

**Washington, Booker T.** (5 Apr. 1856?-14 Nov. 1915), educator and race leader, was born on the plantation of James Burroughs, near Hale's Ford in Franklin County, Virginia, the son of an unknown white father and Jane, a slave cook owned by Burroughs. Washington was never certain of the date of his birth and showed little interest in who his father might have been. His mother gave him his first and middle names, Booker Taliaferro; he took his last name in 1870 from his stepfather, Washington Ferguson, a slave whom his mother had married. In his autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901), he recalled the poverty of his early years as a slave on Burroughs's plantation, but because emancipation came when he was around nine, he was spared the harsher experiences of the slave system. In 1865, at the end of the Civil War, his mother moved him, his half-sister, and his half-brother to Malden, West Virginia, where her husband had found work. Young Booker was put to work packing salt from a nearby mine and later did even harder work in a coal mine.

Two women were influential in Washington's early education. The first was his mother. He displayed an intense interest in learning to read; although illiterate herself, she bought her son a spelling book and encouraged him to learn. While working in the mines, Washington also began attending a local elementary school for black youths. The other female influence was Viola Ruffner, wife of General Lewis Ruffner, owner of the mines. Probably around the age of eleven, eager to escape the brutal mine work, he secured a position as Viola Ruffner's houseboy. She had a prickly personality, was a demanding taskmaster, and had driven off several other boys, but in the eighteen months he worked for her he came to absorb and appreciate her emphasis on the values of hard work, cleanliness, and thrift; thereby an unlikely bond of affection and respect developed between these two people from very different backgrounds. Early on Ruffner spotted the ambition in young Washington: "He seemed peculiarly determined to emerge from his obscurity. He was ever restless, uneasy, as if knowing that contentment would mean inaction. 'Am I getting on?'--that was his principal question" (quoted in Gilson Willetts, "Slave Boy and Leader of His Race," *New Voice* 16 [24 June 1899]: 3).

In 1872, at age sixteen, Washington entered Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia; it turned out to be one of the most important steps of his life. Having overheard two miners talking about the school for young blacks, he had determined to make his way there and set out on the 500-mile trip with a small sum of money donated by family and friends, barely enough to take him partway by train. The rest of the monthlong journey was on foot or via an occasional passing wagon. He arrived with fifty cents in his pocket and asked to be admitted. Ordered to clean out a room, and sensing that this might be his entrance examination, he swept and dusted until the room was spotless and was soon a Hampton student. While there he worked as a custodian to help defray his expenses.

Hampton Institute, only four years old at the time, was a monument to its principal, General [Samuel Chapman Armstrong](#), probably the single most influential person in Washington's life. Born of missionary parents in Hawaii, Armstrong had led black troops in the Civil War. Convinced that the future of the freedmen lay in practical and industrial education and the instilling of Christian virtues, Armstrong had founded Hampton under the auspices of the American Missionary Association. In Booker Washington he found an extraordinarily apt and ambitious pupil. Washington not only learned agriculture, brickmasonry, and the standard academic subjects taught at Hampton, more importantly he absorbed the entire philosophy of character building and utilitarian education stressed by the handsome and charismatic Armstrong.

After graduating in 1875, Washington returned to Malden for three years to teach in a black school and to spread the Hampton philosophy. Several months spent at Wayland Seminary, a Baptist institution, in Washington, D.C., in 1878-1879 convinced the restless young Washington that he was not cut out for the ministry. In addition, his exposure to the poverty and degeneracy of lower-class urban life instilled in him a lifelong dislike of cities. This prejudice would later weaken to a degree his message to his fellow blacks to remain in the rural South, at a time when far greater job opportunities were to be found in the nation's burgeoning cities.

Somewhat adrift in the late 1870s, having rejected the ministry, law, and public school teaching as viable careers, Washington was invited back to Hampton in 1879 by General Armstrong to run the night school and later to supervise the dormitory for Indian boys, who had recently been admitted. As usual, his performance was exemplary. In the spring of 1881 Armstrong received a request from three education commissioners in Alabama to recommend a white principal for a new Negro normal school to be established in Tuskegee. He wrote a persuasive letter urging them to accept Washington instead. They agreed, and the young educator was soon on the way to what would be his

life's work. On arriving in Alabama, he learned that the state legislature had appropriated \$2,000 for salaries only. There was no land, no buildings, no campus.

