

Will the real Mariah Watkins please stand up?:  
A case of inaccuracy and marginalization of African American history and appearance

Jennifer Farley Gordon and Eulanda A. Sanders  
Iowa State University, USA

*Keywords:* African American, Mariah Watkins, George Washington Carver, appearance



Fig. 1: The many faces of Mariah Watkins. Courtesy of the Carver National Monument.

## Introduction

Who was Mariah Watkins? What was her identity, and how did appearance inform that identity? Watkins was an African American woman. Although likely born a slave, she lived most of her free years as a woman of property and of skill, working as a documented nurse and midwife in Neosho, Missouri. Her success and status, as an African American woman of means in an unequal society, is extraordinary; yet, we would likely be unfamiliar with her story if it were not for her association with scientist George Washington Carver during formative years in his childhood. Carver lived with her during his short stay in Neosho, several miles from his birthplace in Diamond, Missouri, and where he attended an African American school. Yet, despite this connection, Mariah Watkins' history—the most basic facts about her person—are shrouded in mystery.

## Materials Researched/Methods

This paper relies on archival records, photographic analysis, and material culture to explore Watkins as a case study in the challenges of documenting African American appearance during and after the antebellum period in the United States. The researchers traveled to the George Washington Carver National Monument in Diamond, Missouri to collect data from primary sources such as letters, oral histories, photographs, textiles, and garments. Additional primary resources included federal censuses and local newspaper records, while supporting secondary resources included biographies on Carver and artist Thomas Hart Benton, for whom she worked as a nurse.

## Implications/Findings

As Gregory Stone (1965) noted, identity is socially constructed, “One’s identity is established when others *place* him as a social object by assigning him the same words of identity that he

appropriates for himself or *announces*” (p. 23). Yet Watkins’ identities, as manifested through her appearance, have been reconstructed—inconsistently—by others, and unfortunately we lack *her* pronouncements on identity and appearance. The result is an assortment of statements and images that fail to triangulate, as seen clearly in Fig. 1, which shows three different women, all of whom were at one time attributed to be Mariah Watkins.

Descriptions of her appearance offer little clarity, but do contribute to the “mammification” of a professional African American woman (Omolade, 1994). She is described in one oral history as a “heavily built” woman, “fair skinned with medium quality hair,” and of self-professed Spanish descent (Gowen, 1953). The recollections of Thomas Hart Benton, as cited in the *Neosho Daily News*, but unconfirmed elsewhere, characterize her as “big, brown, and agile” (Stark, 1980). Conversely, Rackham Holt, who worked closely with Carver on a 1943 biography, described Watkins as a “small wiry woman with dancing eyes in a light brown skin” (1943, p. 24). “Aunt Mariah” has been portrayed as a kindly midwife/nurse maid, clad in a white apron and carrying a black doctor’s bag, from which, according to the speculation of local children, babies magically emerged (Robertson, 1975, p. 20). Of Watkins’ remaining artifacts, we can ascertain ownership of two aprons, confirmed by reliable provenance; however, they are not the style of aprons typically used by nurses.

### Significance of Research/Conclusion

This paper pieces together—to the best of the researchers’ ability—the history of a largely forgotten and certainly misrepresented African American woman. In attempting to tell her story, we also gained insight into the difficulties of conducting research on the appearance and identity of nineteenth-century African American women. Faulty oral histories, incomplete records, and the infusion of prejudice distort the accuracy of such narratives. Thus, African American women are often twice marginalized—by their contemporaries and by historians. Mariah Watkins’ identity was stripped from her and fashioned by others, and descriptions of her appearance have been used to reinforce stereotypical images of African American women.

### References

- Gowen, A.A. (1953, August 6). Interview by A. Jacobson and R. Fuller [Transcript]. National Park Service, George Washington Carver National Monument, Diamond, MO.
- Holt, R. (1943). *George Washington Carver: An American biography*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc.
- Omolade, B. (1994). *The rising song of African American women*. New York: Routledge.
- Robertson, V. (1975, December). Midwife to greatness. *Ozark Mountaineer*, pp. 20-21.
- Stark, H. (1980, October 24). Items pertaining to Aunt Mariah Watkins donated. *Neosho Daily News* 76(233).
- Stone, G. P. (1965). Appearance and the self. In M. E. Roach & J. B. Eicher (Eds.), *Dress, adornment, and the social order* (pp. 19-39). New York: Wiley & Sons.