Yesterday was the start of Black History Month. Last year, I posted about the contributions made by Black climate scientists. This year, I want to go back earlier in history to highlight the environmental contributions of three Black figures in much earlier times.

The earliest of these figures was Solomon Brown, who was born in 1829 and the first Black employee of the Smithsonian. In his early years, he helped defend museum collections against a Smithsonian director who wanted the Smithsonian to be solely a research institute. In more than a half century at the Smithsonian, he prepared maps and drawings for lectures, served as an unofficial curator, and worked for the Smithsonian's International Exchange service. He acquired a broad knowledge of natural history and lectured frequently throughout the D.C. area on topics such as "The Social Habits of Insects." As the federal government increasingly came in the grip of Jim Crow around the turn of the century, Brown was shamefully mistreated and demoted.

The best-known of the early black environmentalists is remembered today for other reasons, but his environmental views are often overlooked. George Washington Carver was born into slavery but became the first Black student at Iowa State and then its first Black faculty member. He is best remembered today for founding the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and for his research to establish peanuts as a valuable cash crop for Black farmers. Contrary to myth, however, he did not invent peanut butter.

In his Masters thesis Carver argued that "no longer must man act simply as an aid to nature in improving plants, both edible and inedible, man must take the initiative in using nature to provide sustainable food systems that will help to alleviate hunger, encourage local participation and activism, and to safeguard and control our local food and water systems." Much of his work involved what we now call regenerative agriculture. His work on peanuts was part of this effort, because legumes like peanuts fertilize the soil. His work was embedded in a broader philosophy about the interconnectness of the world and the beauty of nature.

Charles Young was also born into slavery. As the first Black colonel in the US Army, Young was assigned to Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks. Young became the first Black Park Superintendent, at a time when the army was charged with protecting the parks from poaching and illegal logging and ranching.

Colonel Young recommended that the government expand the parks and negotiated

with neighboring landowners to acquire their property. The Park Service credits him with establishing “that it was critical to both the parks and private landowners to settle contentious property rights issues, paving a foundation for later land acquisition.”

Young was a staunch advocate of conserving these parks. He wrote that “a journey through this park and the Sierra Forest Reserve to Mount Whitney country will convince even the least thoughtful man of the needfulness of preserving these mountains just as they are, with their clothing of trees, shrubs, rocks, and vines.” Like other early conservationists, he emphasized the human benefits of preservation, given the importance of these lands for water storage.

Even today, the major environmental organizations are struggling to address their history of white dominance. Blacks have a become more forceful presence in environmental issues, beginning with the early leaders of the environmental justice movement. Yet the role of these much earlier figures is a reminder that the human relationship with nature is a concern that rightfully belongs to all of society.