

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 6: Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856-1915)

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The First African-American to appear on a US stamp, 1940

Primary Works

The future of the American Negro. NY: Haskell House, 1968. (1899) E185.6 .W313

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The story of my life and work. With an introd. by J. L. M. Curry. Copiously illustrated with photo engravings, original pen drawings by Frank Beard. NY: New American Library, 1970. E185.97 W29

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| [Top](#) | Booker T. Washington (1856-1915): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Melinda Origel

Booker T. Washington was born on April 5, 1856 on a small tobacco plantation in the backcountry of Franklin, Virginia. However, Mr. Washington had doubts of the year he was born. In his autobiographical writings volume I, he wrote, "As nearly as I can get at the facts, I was born in the year 1858 or 1859. At the time I came into the world no careful registry of births of people of my complexion was kept" (Harlan, 10). Booker T. Washington's mother was a slave named Jane; his father was an unknown white man. His mother was the cook for the farm, and the little log cabin where Booker lived was the farm's kitchen (Mansfield, 45). Mr. Washington had an older brother named John and a younger sister named Amanda. The family's home was twelve by sixteen feet with no windows, and a hinged device with large holes in it that some called a door, and a shallow pit in the middle of the dirt floor where sweet potatoes were stored (45). The children slept together on a pile of dirty rags called a pallet, their only protection from the dirt floor (45). Still, home for any child is the spot nearest the mother, and as slave children went, Booker was fortunate to know who his mother was, much less to live with her and feel her love (45). This was Booker's home until 1865, the year the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished.

Booker had always had a deep abiding hunger to learn, despite the fact that he was not afforded the opportunity to attend school until he was practically in his teens (12). When he was finally granted to go to school, Booker was only allowed to attend half of the day (Harlan, 15). His stepfather wanted him to get up very early in the morning and perform as much work as possible before leaving for school (15). The first embarrassment Booker experienced at school was in the matter of finding a name; he did not have a surname, so when the teacher called roll Booker told him to put his name down as Booker Washington (16). He had just chosen his own name; not every schoolboy has the privilege of choosing his own name (16). Sadly, Booker's family financial burdens soon drove him out of school, into night school, and into the exhausting labor of the nearby coalmines (Mansfield, 58).

After working in the mines for quite some time, Booker was offered a job as a houseboy for a woman named Viola Ruffner (61). He eagerly accepted the job to escape the drudgery of the mines (61). Mrs. Ruffner had been a Vermont schoolteacher, and in time her imprint on his life became even more pronounced (62). When his work was done, she let him mine her extensive library; she even encouraged him to build a library of his own (62). The lessons he learned in the home of Mrs. Ruffner were as valuable to him as any education he had received (63). Once again, Booker was forced to go back to the mines and leave Mrs. Ruffner's home; however, while working in the mines he overheard two miners talking about a school for colored people somewhere in Virginia (63).

In 1872, Booker attended the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. At this institute Mr. Washington had a tight schedule; at 5:00 a.m. was the rising bell, and at 9:30 p.m. was the retiring bell (68). The tight schedule was not the only thing he had to learn; there were so many things that were new to him. For instance, taking regular baths, eating regular meals, using a toothbrush, eating with utensils, using a napkin, shining shoes, and sleeping in between the sheets (68). At Hampton, Booker flourished in debates and public speaking; this caused him to organize among fellow students a semi-official debating organization of which he was the leader (Drinker, 45).

In 1875, Booker graduated with honors from Hampton Institute; however his mother could not witness the glorious event, she died the previous summer (Mansfield, 71). Before she died, she had told him something that resurrected a long-silenced mystery in his heart; when he was born she named him Booker Taliaferro (72). This was the name of a nearby plantation family in Hale's Ford (72). It was not known whether Jane simply admired the name or whether the name contained some hint to his father's identity (72). After graduation, Booker went to teach at a colored school in Malden, West Virginia (73). He also started a night school, and when this wasn't enough, he opened a reading room and a debating society and worked tirelessly to send deserving students to Hampton (73). Mr. Washington also instructed his students in the use of a toothbrush, advised them about bathing, taught them to comb and brush their hair, and sought to develop their self-respect by generally keeping themselves clean (Drinker, 48).

| [Top](#) | In 1879, Booker was invited to become a teacher at Hampton (Mansfield, 79). Booker accepted with great gratitude and soon began to sense he was being groomed for some future role of leadership (79). While at Hampton, Booker's greatest challenge came in the form of seventy-five young Native American students (79). Everyone knew that Indians thought themselves superior to blacks, having owned many slaves in their earlier history (80). However, Booker did not hesitate to civilize these students; he patiently helped them to learn the intricacies of

the white man's clothing, taught them to love academic work, and even induced them to exchange their iwar games(for the infant sport of football. (80). The Native American students soon became fond of him.

