

LITTLE PATRIOTS - LESSON 20

Booker T. Washington

April 2024

When your alarm goes off on Monday mornings, do you ever let out a big sigh and ask yourself, “Why do I *have to* go to school?” When your mom comes into your room and tells you to hurry up and come eat breakfast, do you respond to her with, “Can’t I just have five more minutes?”

Have you ever considered how fortunate you are to have the opportunity to go to school? In fact, there was a time in America when people – all because of the color of their skin – weren’t allowed to go to school or learn to read and write.

This began to change after the end of the Civil War for the formerly enslaved and their children, but it was still hard for Blacks to get an education. For Blacks during this time, being able to read was a symbol of freedom.¹ It meant that they could be independent, self-reliant, and have the opportunity to thrive.

A man by the name of Dr. Booker Taliaferro Washington recognized how important education was to the success and prosperity of Blacks in America after the Civil War.

Born on April 5, 1856, Booker would grow to become the leading voice for Blacks after the end of the Civil War. [Editor’s note: Booker’s exact birthdate is not officially known, but this is the date most commonly cited.²]

Booker was born into slavery, and the early years of his life were incredibly difficult. He was born in Franklin County, Virginia, on a farm. His mother, Jane, was the cook for the plantation, and he didn’t know his father. He later wrote that his early life was “not very different from those of thousands of other slaves.”³ In his autobiography, “Up From Slavery,” Booker described his childhood on the plantation:

“I was born in a typical log cabin, about fourteen by sixteen feet square. In this cabin I lived with my mother and a brother and sister ... Of my ancestry, I know almost nothing....the cabin was not only

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<https://www.nps.gov/articles/african-americans-and-education-during-reconstruction-the-tolson-s-chapel-schools.htm>

² Teddy and Booker T., Brian Kilmeade, 2023

³ <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/a-birthplace-that-experienced-slavery-the-civil-war-and-emancipation.htm>

our living-place, but was used as the kitchen for the plantation. My mother was the plantation cook. The cabin was without glass windows; it had only openings in the side which let in the light, and also the cold, chilly air of winter...there was no wooden floor in our cabin, the naked earth being used as a floor."⁴

Life for young Booker was hard, miserable, and grueling. Very rarely did Booker and the other enslaved persons on the plantation have enough to eat, and he didn't have a bed to sleep on, just "a bundle of rags."⁵ The young Booker had a strong desire to learn and go to school, but it was illegal for slaves to learn how to read and write.

"I had no schooling whatever while I was a slave," Booker later reflected. "I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise."⁶

Thankfully, the tide changed for nine-year-old Booker, his family, and every other slave in the South when the Union won the Civil War in 1865, granting every enslaved person their freedom.⁷ "The day [that] freedom came," Booker said, "was a momentous and eventful day." He remembered his mother, "standing by my side, leaned over and kissed her children, while tears of joy ran down her cheeks."⁸

Now that Booker and his family were free, they had to make decisions for themselves. Where would they live? What would they do? How would they make money and take care of each other?

In 1865, Jane moved her children to Malden, West Virginia, where her husband and Booker's step-father, Washington "Wash" Ferguson, was working.⁹ Because the family needed money, Booker went to work packing salt at age nine, and labored in a coal mine between 10 and 12 years old. But all the while, Booker still longed to go to school.¹⁰

His mother gifted him a spelling book that he studied for hours.¹¹ "From the time that I can remember having any thoughts about anything," Booker reflected, "I recall that I had a determination to secure an education at any cost."¹² Finally, Wash allowed him to attend the local school for Black children – the Tinkersville Colored School – as long as he worked a half shift before and after his classes.¹³

⁴ <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/a-birthplace-that-experienced-slavery-the-civil-war-and-emancipation.htm>

⁵ <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/a-birthplace-that-experienced-slavery-the-civil-war-and-emancipation.htm>

⁶ <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/learn/photosmultimedia/index.htm>

⁷ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2967.html>

⁸ <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/a-birthplace-that-experienced-slavery-the-civil-war-and-emancipation.htm>

⁹ <https://www.tuskegee.edu/discover-tu/tu-presidents/booker-t-washington>

¹⁰ <https://www.tuskegee.edu/discover-tu/tu-presidents/booker-t-washington>

¹¹ Teddy and Booker T., Brian Kilmeade, 2023

¹² <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/learn/photosmultimedia/index.htm>

¹³ Teddy and Booker T., Brian Kilmeade, 2023

While working in the coal mines one day, Booker learned about a new and amazing school, called the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. It was located in Virginia and would cost money for him to attend, so he got a job working as a houseboy in 1871, during which time he collected every book he could and gathered them together in a dry goods box.¹⁴

The next year, Booker, who “was on fire constantly with one ambition, and that was to go to Hampton,” walked nearly 500 miles from Malden to Hampton to get to the school of his dreams.¹⁵

To get into the school, Booker had to take an entrance exam – but this one didn’t have multiple choice questions! Instead, Booker had to clean a room, which was inspected by teacher with a white handkerchief to see if he left any dirt, dust, or grime behind. Booker passed the test and was accepted into Hampton.

After studying academic subjects, agriculture, manners, personal cleanliness, public speaking, and debate, he graduated with honors from Hampton in 1875 and was selected to speak at the graduation.

