

A captivating life

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Christina Vella, who received her PhD in European and U.S. history from Tulane University, discusses her new book, *George Washington Carver: A Life*, at a book-signing event. (Photo by Sally Asher)

Nearly 75 years ago, every child knew the name of botanist, scientist and chemist George Washington Carver and his achievements. Today, despite the numerous children's books written about him, his name is not as well-known. [Christina Vella](#) sought to change that by writing an adult biography called [George Washington Carver: A Life](#).

As a visiting professor at Tulane University who teaches biographical topics in

European and U.S. history, Vella was immediately drawn to the complex Carver. Born into slavery in 1864, Carver possessed a brilliant mind and benevolent spirit. After earning a master's degree in agriculture from Iowa State College in 1896, he headed the agricultural department at Tuskegee Institute for almost 50 years. As a parting gift, his students gave him a new suit, which Carver wore with pride and affection for the rest of his life, despite its eventual threadbare appearance.

During his life, Carver developed new products (such as dyes, plastic and medicinal oils) from peanuts, sweet potatoes and soybeans, which helped transform the agricultural economy of the South. He invented thousands of new products, never patenting them but donating them.

Carver's purpose was to serve humanity, not profit from it, which captivated Vella.

"I love writing history because it gives me whatever wisdom I have. You learn to look at things from a broad perspective, and you realize that your generation is not the first, nor the last, to experience things that to you seem entirely new and shocking. People are not simple," Vella says.

"Carver, for example, for all his saintliness, had love affairs, stinging disappointments, and a 10-year relationship when he was 60 and famous, with a 23-year-old white man."

Vella will be lecturing on Carver and signing her new book at the [Louisiana Book Festival](#) on Saturday, Oct. 31.