When one Native American student became ill, Booker had to return him to the Secretary of Interior in Washington (81). While on the steamboat, Booker found that he was unwelcome; a steward informed him that he would not be served (81). Later, upon arriving in Washington he tried to register at a hotel, once again he was refused. Although, his sick student was free to remain (81). This made Booker think seriously about the arrogance of the white man (83). This was the world as Mr. Washington confronted it in his work at Hampton, and this was the face of the enemy he was now summoned to defeat (83). The principal of Hampton gave Booker a direct reward for his earnest and effective work, the opportunity of his lifetime (Drinker, 54).

General Armstrong announced that he had received a letter from Tuskegee, Alabama asking him to recommend someone to take charge of a school, which was to be established for the education of colored people (54). The principal recommended Booker, and the response General Armstrong received was, iBooker T. Washington will suit us. When Mr. Washington arrived at Tuskegee in June 1881, he expected to find a school; he found nothing of the kind (Mansfield, 88). Booker was given two thousand dollars for the establishment of the school, and the only available building was an old dilapidated church (Drinker, 59). Booker was twenty-five years old when the school opened on the Fourth of July, 1881. The first month of school the attendance doubled, and people in the town took notice (Mansfield, 92). After six weeks, a new and rare face joined the fledgling endeavor, a woman with determination and courage by the name of Olivia Davidson (92).

With the first year of school behind him, Booker slowed down enough to marry his sweetheart from Malden (94). Fannie Norton Smith who became a student at Hampton, and who by her interest in his work gave him inspiration (Drinker, 66). When Fannie graduated in 1882, Booker proposed and they were married on August 12, 1882 in Tinkersville, West Virginia (Mansfield, 94). On June 6, 1883, a daughter, Portia Marshall Washington was born. In May 1884, his beloved Fannie died; the local papers reported the cause as consumption of the bowels, but her family remembered that she had fallen off a wagon at a picnic and suffered internal injuries (96). Booker was torn to pieces; only love for a daughter and the needs of his people kept him from cavernous despair (96).

| [Top](#) | In 1885, a year after the death of Fannie, Booker married Olivia Davidson, the vice-principal at Tuskegee (98). In 1887, Booker T. Washington Jr. was born, and in 1889 Earnest Davidson Washington was born. It was a happy time for Booker; however, in 1889, after four years of marriage, Olivia died (99). She had simply worked herself into the grave (99). Booker widowed twice in five years, was left with three children (99).

The 1890s were years of visibility and fame; it began when Booker was invited to speak at Nashville's Fisk University (99). The speech he gave marked new heights for Mr. Washington. For instance, his speeches were not just about Tuskegee, but more of a policy speech on the state of the black race in America (99). Also, his speeches were reported in leading newspapers and he was being introduced as Professor Washington (100).

While the nation began to see Mr. Washington with new eyes, his own eyes had fallen on a pretty Fisk senior by the name of Margaret James Murray (100). She was the daughter of a slave woman and Irishman; but was raised by Quakers (100). In 1892, Booker and Margaret were married, and his new wife would introduce him to a new culture of literature (101).

In 1895, Booker was invited to be a keynote speaker for an Atlanta event called the Cotton States and International Exhibition (103). He spoke of black progress to a largely white audience at a fair designed to celebrate the recovery of the south from losing war against slavery (103). The speech itself was a finely crafted expression of Booker's philosophy (104). What roused the crowd was the clear poetic expression of practical wisdom for the problems of the age; this was something they had not expected (104). Even a young Harvard Ph.D. by the name of W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, iLet me heartily congratulate you upon your phenomenal success at Atlanta; it was a word fitly spoken (106).

The acclaim that now came to Booker was never before given to a black man in America; he was awarded an honorary Master's Degree from Harvard University in 1886 (106). *The Washington Times* promoted him for a cabinet post, and he was asked to make speeches at numerous official occasions (106). In 1898, President William McKinley visited Tuskegee, along with a crowd of six thousand that included the state governor and the entire Alabama legislature (106). With such intense interest centered upon him, Mr. Washington felt compelled to commit his story to print (106). In 1900, *The story of my life and work* was published, and this book brought its author international respect.

| [Top](#) | The year 1901 was quite a year for Booker, *Up from slavery*, the book he is most known for was published. Dartmouth College gave him an honorary degree; and he dined with Theodore Roosevelt in the White House. He also had tea with the Queen of England. He was the first black man to ever be afforded these opportunities (251).

In 1903, he received a \$600,000 endowment from Andrew Carnegie, and in 1911, his third book called, *My Larger Education* was published. In 1912, *The Man Farthest Down* was published.

Booker T. Washington died November 14, 1915 at Tuskegee, Alabama. Throughout his career his racial policies drew diverse critical reactions (10: 512). Black intellectuals often harshly criticized him for his separate but equal concept as well as for his seeming acceptance of his disenfranchisement (513). According to critic August Meier, "Those who accepted his accommodating doctrines understood that through tact and indirection he hoped to secure the good will of the white man and the eventual recognition of the constitutional rights of American Negroes" (513). Booker taught his race to plan, to envision the unfolding decades and invest for them; he urged them to define success in terms of the whole of the Negro race and in terms of generations (Mansfield, 247). He taught that this is how great civilizations are made, and it was to this vision that he sought to stir the race he loved so dearly (247).

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