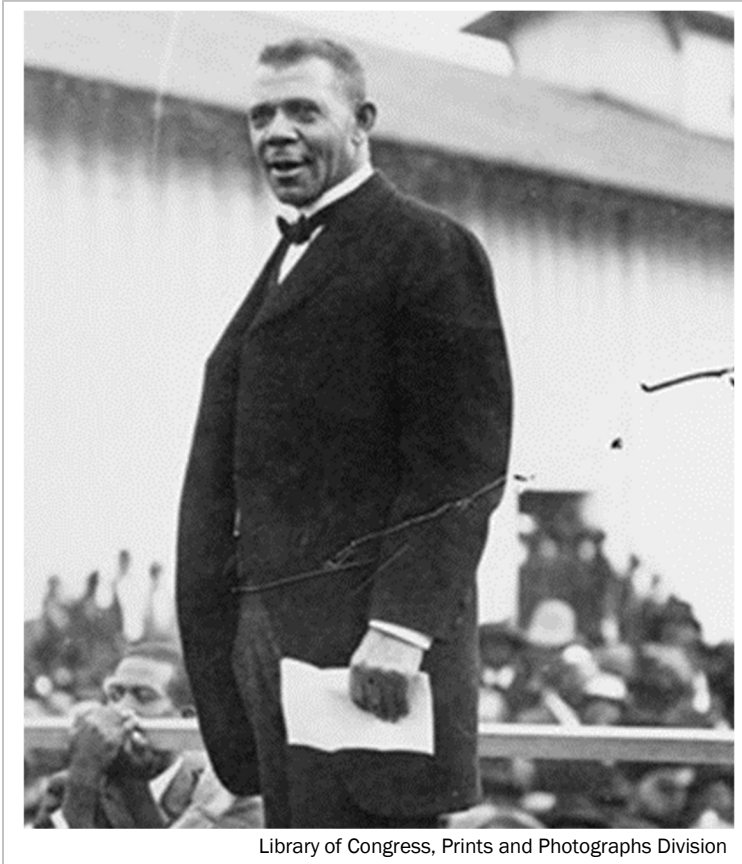


Booker T. Washington



Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

“That man’s speech is the beginning of a moral revolution in America.” – James Creelman (1895)

Born in 1856, on a small tobacco plantation in Virginia, Booker T. Washington was nine years old when the end of the U.S. Civil War freed him from a life of slavery. Despite this fact, life remained hard for Washington. He would later recall surviving on scraps of food and securing odd jobs to help his family survive. It was during this time that he began to dream of attending Hampton Institute, a newly established institute for former slaves.

With no means of his own to make his dream a reality, the members of a local Baptist church took an offering to get him started and, with his family’s blessing, the 16-year-old began the long journey to Hampton, Virginia with a few coins in his pockets and all his belongings in a single carpetbag. Along the way, he ran out of money and was forced to evade criminals,

sleep outside in the cold night air, and beg for work so he could save enough for the next leg of his journey.¹

When he finally arrived at Hampton, Washington worked full-time as a janitor while attending classes. He embraced the long hours and hard work he found at Hampton. In fact, he came to believe hard work and perseverance were the keys to his success. Later in life, he would recall that “I have begun everything with the idea that I could succeed, and I never had much patience with the multitudes of people who are always ready to explain why one cannot succeed.”²

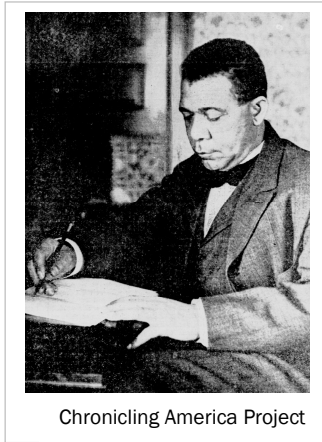
Having learned how to work hard that first year, he would claim that the “most valuable thing I got out of my second year [at Hampton] was an understanding of the use and value of the Bible.”³ In this book, Washington found the inspiration to serve others and prioritize the needs of the poor and marginalized. “If we imitate the life of Christ as nearly as possible,” he said, “heaven will come about more and more here on earth.” He would write in his autobiography that “those who are happiest are those who do the most for others.”⁴ To Washington, this wasn’t just an empty slogan. His acts of humility toward others became legendary.

