was widely admired and Henry Ford included a replica of his birthplace at Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan.

In his personal life Carver was never married and current scholarship indicates that he may have been homosexual. The historian, Horace L. Griffin, in his 2006 book *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians & Gays in Black Churches*, details the clandestine homosexual life of Carver and others. Pertaining to Carver's habit of giving peanut oil massages to his male friends, Linda O. McMurry in her 1982 biography of Carver, *George Washington Carver, Scientist and Symbol*, relates, "Most of his male friends received at least one massage from the professor," but evidence that it ever went beyond massage is not detailed. Beginning in 1935, Carver's constant companion was Austin W. Curtis, Jr. a graduate of Cornell who taught at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College before coming to Tuskegee and joining Carver as his assistant.

Rackham Holt, Carver's biographer, describes the relationship between the two men in his 1943 biography, *George Washington Carver: an American Biography*, "At last someone had been welcomed not merely into Dr. Carver's laboratory, but also into his heart. He believed that there was something providential in the coming of this young man, so intensely serious about his work and extremely competent at it, who was at the same time a genial companion; he was proud of him and loved and depended on him as his own son And the affection was returned in full measure. Mr. Curtis accompanied him everywhere, seeing to his comfort, shielding him from intrusion, and acting as his official mouthpiece." Carver had a standing invitation to visit Henry Ford at his plantation in Ways, Georgia, where guest rooms were kept prepared for both Carver and Curtis. Carver died in Tuskegee, Alabama on January 5, 1943 and was buried in the churchyard of the college chapel. The National Park Service owns and maintains 210 acres of the farm where Carver was born as the George Washington Carver National Monument.

Scope and Contents

This collection consists of a copy of the original script for the motion picture George Washington Carver and a scrapbook detailing the motion picture's press. The bulk of the material dates to the production and release of the film, 1939-1940. There is additional correspondence from Shurr concerning the film dated 1968. The scrapbook contains photographs from the film. There are reference copies for the script and scrapbook.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- African American scientists
- Agricultural chemistry
- Agricultural chemists
- Agriculture -- Research
- Cotton stalks
- Motion pictures -- 1930-1940
- Peanuts
- Pecan
- Plant diseases
- Sweet potatoes

Types of Materials:

- Clippings -- 1930-1950
- Film stills
- Press releases -- 1930-1940
- Scrapbooks -- 1900-1950
- Screenplays -- 1930-1940

Names:

- Carver, George Washington, 1864?-1943
- RKO Pictures.
- Tuskegee Institute

Container Listing

Box 1, Folder 1	"Devil Cotton or the Story of Dr. Carver," original script, 1939
Box 1, Folder 2	"Devil Cotton or the Story of Dr. Carver," original script, (reference copy), 1939
Box 1, Folder 3	"Motion Picture Daily", 1939
Box 1, Folder 4	"George Washington Carver" scrapbook, (reference copy), 1939-1968
Box 2, Folder 1	"George Washington Carver" scrapbook, 1939-1968