PART ONE

THE FORERUNNERS

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

(1856–1915)

Booker Taliaferro Washington was born into slavery five years before the Civil War began. He was nine years old when the Civil War ended and slavery became illegal in the United States. He lived through Reconstruction, the post-Civil War period when federal troops occupied the states of the former Confederacy. During that time, black southerners enjoyed the rights to vote and hold office. However, once the federal troops left, white southerners quickly took away those civil rights. Washington lived his entire life in the South and experienced the frustration of being granted and then denied equal rights, so he decided that blacks should not demand social equality. Instead, they should work to achieve economic equality, and after that perhaps social equality would follow. He emphasized learning, but the learning of trades rather than book learning for its own sake.

Washington was born in Franklin County, Virginia, on April 5, 1856. His mother Jane was enslaved, and his father was a white man whom he never knew. When the Civil War ended, he was sent to work

in a salt mine by his stepfather, a man named Washington Ferguson, whom his mother married sometime after Booker was born. Between the ages of ten and twelve, Booker also worked in coal mines near his home in Malden, Virginia, as did many other children at the time. The work was hard and dangerous.

Eager to learn, Booker managed to obtain a little schooling before and after work. His mother also arranged for the teacher from the local black school to give him lessons at night. As he recalled years later, "[we were] a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn. As fast as any kind of teachers could be secured, not only were day-schools filled, but night-schools as well."[1]

One day while working in the coal mine, he heard two miners talking about "a great school for coloured people somewhere in Virginia." He recalled, "as they went on describing the school, it seemed to me that it must be the greatest place on earth."[2] The school was the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (later Hampton Institute). In 1872, the eager sixteen-year-old began the 500-mile journey to the school, walking most of the way. He arrived with fifty cents in his pocket.

His decision to enroll in Hampton was probably the most important one of his life. The school's principal was General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a man who had commanded black Union army soldiers in the Civil War. He quickly befriended Washington and arranged for a white northern philanthropist to pay the young man's tuition. Washington paid for his room and board by working as a janitor at the school.

Washington said he received two great benefits from his years as a student at Hampton—the friendship of Armstrong and the knowledge of the importance of vocational education: "labour, not alone for its financial value, but for labour's own sake and for the independence

and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants done brings."[3]

Washington graduated from Hampton in 1875 and returned home to Malden to teach. In 1879, he went back to Hampton to teach in a program for Native Americans, where he remained for two years.

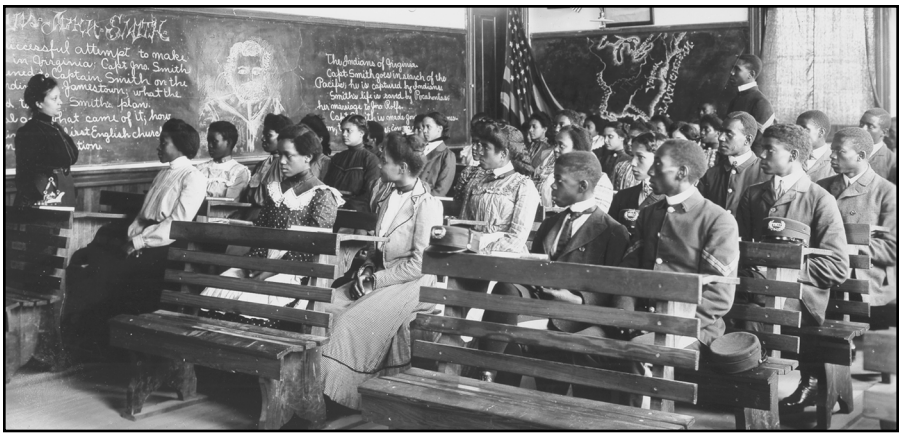
In 1881, through the influence of General Armstrong, Washington was offered a position that would bring him worldwide fame: the principalship of a high school to train black teachers in Tuskegee, Alabama, that had been authorized by the Alabama legislature. The twenty-five-year-old Washington quickly accepted the offer. But when he arrived, he found that the legislature's $2,000 appropriation covered only salaries. There were no school buildings or land.

