# Booker T. Washington

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About this Person
**Born:** April 05, 1856 in Hale's Ford, Virginia, United States
**Died:** November 14, 1915 in Tuskegee, Alabama, United States
**Nationality:** American
**Occupation:** Educator
**Other Names:** Taliaferro, Booker; Washington, Booker Taliaferro
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Full Text:
In the annals of African American history, few names are as celebrated or as controversial as that of Booker Taliaferro Washington. Washington emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century as the most important black leader since the post-Civil War Reconstruction--a period of transition during which the Southern states, then occupied by Northern troops, were reintegrated into the Union.

Washington was an educator admired by blacks and trusted by both northern and southern whites as a thoughtful, honorable, and articulate spokesperson for African Americans. The founder and for many years the president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, he was an untiring promoter of the virtues of economic independence, thrift, hard work, and patience on the part of black Americans facing the seemingly insurmountable difficulties of survival in a white-ruled society.

Washington's own life was an outstanding example of his philosophy of deference and self-help. He was granted unique power by white political and economic leaders while suffering harsh condemnation during his life--and even after his death--by some blacks who perceived him as little more than a well-educated "Uncle Tom" (a negative name given to blacks who appeared overly eager to cooperate with white authority). Some critics have indicated that Washington's philosophy of economic self-reliance was hopelessly outdated even during his own lifetime, but he was widely regarded as the best-known and most powerful black American from 1895 until his death in 1915.

Booker T. Washington was born in the spring of 1856 near Hale's Ford, Virginia, the son of a slave named Jane who belonged to James Burroughs and served as cook for the Burroughs family and their slaves. The identity of Washington's father is not certain, but he was most likely a white man living in the immediate area. As Washington later recounted in his famous autobiography, *Up From Slavery* , his first years were spent in a single-room cabin on Burroughs's farm, where he and his siblings were put to work at an early age. Young Booker (his only name at that time) was allowed no education and did not even own a pair of shoes until the age of eight, at which time he was often employed at the Burroughses' dining table as the operator of a contraption designed to shoo flies away from the food. There, Booker received an introduction to white society, etiquette, and more or less cultured conversation, all of which would prove of lasting importance in the course of his life.

With the defeat of the South at the close of the Civil War in 1865, Booker's stepfather, a former slave named Washington Ferguson, traveled to the town of Malden, West Virginia, where he had found work in the salt furnaces of Kanawha Salines. Jane, who had married Ferguson while still a slave in Virginia, and the rest of the family joined him there the same year. Soon young Booker was working alongside Ferguson in the salt furnaces, and later he was forced to labor in the local coal mines; but, as Washington wrote in his autobiography, "From the time that I can remember having any thoughts about anything, I recall that I had an intense desire to learn to read." It was in Malden that Booker received his first classroom education, squeezing in a few hours every day or night at the local school for black children while continuing to work full time in the mines. When asked by his first teacher for his name, the ten-year-old replied, "Booker Washington," taking as his last name the first name of his stepfather; only years later did he add the name of Taliaferro.

While at work in the coal mines, Washington one day overheard discussion of a school for blacks called Hampton Institute, and the

youngster promptly determined that he would seek a formal education there. Before going to Hampton, Washington worked for a second time in the home of a white family, in this case as a houseboy for General Lewis Ruffner and his wife, Viola, owners of the local mines. With the encouragement of Mrs. Ruffner and the financial help of many local black residents, Washington was able to enroll at Hampton Institute in the fall of 1872.

Located in Hampton, Virginia, the Normal and Agricultural Institute had been founded three years before by General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the son of white missionaries stationed in Hawaii, for the purpose of educating black schoolteachers in the habits of thrift, industry, and practical know-how. These qualities formed the core of the general's philosophy concerning education for African Americans. Armstrong and his institute were the models upon which Booker T. Washington molded his own life and work, and there is little in the career of Washington that cannot be traced back to his experience at Hampton.