But wait, some of these may sound like strange subjects to be learning at school. This was because the principal of the school, Samuel Chapman Armstrong, thought that freedmen and their descendants needed a practical education that focused on developing skills, and fostering good values and character. Armstrong became Booker’s mentor and had a significant influence on his approach to education. Booker described Armstrong as “a great man – the noblest, rarest, human being it has ever been my privilege to meet.”¹⁶

After graduation, Booker went back to Malden to teach and spent eight months as a student at Wayland Seminary. The exclusively academic curriculum of the institution firmed up Booker’s belief that education should emphasize practical skills and self-help. Booker went back to Hampton in 1879, and two years later, Booker became principal of Alabama’s new Tuskegee Normal School – founded to train Black teachers – on the recommendation of Armstrong.

Booker soon found upon his arrival that the school wasn’t actually a school yet – they didn’t have money to buy land, or buildings to use for classrooms. However, the determined Booker was able to get local support and recruit students to open the school on July 4, 1881, in a one-room shack on loan from a Black church.

From there, thanks to the conviction of Booker and the hard work of the students (who built the buildings, made the bricks, and sold bricks for money), the school continued to grow.

¹⁴ <https://www.tuskegee.edu/discover-tu/tu-presidents/booker-t-washington>

¹⁵ <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/learn/photosmultimedia/index.htm>

¹⁶ <https://www.tuskegee.edu/discover-tu/tu-presidents/booker-t-washington>

By 1888, the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute had expanded to 540 acres with an enrollment of more than 400 students. Washington made sure that everything that was learned had a practical application and related to the experiences of the students.¹⁷ Graduates of Tuskegee were then sent out to teach and instruct the children of formerly enslaved Americans.¹⁸

Let's pause for a moment and take a look at what was happening in the southern United States at the time that Booker arrived in Alabama. After the Union victory in the Civil War, the Reconstruction Era brought the southern states back into the fold and worked to ensure that former slaves were able to live freely and have the opportunity to succeed. But, it unfortunately didn't work out this simply.

The end of the Reconstruction era in 1877 meant that the southern states were again left to their own devices. But here was the problem: many southern whites were not happy that they lost the Civil War, and many still wrongly saw Blacks as inferior. Thus, the Jim Crow system, which made different rules and laws for people based on their skin color, began to grow throughout the southern states.¹⁹ Many schools were racially segregated – which meant there were schools for Black children and others (often, better, schools) for white children.²⁰

While Blacks had their freedom, life was still difficult and dangerous during this time, especially in former slave states. Racism – a word which means not liking someone because of the color of their skin or because of where they come from – against Blacks was pronounced.

How did Booker fit into this? He believed that the best way to improve the relationship between Blacks and whites, better the lives of former slaves and their descendants, and eliminate inequality was by giving Blacks the tools they needed to succeed on their own. Meaning, Blacks needed the education and skills to be able to build their own lives as freemen and, as a result, contribute to their communities as active citizens.

Booker made Tuskegee an example of this approach in practice and articulated these ideas in his most famous speech, the Atlanta Exposition Address, in 1895 in which he noted the importance of “dignify[ing] and glorify[ing] common labor and put[ting] brains and skill into the common occupations of life.”²¹

¹⁷ <https://www.tuskegee.edu/discover-tu/tu-presidents/booker-t-washington>

¹⁸ Teddy and Booker T., Brian Kilmeade, 2023

¹⁹ <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african-american-odyssey/reconstruction.html>

²⁰ <https://americansall.org/legacy-story-group/jim-crow-laws-alabama-alaska-arizona-and-arkansas>

²¹ <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/learn/historyculture/atlanta2-1.htm>

Booker declared that Blacks must recognize that “[T]here is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem,” and not “permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.”²²

While some, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, strongly disagreed and called for political action, Booker’s impact as a speaker and thought leader made him the most influential figure in the Black community of his time.²³ So much so, that President Theodore Roosevelt invited him to dinner at the White House in 1901, making Booker the first Black person to dine at the Executive Mansion.

By 1906, Tuskegee’s 25th anniversary, the campus spanned across 2,000 acres, had 83 buildings, an endowment fund of \$1.3 million, more than 1,500 enrolled students, and training programs in 37 industries.

Booker died in 1915 and was survived by his third wife, Margaret, his three children, and four grandchildren.²⁴

Today, his legacy lives on. By his work at Tuskegee and through the example of his own life, Booker proved that anyone, no matter where they come from, what they look like, or how their life begins, can succeed. In America today, we are fortunate to have many opportunities at our fingertips. What we do with those chances we have is what matters. Hard work, a willingness to learn, and a determination to overcome any challenge will take you far. As Booker correctly said, “Luck, as I have experienced it, is only another name for hard work.”²⁵ Ultimately, it is up to you what you do with your life, and how you make it as wonderful and full as it can be.



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²² <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/learn/historyculture/atlanta2-1.htm>

²³ [https://huntingtonny.gov/filestorage/13747/99540/16499/Booker T. Washington.pdf](https://huntingtonny.gov/filestorage/13747/99540/16499/Booker_T._Washington.pdf)

²⁴ <https://www.tuskegee.edu/discover-tu/tu-presidents/booker-t-washington>

²⁵ <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/learn/photosmultimedia/index.htm>