He recruited students from throughout the county, and held the institute's first classes in a shanty near the black Methodist church. The church was used as an assembly hall. Washington said the shanty was in such poor shape that "whenever it rained, one of the older students would very kindly leave his lessons to hold an umbrella over me."[4]

THE PRINCIPAL BUILDS HIS SCHOOL

A personal loan from the treasurer at Hampton Institute enabled Booker T. Washington to buy an abandoned plantation on the edge of Tuskegee, Alabama. The mansion on the plantation had been burned down, but he had the Tuskegee students repair a stable and a henhouse for use as classrooms. Black residents in the area contributed whatever money they could toward buying materials for a new building. One farmer who had no money, gave a "fine hog."

A white sawmill owner supplied the lumber, even though Washington could not pay him until much later. With this help, and money from several whites in the North, Washington put his thirty students to work erecting Tuskegee's first new building.



Tuskegee students gather for a history class in one of the many classrooms built with the skillful hands of students.

All of Tuskegee's buildings were constructed by the students. Washington was determined that they "would be taught to see not only utility in labour, but beauty and dignity."[5] By 1888, Tuskegee owned 540 acres of land, had an enrollment of over four hundred students, and offered courses in printing, cabinetmaking, carpentry, farming, cooking, sewing, and other vocational skills. In 1896, the young scientist George Washington Carver joined the faculty as director of agricultural research. Washington believed in practical, vocational education. Not only did it give people skills to make a living, but it also gave them independence and self-reliance.

Washington was not the first black educator to teach the virtues of self-reliance, though none did it more successfully. His name became a household word throughout the country, however, for another reason. In his "Atlanta Compromise" speech on September 18, 1895, at the opening of the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, Washington urged black Americans to accept segregation and its second-class status.

He declared: "The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly."[6]

The legendary educator Booker T. Washington poses with a group of Tuskegee Institute teachers and trustees.

Black members of the audience wept openly at this surrender of their dreams of equality, but the majority of white Americans loved the speech. White editorial writers and politicians took it upon themselves to proclaim Washington the new black leader (Frederick Douglass, the leading African American for decades, had died a few months before).

John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and other wealthy industrialists contributed money to Washington for black education. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft consulted him on which black Americans should receive governmental jobs. But Washington's critics charged that his opposition to nonvocational academic training for black people would keep African Americans on the bottom rungs of society's ladder.

Washington was a more complex man than some of his critics realized. Though he told black people to accept segregation, he also fought behind the scenes to end it. His work encouraging an investigation into black peonage (semi-slavery) in Alabama helped bring about a federal court ruling that the practice was unconstitutional.

In 1904, Washington secretly financed a legal challenge against Alabama for denying qualified black people the right to vote. He financed successful appeals in an Alabama case involving the exclusion of black people from a jury. He also helped challenge transporta-

tion laws requiring separate seating for blacks and whites. These actions were done so carefully that few black people, and almost no white people, knew about them.

In the latter years of his life, Washington was helped at the institute by its principal—his third wife, Margaret Murray Washington. They were married in 1893. Washington's first wife, Fannie M. Smith, had died in 1884 after two years of marriage. They had one daughter. In 1885, Washington had married a second time to Olivia A. Davidson, the assistant principal of Tuskegee. She died in 1889, leaving him two sons.

Washington passed away at Tuskegee from heart disease and overwork on November 14, 1915, at the age of fifty-nine. His funeral, which was held three days later in the Tuskegee Institute Chapel, was attended by almost 8,000 people. A special train bearing dignitaries came from New York City.

Booker Taliaferro Washington was buried in a brick tomb on a hilltop that overlooked the institute. Fittingly enough, the tomb was built by his students with bricks that they had made.

WHO IS RIGHT, BOOKER T. OR W. E. B.?

In *The Souls of Black Folk* the black scholar and leader W. E. B. Du Bois summed up his opinion of Washington and the passive path he urged blacks to follow in his famous "Atlanta Compromise" speech: "So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him. . . . But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice . . . and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brightest minds,—so far as he, the South, or the Nation, does this,—we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them."[7]