

The "Impossible" Dream

Booker T. Washington



Imagine this: You are born a black slave in Virginia and, more than anything, you want to go to school. But since it's against the law to educate slaves, you aren't even taught to read or write. In spite of the odds against you, however, you never give up your dream for an education.

Your name is Booker T. Washington, and you end up not only getting a college education yourself, but also helping other black citizens receive an education. Under your leadership, the Tuskegee Institute becomes one of the most famous schools in America. You are later remembered for helping black Americans rise up from the economic slavery that held them down long after they were legally free citizens.

"I will permit no man to narrow and degrade my soul by making me hate him."

—Booker T. Washington
(1856–1915)



They Stood Alone!

Washington was born a slave on the Burroughs tobacco farm in Virginia, and, because slave records were seldom kept back then, his birth date can only be estimated as 1856. His mother was a cook and his father was a white man from a nearby farm whom Washington never knew.

The squalid conditions in which he lived were commonplace for slaves: a one-room, dirt-floored cabin 14 × 16 feet with no windows and only a fireplace for cooking and heating. He and his family slept on rags heaped on the floor.

More than anything he wanted to go to school, but since it was against the law to educate slaves, he wasn't even taught to read or write.

He said later that his first realization that he was a slave came early one morning as a young boy when he awoke to find his mother praying over her children that Lincoln's armies would win and that one day she and her family would be free.²⁶

When the Civil War ended in 1865, his mother's prayer was answered, and his family moved to West Virginia where his stepfather had found work in the salt mines.

For Washington, freedom meant one thing: now he could go to school. But his stepfather had a different idea. The family needed money, so Washington had to work in the salt mines along with his brother and stepfather from dawn to nine o'clock at night with very few breaks during the day.

While working in the salt mines, each salt packer was given a barrel marked with a number and his father's number was 18. Booker learned to recognize that number and to write it.

From that time on he had an intense longing to read and persuaded his mother to get hold of a book for him. Somewhere his mother found an old Webster's spelling book, and it became his most treasured possession. The book con-

tained the alphabet, and he studied that book until he had mastered the entire alphabet.

In his autobiography he later wrote, "In all my efforts to learn to read my mother shared fully my ambition, and sympathized with me and aided me in every way that she could."²⁷

Though his mother was totally ignorant as far as book knowledge was concerned, she had high ambitions for her children, and Washington later said that the lessons in virtue and thrift she taught him remained with him all his life. No one was stricter than his mother in teaching and observing the highest rules of integrity.

To support the teacher at the black school that had opened in their community, parents of the students took turns feeding and boarding him in their homes.

Even though Washington wasn't a student because he had to work, his mother still agreed to invite the teacher to join them for meals one day each month. And soon Washington was receiving private lessons at night.

His stepfather finally agreed to let Washington go to school a few months of the year, but only if he continued to work from four o'clock until nine o'clock in the morning and then return to work in the mines for a few more hours after school. Washington later said that his first day at school was the happiest day of his life.

All the other boys wore caps to school, but his mother couldn't afford to buy him one, so she sewed two pieces of cloth together and that was his cap. The other boys teased him about his crude homemade cap, but Booker wore it proudly.

Regarding that incident, he later wrote that that was an important lesson his mother had taught him. She had the strength of character to do what she could for him, but she refused to worry about trying to impress his schoolmates and

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others with the fact that she was able to buy him a "store hat" when she was not.

Unable to keep up the grueling schedule, he soon had to drop out of school and work all day at the salt mines.

When he was about twelve, he went to work in a coal mine where one day he heard two men talking about a new school for African Americans, a school set up by whites to educate African Americans after the Civil War.

It was called the Hampton Institute, and black students could go there even if they didn't have any money. They could pay their way by working at the school. Washington didn't know where Hampton was or how to get there. He only knew that somehow he would go to this school.

No one sympathized with his ambition to go to Hampton more than his mother, but even she feared that he might be starting out on a wild-goose chase. He did get her half-hearted consent, however, so he started out.

It took him weeks to make his way the five hundred miles to Hampton all on his own, walking most of the way. Once there, the female principal told him to sweep a room for her. He knew it was a test, so he swept and dusted the room three times until not a speck of dirt remained. He was accepted into the school, and he had attained his "impossible" dream.

While at the Hampton Institute, he worked as a janitor to pay his way, and he learned important lessons about education that would stay with him the rest of his life. He learned that cleanliness was an important part of one's self-worth, that education did not mean that one was above manual labor, and that one should lead by example.

One teacher, Miss Nathalie Lord, gave him lessons in public speaking which helped him a great deal later on in attaining financial and moral support for his work.

After graduating from Hampton, he returned to his hometown and taught day school, night classes, and two Sunday schools. In 1881 he was selected to be the principal of a new school for African Americans in Alabama called Tuskegee. When its doors opened on July 4, 1881, the school was little more than a broken down shanty and an old henhouse with one teacher and thirty students.

Under Washington's leadership, the Tuskegee Institute grew into one of the most famous schools in America. He always stressed the importance of cleanliness and spirituality and that there was no shame in being a laborer. He believed that "no race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem."²⁸

The emphasis at Tuskegee was on the trades and daily living skills. He believed in educating the "head, hand, and the heart," and he hoped that his graduates would go throughout the country and be an example to all who came in contact with them.

He told his students to build their own houses so they would not be homeless and to grow food and raise animals so they would never be hungry.

Washington's enormous capacity for hard work and his success in winning financial and moral support in the cause of Negro education earned him a national reputation as the outstanding black leader of his day.

In 1896, Washington was awarded an honorary master's degree from Harvard, the nation's oldest university. He had come a long way since his childhood as an impoverished slave who dreamed of one day learning to read.

When Washington died in 1915 at age fifty-nine, he was one of the most well known (black or white) men in the world, and more than eight thousand people attended his funeral held in the Tuskegee Institute Chapel.

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This extraordinary black educator who was born a slave overcame near-impossible odds to become one of the most powerful black leaders of his time.

Washington believed that the way to gain equality was through education, and his name still brings to mind leadership, academic excellence, and the ongoing pursuit of equality for everyone.