Hampton students were given a book education sufficient to allow them to teach elementary school, but the essence of Armstrong's program was the development of a strong moral character and work ethic. All Hampton students were required to pay their tuition in the form of work, and life at the school was regulated with an almost military discipline. Armstrong believed that the newly freed black peoples would find a place in American society only when they had demonstrated flawless moral integrity and could offer a usable product or service. He viewed as secondary the issues of black civil and political rights, believing that these would inevitably follow upon the economic self-sufficiency of the race. Armstrong's was an inherently conservative doctrine--its goal being the formation of an equal society of black farmers and artisans--and Booker Washington never deviated from its basic tenets.

Laboring as a janitor and engaging in whatever additional summer work he could find, Washington made his way through Hampton Institute in three years, from 1872 to 1875. He returned to Malden, West Virginia, for a brief term as a local teacher and was then invited back to Hampton to serve as one of General Armstrong's instructors. When Armstrong was asked in 1881 to create a new and similar school in Tuskegee, Alabama, he recommended Washington, who was accepted by the Alabama legislature and moved to Tuskegee in June of that year.

Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute was built by Washington literally from the ground up: upon his arrival in Tuskegee, he had nothing but a $2,000 grant from the state for salaries and permission to build a training school for black teachers. After a tour of Alabama communities to gauge the region's most immediate needs, Washington enrolled the first year's class in a shanty loaned by a local church. He eventually borrowed enough money to purchase an old plantation and begin the daunting task of establishing school buildings on the institute's permanent site. Until Washington's death in 1915, Tuskegee Institute would remain the chief occupation and pride of his life, and the town of Tuskegee the unofficial capital of black America.

In every important respect Tuskegee Institute closely resembled General Armstrong's Hampton school. Although Tuskegee trained young black men and women to be teachers, it also insisted that they participate in one of the institute's many and ongoing industrial projects, whether it be the construction of school buildings or the fabrication of such articles as bricks and mattresses for sale to market. As a provider of what was called "industrial education," however, Tuskegee's emphasis was heavily directed toward agriculture and artisan skills, reflecting Washington's belief that blacks first needed to establish their economic independence and security. Tuskegee students were exhorted to lead lives of modesty and hard work in accord with the dominant white southern culture, leaving the questions of political power and civil status to be answered by the gradual reconciliation of the races.

At a time of white southern resentment and retaliation for the more radical forms of postwar Reconstruction, Washington's program of black self-help was applauded by both races--and most crucially by southern white leaders and northern philanthropists. The former allowed Tuskegee to grow into an institution of imposing size and power, the latter provided the funds required to do so.

With important help from General Armstrong, Washington became a well-known figure in the national debate over race and the future of black Americans. His position as black leader was solidified in the year 1895, when he was asked by the organizers of the Cotton States and International Exposition to deliver an address as a black representative to their industrial fair in Atlanta. The event was of unprecedented significance in the history of postwar southern racial politics, and Washington used the opportunity to present in especially eloquent form his philosophy of harmony through economic cooperation. His appeal was doubly appreciated at the exposition, as it promised both racial calm and much needed economic vitality in the impoverished South.

Washington was given a spectacular ovation after the speech. The event was covered by newspapers around the country, and he was rapidly honored in both business and political circles as an eminently practical African American activist and leader. Funds poured into Tuskegee, and Washington became the confidante of philanthropists such as Andrew Carnegie and the adviser to President Theodore Roosevelt on questions of the South and racial relations in general.

Washington was married in 1882 to Fannie N. Smith, whom he had met and courted in Malden, West Virginia. Following her death in 1884, he wed Olivia A. Davidson, whom he credited with much of Tuskegee's success in fund-raising. Washington's third wife, Margaret James Murray, exercised considerable influence at Tuskegee as well, and she also helped Washington to raise his children from his first two marriages. His busy life was divided between the administration of Tuskegee, writing books and articles, and an endless round of travel and lectures. As a man of limitless energy but sharply defined goals, he became a highly influential black leader.

Washington wielded power directly by means of Tuskegee's many graduates, his role as counselor to the federal government, and as part-owner of the *New York Age* , an influential black newspaper. More generally, he was the chief arbiter between the black community and the centers of national power in New York and Washington, D.C., and he was inevitably consulted by white leaders in questions of philanthropy and interracial politics. Under the Republican presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, Washington reached the pinnacle of his national power, perhaps best symbolized by an invitation to dine with the president at the White House in October of 1901.