Plunging into unrelenting activity, Washington won over local whites in the community, began to recruit black students who were hungry for education, and held the first classes in a shanty. One of his mentors at Hampton was the school's treasurer, James F. B. Marshall, an elderly and kindly ex-general who now began coaching Washington in the arts of financial management and extracting money from wealthy white benefactors. With a \$200 loan from Marshall, Washington purchased land outside of town for a permanent campus. Student labor erected the initial buildings of Tuskegee Institute, and student farming supplied much of the foodstuff for the dormitory kitchen. Tuskegee would grow to 2,000 acres and 100 buildings, with a faculty of nearly 200 and an endowment close to \$2 million by the time of Washington's death.

In spite of Washington's national fame in years to come, Tuskegee never ceased to be his base of operations and the enterprise to which he devoted most of his time. Each morning began with a horseback ride to inspect the campus. He hired and fired faculty, admitted and expelled students, oversaw the smallest details of finances and purchasing, bought more land when he could, kept creditors at bay when he had to, and spent much time cultivating northern philanthropists for donations, at which he became extremely adept. Among the notable benefactors of Tuskegee were steel magnate [Andrew Carnegie](#), oilman [John D. Rockefeller](#), camera manufacturer [George Eastman](#), and [Julius Rosenwald](#), president of Sears, Roebuck, and Co.

In many respects Tuskegee was a "colony" of Hampton Institute, as Washington had imbibed General Armstrong's emphasis on industrial skills and character building. The vocational curriculum included some thirty-eight subjects, including printing, carpentry, cabinetmaking, and farming. Female students specialized in cooking, sewing, and other domestic skills. In addition to the standard academic subjects, from grammar and composition to history, mathematics, chemistry, and bookkeeping, strong emphasis was placed on personal hygiene and moral development and on daily chapel services. At the time of Washington's death the student body numbered more than fifteen hundred.

Unlike Hampton, however, Washington's faculty and administrative staff were all black, and many were graduates of Hampton and Fisk University. Notable among the staff were botanist and agricultural researcher [George Washington Carver](#) and [Monroe Nathan Work](#), the sociologist and bibliographer of black history and life who spent thirty-seven years at Tuskegee as head of the Records and Research Department. The highly capable Olivia Davidson, a graduate of Hampton and the Framingham State Normal School near Boston, arrived in 1881 to serve as principal of the female students and came as close as anyone to being Washington's co-superintendent. For the last eighteen years of his life, Washington's personal private secretary, factotum, and alter ego was [Emmett J. Scott](#), an extraordinarily loyal, astute, and circumspect assistant who handled much of Washington's correspondence, supervised the Tuskegee office staff, and was privy to all of Washington's secret machinations at controlling black American politics.

Washington was married three times. His first wife, Fannie N. Smith, his sweetheart from Malden, gave birth to a child in 1883, the year after their marriage, but died prematurely the next year. In 1885 Washington married Olivia Davidson; they had two children. This too was a short marriage, for she had suffered from physical maladies for years and died in 1889. Four years later he married Margaret J. Murray ([Margaret Washington](#)), a Fisk graduate who had replaced Davidson as lady principal. She remained Washington's wife for the rest of his life, helping to raise his three children and continuing to play a major role at Tuskegee.

As Tuskegee Institute grew it branched out into other endeavors. The annual Tuskegee Negro Conferences, inaugurated in 1892, sought solutions for impoverished black farmers through crop diversity and education. The National Negro Business League, founded in 1900, gave encouragement to black enterprises and publicized their successes. Margaret Washington hosted women's conferences on campus. Washington established National Negro Health Week and called attention to minority health issues in addresses nationwide.

By the mid-1880s Washington was becoming a fixture on the nation's lecture circuit. This exposure both drew attention and dollars to Tuskegee and allowed the black educator to articulate his philosophy of racial advancement.

