



Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

Early Life: Born into Slavery

- Booker T. Washington was born in 1856 into slavery. His mother, Jane, was an enslaved African-American woman in southwest Virginia, and his father is said to be a white man who lived on a neighbouring plantation. Booker never knew his father, and as such Booker said his father never played an emotional role in his life.
 - At an early age, Booker went to work carrying grain to the plantation's mill. Toting 100-pound sacks was hard work for a small, young boy, and he was sometimes beaten for not performing his duties to the liking of his masters

Freedom after the Civil War

- As a boy of about nine in Virginia, Booker and his family gained freedom under the **Emancipation Proclamation** as US troops occupied their region in Virginia.
- After the Civil War, Booker and his mother moved to Malden, West Virginia, where she married Washington Ferguson, himself a recently freed man. The family was very poor, and 9-year-old Booker went to work in the nearby salt furnaces with his stepfather instead of going to school.
 - Booker's mother noticed his interest in learning and got him a book from which he learned the alphabet as well as how to read and write basic words. Because he was working, he got up nearly every morning at 4 a.m. to practice and study.
 - At about this time, Booker took on the name of his stepfather for his last name, Washington.
- In 1866, Booker T. Washington got a job as a houseboy for Viola Ruffner, the wife of coal mine owner Lewis Ruffner. Mrs. Ruffner was strict with her servants, especially boys. But she saw something in Booker—his maturity, intelligence and integrity—and soon warmed up to him.
 - Booker worked for Ms. Ruffner for two years, and understanding his desire for a formal education she allowed him to go to school for an hour a day during the winter months.

Formal Education and Tuskegee

- In 1872, at age 16, Booker left home and walked 500 miles to Hampton Normal Agricultural Institute in Virginia. Along the way he took odd jobs to support himself. He convinced administrators to let him attend the school and took a job as a janitor to help pay his tuition, and he saved as much as he could from his previous work.
 - General Samuel C. Armstrong, a white man, discovered young Booker and recognized his intellect, offered him a scholarship.
 - Armstrong was a commander of a Union African-American regiment during the Civil War and was a strong supporter of providing newly freed slaves with a practical education. Armstrong became Washington's mentor, strengthening his values of hard work and strong moral character.
- Booker T. Washington graduated from Hampton in 1875 with high marks, and for a time he went back to his old grade school to teach, and attended a religious school for a year in Washington D.C.
- Several years later, in 1879, Booker was chosen to speak at Hampton's graduating ceremonies, and was offered a job to teach there.
 - Two years later, the Alabama state legislature approved for \$2000 to be spent to create a "colored" school named the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. General Armstrong, Booker's mentor, recommended him to run the school. He was offered the job and gladly accepted.

- **Fact: the school still exists! It's now known as Tuskegee University.**
 - Classes were first held in an old church, while Washington traveled all over the countryside promoting the school and raising money. He reassured whites that nothing in the Tuskegee program would threaten white supremacy or pose any economic competition to whites.
- Under Booker T. Washington's leadership, Tuskegee became a leading school in the country. At his death, it had more than 100 well-equipped buildings, 1,500 students, a 200-member faculty teaching 38 trades and professions, and a nearly \$2 million endowment.
 - Washington put much of himself into the school's curriculum, stressing the virtues of patience, enterprise, and thrift.
 - He believed that if African Americans worked hard and obtained financial independence and cultural advancement, they would eventually win acceptance and respect from the white community.

The Atlanta Compromise

- In 1895, Booker T. Washington publicly presented his philosophy on race relations in a speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, known as the "**Atlanta Compromise.**"
 - In his speech, Washington stated that African Americans should accept disenfranchisement and social segregation as long as whites allow them economic progress, educational opportunity and justice in the courts. *This started a firestorm in parts of the African-American community, especially in the North.*
 - Activists deplored Washington's conciliatory philosophy and his belief that African Americans were only suited to vocational training.
 - While Washington did much to help advance many African Americans, there was some truth in the criticism to his approach to improving race relations with white Americans.
 - African Americans were completely excluded from the vote and political participation through black codes and Jim Crow laws as segregation and discrimination became institutionalized throughout the South and much of the United States.

Booker T. Washington: Presidential Advisor & Legacy

- In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington—age 45, to the White House, making him the first African American to be so honored.
- President William Howard Taft, used Washington as an adviser on racial matters, partly because he accepted racial subservience.
 - His White House visit and the publication of his autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, brought him both acclaim and indignation from many Americans. While some African Americans looked upon Washington as a hero, others, including many African-Americans, saw him as a traitor.
- Booker T. Washington was a complex individual. On one hand, he was openly supportive of African Americans taking a "back seat" to whites, while on the other he secretly financed several court cases challenging segregation.
- By 1913, Washington had lost much of his influence. The newly inaugurated Wilson administration was cool to the idea of racial integration and African-American equality.
- Booker T. Washington remained the head of Tuskegee Institute until his death on November 14, 1915, at the age of 59, of congestive heart failure.

Famous Quotes

- "Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome."
- "Character, not circumstances, makes the man."
- "Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way."