

George Washington Carver's assistant tells his story

By **JULIAN JINGLES**
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Dr. Austin Wingate Curtis Jr. came to New York City recently from his home in Detroit to have the story of his life videotaped for posterity by James Murray, the director of the audio/visual department of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem.

Dr. Curtis, 84, has the distinction of being the only assistant to the esteemed American scientist, Dr. George Washington Carver, the African-American genius who successfully researched the multi-purpose benefits of the peanut. Dr. Carver, who was born into slavery in 1860, went on to become the head of the science department at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

Dr. Curtis was 23 years old, a graduate with a degree in chemistry from Cornell University, when he was awarded a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to be an assistant to Dr. Carver, who was then in his seventies. The young Curtis spent seven and a half years at Tuskegee with Dr. Carver. Their

work resulted in the development of a dozen products. Dr. Carver, himself, is credited with developing some 250 products from the peanut. He transformed the peanut industry in the American South, and indeed throughout the world.

Today, the sprightly Dr. Curtis is the benefactor of the legacy of his mentor, Dr. Carver, who died in 1943 at the age of 83 without a single living relative. Dr. Curtis went on to establish Curtis Laboratory and A.W. Curtis Pharmaceuticals, two companies headquartered in Detroit and Brooklyn, respectively. Dr. Curtis' companies manufacture and sell several products derived from the peanut, including Fortex, a "rubbing oil used in the treatment of arthritis, rheumatism and muscular pains," and skin and hair care products sold under the brand name "Curtis." As Dr. Curtis sat in the offices of the *Amsterdam News* eating peanuts, accompanied by Michel Lockhart — the president of his Brooklyn-based company — and another employee, he reflected on the Million Man March on

Washington, and said that he strongly supported it. He said that somehow Black people in America seemed to have lost their

sense of independence and self-worth. He recalled the many Black-owned businesses, wholly supported by the Black commu-

nities in the South, in Detroit and all over America "before integration."

Integration, he said, has "wrecked Black business" in America. He said that between 1944, when he started Curtis Lab, and the late 1950s, his company had over 200 sales representatives around the country. But today he struggles to sell his products in the Midwest and Southeast exclusively to Blacks while having to compete with white-owned companies selling products developed solely for the Black consumer.

"The march shows that we can come together and organize, and as far as I can remember going back, white folks never did like to see Blacks organized," said Dr. Curtis. He has just completed a book on the life of Dr. Carver, whom he describes as "one of the true American geniuses, along with Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell." He is also still active as the chairman of his companies, embarking on the project of getting his products to the American mainstream marketplace.



DR. CURTIS AND DR. CARVER