In a notable 1884 address to the National Education Association in Madison, Wisconsin, Washington touted education for Negroes--"brains, property, and character"--as the key to black advancement and acceptance by white southerners. "Separate but equal" railroad and other public facilities were acceptable to blacks, he argued, as long as they really were equal. This speech foreshadowed the accommodationist racial compromises he would preach for the rest of his life. During the 1880s and 1890s Washington went out of his way to soft-pedal racial insults and attacks on blacks (including himself) by whites. He courted southern white politicians who were racial moderates, arguing that black Americans had to exhibit good citizenship, hard work, and elevated character in order to win the respect of the "better sort" of whites. Full political and social equality would result in all due time, he maintained.

The apogee of Washington's career as a spokesman for his race occurred at the opening of Atlanta's Cotton States and International Exposition in September 1895. This was one of a number of such fairs held to highlight the South's progress since the Civil War. Blacks had their own, albeit segregated, exhibit space at the exposition, and the Atlanta leaders of the affair invited Washington to give a ten-minute address. He spent much time honing the speech, sensing its symbolic importance, and was uncharacteristically nervous as 18 September approached.

Dubbed the "Atlanta Compromise," the speech was a masterpiece of tact and ambiguity intended to impress all members of the integrated audience--northern whites, southern whites, and blacks from the South. It had all been said before by Washington but never as succinctly and before such an important gathering. Though acceding realistically to the deplorable state of race relations in the United States at that time, Washington seemed to accept the existence of segregation for his people and urged them not to push for integrated facilities and other civil and political rights. "The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing." He urged southern Negroes to "cast down your bucket where you are"--stay in the South, gain education, and through hard work win the economic advancement that would also gain them the respect of their white neighbors. He reminded his white listeners that the blacks among them made up one-third of the South's population and that the fates of the two races were inextricably bound. The climax of the speech, which brought the audience to its feet in thunderous applause, was the memorable sentence: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."

The Atlanta Compromise speech unquestionably secured Washington's position as the leading spokesman for American blacks to the larger white community and particularly to the white power structure of American politics, and it was lavishly praised by white leaders. Symbolically the torch of black leadership had also been passed to a younger generation, inasmuch as [Frederick Douglass](#), the former slave turned abolitionist, orator, and journalist, who had been the most notable black American of his day, had died a few months before Washington spoke. Washington had tapped into the classic American myth that hard work, self-discipline, and economic independence would win for any citizen the respect of his neighbors. He conveniently ignored or chose to omit the fact that at the very time he spoke American race relations were at their worst point since the end of the Civil War, with lynchings and other violence, grinding poverty, and legal and extralegal discrimination at the ballot box a fact of life for most American blacks. The U.S. Supreme Court's decision the very next year in *Plessy v. Ferguson* would place the fiction of "separate but equal" on segregated public facilities.

Yet the decade after 1895 was for Washington the most influential period of his life, if that influence is measured by his demand as a speaker and the power he wielded among white political leaders. In 1898 President [William McKinley](#) paid a visit to Tuskegee Institute. McKinley's successor, [Theodore Roosevelt](#), had been a friend of Washington's for several years. The relationship between president and educator began on an inauspicious note when Roosevelt, one month after taking office in 1901, invited Washington to dinner at the White House. Although other blacks had visited the executive mansion on occasion since at least the time of [Abraham Lincoln](#), the Roosevelt-Washington dinner set off a firestorm of outrage, especially in the southern white press. Washington was chagrined by the whole affair; Roosevelt made light of it to his southern friend but privately called it a "mistake" and never again invited minorities to the White House.

The dinner aside, the relationship between the two men was unusually close. Roosevelt regularly though privately consulted Washington on matters involving race and southern policies, and almost all of the minority political appointments Roosevelt made as president were first cleared with the Tuskegeean. Washington's relationship with

Roosevelt's successor, [William Howard Taft](#), was cooler, given Taft's greater reluctance than Roosevelt to make significant black political appointments; but Washington scored an occasional minor victory with Taft, and it was one of the many ironies of his career that while he urged ordinary blacks to eschew politics and humbly go about their daily work, he himself wielded more political power than any other black American of his day.

