

Booker t washington: fighter for the black man

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Booker T. Washington was a man beyond words. His perseverance and will to work were well known throughout the United States. He rose from slavery, delivering speech after speech expressing his views on how to uplift America's view of the Negro. He felt that knowledge was power, not just knowledge of "books", but knowledge of agricultural and industrial trades. He felt that the Negro would rise to be an equal in American society through hard work. Washington founded a school on these principles, and it became the world's leader in agricultural and industrial education for the Negro.

As the world watched him put his heart and soul into his school, Tuskegee Institute, he gained great respect from both the white and black communities. Many of the country's white leaders agreed with his principals, and so he had a great deal of support. Booker T. Washington was a great man. He put his own needs aside in order to build the reputation of an entire race. He didn't do it by accusing and putting blame on others, but instead through hard work. Booker T. Washington cleared the way for the black community to fully enter the American society.

Washington was born into slavery on April 5, 1856, in Franklin County, Virginia, on a small tobacco plantation. His only true relative was his mother, Jane, who was the plantation's cook. His father was probably the white son of one of the neighbors, though it is not known for sure. Washington spent his childhood years on the plantation, but since he was so young he never had to do the heavy work. He did the small jobs, such as carrying water to the field hands and taking corn to the local mill for grinding. This hard work at an early age instilled in him the values he would teach for the rest of his life.

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When the Civil War ended in April of 1863, Washington and his mom were set free. Unlike most of the other slaves, Washington had somewhere to go. His step-father had escaped earlier, and had gotten a job in Malden, West Virginia, at a salt furnace. When the war ended, he sent for Washington and his mom. Life was tough in Malden. " Drinking, gambling, quarrels, fights, and shockingly immoral practices were frequent." Washington himself got a job in the salt furnace and often had to go to work at four in the morning.

Washington longed for an education. A school for Negro's opened in Malden, but his step-father would not let him leave work to attend. Washington was so determined to get an education that he arranged with the teachers to give him classes at night. He was later allowed to attend in the morning, but would then work all afternoon and into the evening. Booker did not have a last name until he went to school. " When he realized that all of the other children at the school had a 'second' name, and the teacher asked him his, he invented the name Washington."

A great influence on Washington was Viola Ruffner, the wife of the owner of the salt furnace. Washington became her house boy, where he learned the importance of cleanness and hard work, and pride in a job well done. He would use these principles for the rest of his life. " The lessons I learned in the home of Mrs. Ruffner were as valuable to me as any education I have ever gotten anywhere since," he later commented.

Booker heard of a big school for Negro's in Hampton, Virginia, and he decided to go there. In 1872, at the age of sixteen, he set out on the 400 mile journey to Hampton, traveling most of the way by foot. When he finally

arrived, he was so ragged and dirty that he almost wasn't admitted, but he was so persistent that they finally caved in, and he was allowed to attend. He studied there for three years, working as a janitor to pay his board. At Hampton, Washington participated in the debating society, which helped him develop a talent for public speaking. He used this talent many times throughout the rest of his life.

In 1875, he graduated with honors and returned to Malden, where he taught elementary school. Two years later he went to Wayland Seminary, in Washington, DC, where he studied for eight months. He then was asked to come back to Hampton to be an instructor. In May, 1881, the principal of Hampton received a letter from a group in Tuskegee, Alabama, asking for help in starting a school for Negro's there. They were expecting a white man, but when they got Washington, they were quite pleased with him.

On July 4, 1881, at the age of twenty-five, Washington founded The Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. The State of Alabama had sent \$2,000 for the teachers' salaries, but had sent no money for land, buildings, or equipment. The school opened with 30 students. Most of them had some prior education, but they did not appreciate household cleanness, which was so valued by Washington. He wanted on-campus dormitories so he could supervise and improve the students' living habits. The school found an abandoned farm nearby, but it had no buildings fit for living or teaching in. Washington and his students raised enough money for construction, and they built the first brick building. They also built a kiln to make bricks for future projects as well as to manufacture and sell to others.

Tuskegee Institute and its facilities grew, and so did its courses in agricultural and engineering subjects. The Institute survived its early years only through the perseverance of Washington. In the second month of the school's first year, Olivia Davidson joined Washington as his assistant. She was also a graduate of Hampton and of a Massachusetts normal school. She was not only Washington's assistant but also a teacher at the school. She would later marry Washington. " No single individual did more toward laying the foundations of Tuskegee Institute so as to insure the successful work that has been done there than Olivia A. Davidson."

Washington believed in the " dignity of labor." He emphasized the teaching of " practical skills," like brickmaking, carpentry and dairying for the boys, and cooking and sewing for the girls. He believed that Negro's must make economic progress, and learn how to make a living first.

In order to raise funds for the school, Washington traveled all over the country, giving hundreds of speeches expressing his ideas and explaining his program at the school. He became known nationally because of these speeches, which led to many contributors such as Andrew Carnagie, John Rockefeller, and Collis Huntington.

As for Tuskegee Institute, its success was beyond Washington's wildest dreams. At the time of Washington's death, 34 years after its founding, the school property included 2, 345 acres and 107 buildings, with nearly 200 faculty members and more than 1, 500 students. Tuskegee Institute had become the world's leader in agricultural and industrial education for the Negro.

Booker's spirit and name live on long after his death. He is remembered and admired for his struggle for the black man. Tuskegee Institute still exists today and is quite well off, with over 3, 250 students, about 5, 000 acres, and an annual budget of \$75 million. Booker T. Washington is a wonderful example that even if you came from nothing, you can accomplish great things if you try hard enough and are willing to make the sacrifice.