In 1900 Washington helped organize the National Negro Business League, an effort, as its name suggests, at helping black Americans to develop their own commercial ventures. He toured the continent of Europe, received honorary degrees from Harvard and Dartmouth universities, and published several versions of his autobiography, *Up From Slavery.* Yet there were already signs of disillusionment among black intellectuals.

In 1902, editor William Monroe Trotter began publishing virulent attacks on Washington in his Boston *Guardian.* The following year black leader W. E. B. Du Bois weighed in with his justly celebrated *Souls of Black Folk,* in which he protested: "[In cases where] Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice North and South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effect of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds ... we must unceasingly and firmly oppose [him]." Du Bois was a passionate political activist and a leading intellectual whose temperament and opinions were at the furthest extreme from Washington's hard-headed pragmatism. Opposing Washington's emphasis on vocational training, Du Bois urged blacks to pursue higher education and employ political agitation in order to achieve equality.

Du Bois's writings accurately reflected the desperate condition of black Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, when it could have been argued that blacks were indeed worse off than in the era of slavery. Nearly every state in the South had managed to prevent blacks from exercising the right to vote granted them by the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution. With the help of terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, the South had restored absolute segregation between the races. Worst of all were the lynchings of blacks that occurred with appalling regularity during the years of Washington's reign as a leader among African Americans. Whether the connection was valid or not, some black intellectuals believed Washington's philosophy of humility and political acquiescence contributed to the generally deteriorating welfare of black Americans.

In response, Du Bois and other concerned blacks founded the Niagara Movement in 1905 as a direct challenge to Washington's power, and five years later many of the same individuals created the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). At the same time, Washington's national influence declined after 1908 under the administrations of U. S. presidents William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson. Despite his continued fame and prestige, he must have sensed that a new era in black American history was about to begin. As Du Bois and others pointed out, Washington's dream of racial equality via the economic independence of blacks was impossible so long as blacks lacked the capacity to protest at the ballot box. Furthermore, the Tuskegee emphasis on small-scale farming and artisan skills was of little use at a time of exploding industrialization; jobs were now in the cities of the North, and increasing numbers of blacks abandoned their southern roots to seek their fortunes in the North.

Washington died in November of 1915 at his home in Tuskegee, one of the most honored men of his age, and one of the most complex. Historians have discovered in his voluminous private correspondence that Washington's apparent conservatism was in part only a mask for the benefit of his white audience. Washington secretly funded numerous court challenges to segregation and disenfranchisement, and in many instances took pains to conceal acts of generosity to blacks that might have been construed by whites as too radical.

In every sense, then, Washington's life and work--the story of his personal rise from slavery, the creation of Tuskegee, and the millions of dollars he raised for the material betterment of black Americans--were remarkable. His philosophy and policies, however, were limited by the prevailing attitudes of his day and therefore failed to anticipate the political and economic changes that would engulf his people later in the twentieth century.

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born April 5, 1856, near Hale's Ford, Franklin County, VA; died November 14, 1915, in Tuskegee, AL; son of an enslaved mother and a white father; married Fannie N. Smith, 1882 (died, 1884); married Olivia A. Davidson, 1885 (died, 1889); married Margaret James Murray, 1893; children: Booker T., Jr., Ernest Davidson, Portia Marshall. **Education:** Received degree from Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, 1875.

## CAREER

Educator, social activist, and writer. Teacher in schools in Malden, WV, 1875-78, and at Hampton Institute, Hampton, VA, 1879-81; Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (now Tuskegee Institute), Tuskegee, AL, cofounder, principal, and professor, 1881-1915. Organized first annual Tuskegee Negro Conference, 1892, and National Negro Business League, 1900; representative and speaker at Cotton States and International Exposition, 1895; adviser to U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt.

## AWARDS

Received honorary degrees from Harvard University, 1896, and Dartmouth College, 1901.

## WORKS

Writings

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- *The Future of the American Negro,* Small, Maynard, 1899.

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