

Restoration of Historic George Washington Carver Prairie

By George Oviatt and Gary Willson

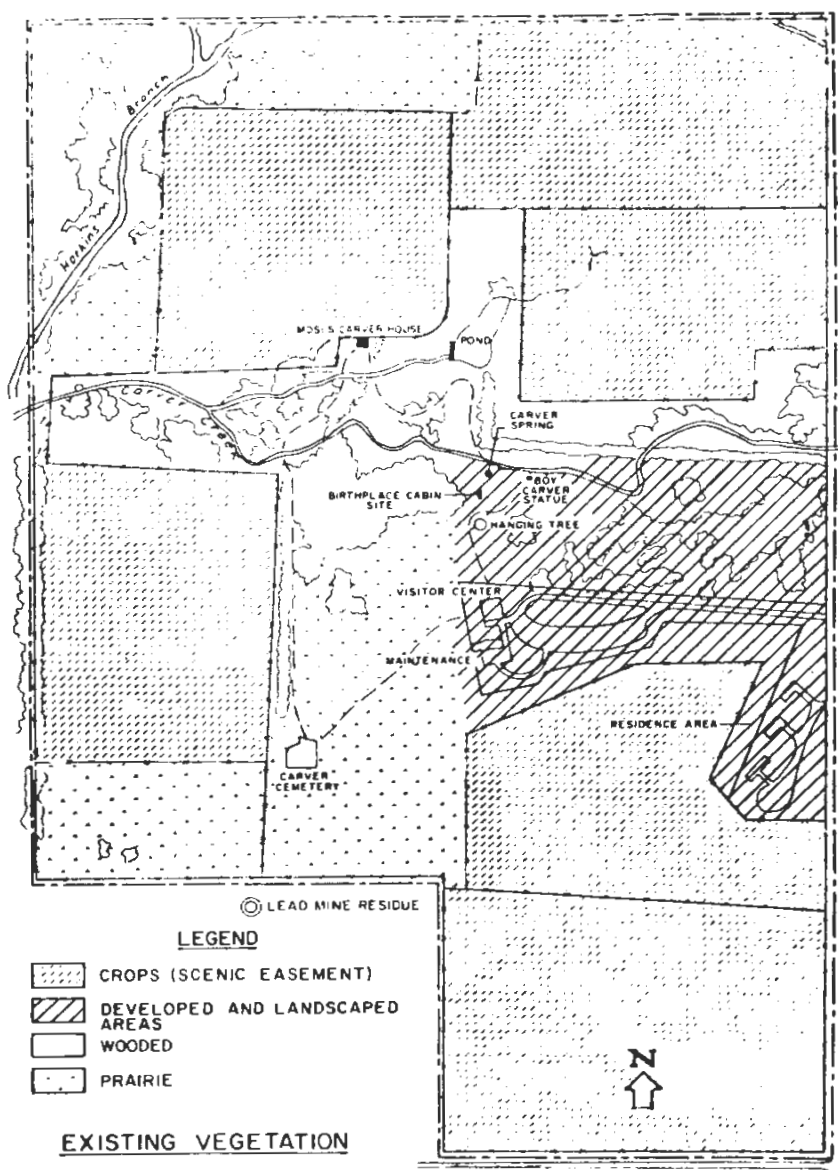
The presettlement prairie in Missouri occupied 27 percent of the state's total land area. This 18,474 square mile area now has dwindled to some 40,000 acres and because of agricultural impacts it has lost much of its presettlement character. Originally, vast stretches of prairie with vistas of 8 miles or more were common. These now are gone and the remaining prairie is relegated to small remnants in isolated areas and along roadsides. The land within George Washington Carver National Monument (GWCA) contains several scraps of a prominent 19th-century landmark called Diamond Prairie, which stretched for some 25 miles across southwest Missouri.

In 1981, a program was initiated to restore the native prairie remnants at GWCA and thus implement one of the park's primary management objectives: "to restore the historic scene to that of the Moses Carver farm of the 1860s and 1870s." Several preliminary studies demonstrated the need for this restoration. Although the original land survey of 1842 describes the area encompassing GWCA as being almost entirely native prairie, vegetation sampling during 1981 showed the area to be a mosaic of weedy old fields, pieces of prairie, and young forest. In addition, subsequent studies found soils within the monument to be predominately associated with prairie.

George Washington Carver lived on the Moses Carver farm during the 1860s and 1870s and historic prairie areas were thought to be significant because of the role they played in shaping his scientific interest in later life.

Sound management planning was needed to restore the prairie as close to that of the 1860s and 1870s as possible. This need was partially met through the design and implementation of a Prairie Restoration Action Plan. This plan documented management alternatives and their probable environmental impacts and recommended specific management actions to restore prairie. Management practices proposed included reseeding, prescribed fire, mowing and herbicides use. In conjunction with this document, a prescribed burn program was implemented.

With a project of this magnitude, success depends a great deal upon the cooperative efforts of all parties involved. From the beginning, cooperation was solicited from various state agencies such as the Missouri Department of Conservation, which provided free equipment, labor and professional opinions. The park /IP program, in association with a local college, initiated scientific studies that documented baseline data and monitored changes as restoration progressed. In no other area was this cooperative effort more evident than in the exchanges of personnel and time that took place between park divisions to meet common restoration objectives.



EXISTING VEGETATION
GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER
NATIONAL MONUMENT

Results of the most recent scientific monitoring done on the prairie restoration areas have shown a definite improvement in native prairie species composition. This past year native grasses were found to be increasing in dominance in all areas. Future management actions will include inclusion of new areas

for reestablishment of historic prairie and the examination of the woodland prairie ecotone to better define the historic prairie borders of the 1860-1870s.

Willson is a Midwest Region Ecologist; Oviatt is a Resources Management Technician at George Washington Carver NM.