Booker T. Washington

Washington, Booker T.

Record Information

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Description:

Booker Taliaferro Washington was a prominent spokesman for African Americans from 1880 until his death in 1915. As founder and head of the Tuskegee Institute, a college-level school for blacks in Alabama, he advocated a program of what would now be called vocational education as a means of equipping blacks to gain an economic foothold in American society.

Booker Taliaferro Washington was probably the most influential black leader of his time. He wielded an enormous amount of power among both black and white people. He advised presidents on race relations; helped to decide black political appointments throughout the nation and white political appointments in the South; and was supported by the major part of the black press of his day.

Yet Washington was also an enormously controversial figure. He believed that black people should concentrate their energies on improving themselves through industrial education—learning a trade—so that they could become employed and self-supporting. This, he argued, was more important than trying to win political power through electing black officials, and more useful than trying to win social equality through integrating restaurants, trains, schools, and other public places.

Many influential black leaders strongly disagreed with Washington, most notably, W. E. B. DuBois, James Monroe Trotter, Henry McNeal Turner and Charles Waddell Chesnutt. Those writers believed that black people must aspire to both political power and social equality—to elect their own officials, develop highly educated black professionals, and work to fully integrate American society.

Washington's most visible achievement was the establishment of Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), the industrial school in Alabama that was supposed to be a model for black self-improvement through education. Under his

leadership, Tuskegee, which began as a collection of temporary shelters and shanties, grew to more than 60 permanent buildings endowed with nearly $3 million. The school was built through the efforts of the students, and through the donations of wealthy white northerners, who agreed with Washington's theories of black self-improvement. Booker T. Washington was born Booker Taliaferro, on April 5, 1856, the child of an unknown white man and Jane, the slave cook of a small planter in rural Virginia. After Booker was born, his mother married a slave, Washington Ferguson. Later, when Booker enrolled in school, he used "Washington" as his surname.

His childhood was spent as a slave on the Virginia farm where he was born. In 1865, when slavery had ended, his mother took the children to Malden, West Virginia, where her husband had found work in the salt mines. Washington was then only nine. For the next three years, he packed salt for a meager wage, and worked in a coal mine. In 1871, Washington went to work as a houseboy for the local mine owner. He had been trying in the meantime to educate himself, and could now attend school while working. Thus, in 1872, at 16, he was able to enter Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia. He had to walk most of the way from his home in West Virginia to the school in Hampton, Virginia. Once there, he worked as a janitor for room and board. Fortunately, the school principal, Samuel Chapman Armstrong, found a patron to pay his tuition. Washington, graduated with honors in 1875, and returned to West Virginia to teach. In 1878, he continued his education at Wayland Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. In contrast to the practical teaching at Hampton, Wayland's curriculum was all academic.

The two experiences convinced Washington that practical skills were more important, and in 1879, he went back to Hampton to teach American Indians. In 1881, Washington's great opportunity came. The Alabama legislature wanted toestablish a school at Tuskegee to train black teachers. Armstrong, the Hampton principal, was invited to recommend a white teacher—but he named Washington. Washington accepted, only to find that the school had no money, no land, and no buildings. Only $2,000 was available to pay teachers' salaries. Somehow, Washington managed to put together an institution. He recruited local black students, gained the support of local white residents, and found a shack that was lent tohim by a black church for his first building. Eventually by borrowing money and involving students in construction, he was able to buy a local plantation and build dorms, classrooms, a dining hall, and a chapel. These buildings were built with bricks from a kiln the students themselves had made, and they continued to sell bricks to raise money.

Little by little, Washington built Tuskegee, focusing always on practical skills, such as carpentry and farming for boys, and homemaking tasks for girls. (In those days, few people questioned such a division of labor.) He also taught students personal hygiene and manners, and stressed "building good character."
In 1882, Washington married Fannie N. Smith, who died two years later after bearing a child. In 1885, he married again—Olivia A. Davidson, the assistant principal of Tuskegee. She too died young, in 1889, after having two children. Finally, in 1893, Washington married a third time, to Margaret Murray, who had become a

principal at Tuskegee in 1889. She later directed all the girls' programs at Tuskegee and initiated programs for local women.

Tuskegee's influence was growing. The school held annual Tuskegee Negro Conferences beginning in 1892, inviting thousands of black people to come and learn new farming methods. Graduates of Tuskegee went on to found similar schools around the South.

Washington's influence was also growing. His fund-raising efforts brought him into contact with many northern millionaires. He helped to establish the Anna T. Jeanes Fund and the Phelps-Stokes Fund—philanthropic foundations that provided channels for the wealthy to assist black education.

Washington's political influence gained ground in 1895, when he was invited to speak toa multiracial audience at the International Exposition in Atlanta. In this speech, he apologized for black people having started at the "top"—electing black political officials under Reconstruction—instead of at the "bottom"—through educating themselves. He stressed that black people should not actively seek social equality, but rather educate themselves and rely on the kindness and fairness of white southerners. The white people in the audience received this message with thunderous cheers. According to a white reporter, however, at the end of the speech, "most of the Negroes in the audience were crying, perhaps without knowing just why."

After this speech, Washington's political power grew even greater, and he was much in demand as a speaker around the country. His fame grew further in 1901 with the publication of *Up from Slavery* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), his autobiography. When Theodore Roosevelt was elected president in the same year, Washington became an influential adviser, although he eventually lost this political inroad when Democrat Woodrow Wilson took office in 1913. Wilson was known for his lack of sympathy for civil rights, and his Democratic Party was the stronghold of southerners who had opposed political equality for black Americans since well before the Civil War. Modern historians speak of the many contradictions in Washington's career. He told southern black people that Jim Crow laws (laws enforcing rigid segregation) did not matter; yet, he broke those laws by riding first class in the white Pullman cars of southern railroads. He hoped to prevent lynchings and to get some kind of economic justice for black people through compromise and accommodation, but during the years of his influence, racial violence and black poverty increased.

Washington died on November 14, 1915, from arteriosclerosis, at the relatively young age of 59. He had become ill while in New York City but managed to return home toTuskegee to die. Nearly 8,000 people attended his funeral. Later, he became the first African American to be commemorated on a postage stamp.

Washington's legacy is a mixed one. He is remembered as the target of a great deal of criticism for his efforts to accommodate and pacify white supremacists by urging black Americans to avoid political action and militant organizing. But he founded a major black institution that continues to exist today, achieving a level of tremendous

power and influence in both black and white communities, and he provided inspiration and leadership for later generations of black Americans.

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