News of Washington’s brilliant mind and tireless work ethic quickly spread beyond the Hampton campus and the state legislature in Alabama asked him to consider duplicating the success at Hampton. At the age of 25, Booker T. Washington became the founder and first president of a new institution—Tuskegee Normal Industrial School. The challenges were enormous. There was no money, no campus, and no students—just opportunity.

As he had always done, Washington attacked the challenges with hard work and determination. Educating a generation of young African Americans in an era plagued by segregationist policies and prejudicial attitudes was a formidable challenge.

At his insistence, the school's curriculum emphasized not just how to make a living but how to live. Alongside traditional courses in logic and rhetoric were lessons in personal integrity, hard work, and resourcefulness. On Sunday evenings, he would stand in the pulpit of the Tuskegee chapel and remind the students that he was unwilling to "permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities." The path to a better future, he maintained, began with a commitment to hard work and a charitable mind. He would often remind them "that no man shall drag me down by making me hate him"⁵

Washington knew plenty about hatred. He endured racist accusations and threats his entire career. His response was always full of grit and grace. However, by the turn of the century, growing numbers of black Americans began to criticize his methods. Instead of preaching reconciliation,



they wanted him to take a more militant approach to race relations in America. Unknown to many of these critics, Washington worked aggressively, often out of the public eye, to resist racist policies and attitudes even giving his own money to pay legal fees or support those in need. But it wasn't just his actions that were misunderstood by the critics, it was his ideas. Washington was no apologist for prejudicial attitudes, nor did he ever excuse the hatred and bigotry of his day. He was openly critical of harsh laws and "counterfeit forms of religion" that stood in the way of progress. But he genuinely believed that God could reconcile individuals from all backgrounds and remained optimistic that persistent but peaceful resistance was the surest path to lifting the "veil of ignorance" he saw around him. This belief remained a pillar of his public life and an inspiration for later generations of civil-rights advocates including Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1896, Booker T. Washington stood on the stage of Memorial Hall at Harvard University. He was there to receive an honorary degree. With some modest hesitation, he recorded in his autobiography a report of that event from a Boston newspaper.

“ It has been mentioned that Mr. Washington is the first of his race to receive an honorary degree from a New England university. This, in itself, is a distinction. But the degree was not conferred because Mr. Washington is a coloured man, or because he was born in slavery, but because he has shown . . . a genius and a broad humanity which count for greatness in any man.⁶

To Booker T. Washington, there could be no higher compliment. His genius, built through hard work and a commitment to serving others, had earned him the respect of a nation. By 1940, he had become a national icon and the U.S. Post Office honored him with the nation's first stamp portraying an African American. That same admiration was captured a few years earlier when a statue of Booker T. Washington and a young student had been raised on the campus of Tuskegee University. At the base of that statue was an inscription "He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry." Over a century after his death, Booker T. Washington continues to point the country toward a better future.



Key Question

1. The National Museum of African American History and Culture is creating a new display in honor of Booker T. Washington. Imagine you are asked to select three items for the display, what items would you choose and why?

Sources

- 1 Raymond W. Smock, *Booker T. Washington: Black Leadership in the Age of Jim Crow* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 40.
- 2 Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography*, Reprint ed. (New York City: Skyhorse, 2015), 38.
- 3 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 67.
- 4 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 66.
- 5 Stephen Mansfield, *Then Darkness Fled: The Liberating Wisdom of Booker T. Washington* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2002), 189.
- 6 Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 301.