Washington's prolific writing also helped to spread his influence; moreover, much of the royalties from his books went into the coffers of Tuskegee. He wrote scores of articles and ten books, often with the help of ghost-writers, due to his busy schedule. Among them were *The Future of the American Negro* (1899), a collection of his articles and speeches; *The Story of My Life and Work* (1900), the first of three autobiographies; *Up from Slavery* (1901), his most critically acclaimed autobiography, translated into some eighteen languages; *Working with the Hands* (1904); *The Negro in Business* and a biography of Frederick Douglass, both in 1907; *My Larger Education* (1911), the last of the trilogy about his own life; and *The Man Farthest Down* (1912), based on a European tour.

Washington's power involved not only close relationships with influential white political leaders and industrialists but also a secret network of contacts with journalists and various organizations. He schemed with white and black Alabamians to try to keep other black schools from locating near Tuskegee. He engineered political appointments for supporters in the black community as a way of solidifying his own power base. He planted spies in organizations unfriendly to him to report on their activities and at one time even used a detective agency briefly. Despite public denials, Washington owned partial interests in some minority newspapers. This allowed him to plant stories and to influence their news coverage and editorial stands in ways beneficial to himself. Beginning in the mid-1880s, and lasting for some twenty years, he maintained a clandestine relationship with [T. Thomas Fortune](#), editor of the *New York Age*, the leading black newspaper of its day. He helped support the paper financially, was one of its stockholders, and quietly endorsed many of Fortune's militant stands for voting and other civil rights and against lynching. He also supported the Afro-American League, a civil rights organization founded by Fortune in 1887. Washington secretly provided financial and legal support for court challenges to all-white juries in Alabama, segregated transportation facilities, and disfranchisement of black voters. As black suffrage decreased nonetheless around the turn of the century, Washington struggled to keep a modicum of black influence and patronage in the Republican party in the South. From 1908 to 1911 he played a major, though covert, role in the successful effort to get the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn a harsh Alabama peonage law under which Alonzo Bailey, a black Alabama farmer, had been convicted.

It is clear, from research in Washington's massive correspondence, that he supported the full agenda of civil and political rights put forward by Fortune, the Afro-American League, and later the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. But he refused to go public with such efforts, fearing, probably rightly, that to reveal his involvement would undercut if not destroy his support from white politicians and philanthropists and perhaps threaten his beloved Tuskegee. Emmett Scott was one of very few blacks who knew the full range of Washington's secret activities; certainly no whites did.

After about 1900 Washington came under increasing criticism from black opponents who questioned his measured and nonaggressive responses to legalized segregation, loss of voting rights, and violence against blacks. His critics referred disrespectfully to his enormous influence as the Tuskegee Machine. Among the most vocal were [William Monroe Trotter](#), the militant editor of the *Boston Guardian*, and noted sociologist [W. E. B. Du Bois](#). In his *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) Du Bois launched a strong indictment of Washington's accommodationist philosophy toward the terrible racial climate of the time. Du Bois and others also questioned Washington's emphasis on vocational and industrial education, claiming that the black race needed college-educated professionals in its fight against discrimination and injustice.

A series of setbacks after the turn of the century illustrated how little effect Washington's moderation had had in ameliorating the nation's tense racial climate. The uproar over the 1901 dinner with President Roosevelt was a harbinger of worse things to come. In September 1906 five days of frenzied racial violence rocked Atlanta, the supposedly progressive capital of the New South. After the violence subsided, at least eleven citizens, ten black and one white, were dead, many other blacks were injured, and black areas of the city experienced destruction. Washington gave his usual muted response, urging Atlanta's blacks to exercise "self-control" and not compound the lawless white behavior with violence of their own. He was, however, instrumental in bringing leaders of both races together after the riot to begin the healing process.

Also in 1906 occurred the notorious Brownsville affair. In August an undetermined group of people shot up an area of Brownsville, Texas, nearby Fort Brown, where black infantry soldiers were stationed. One white man was killed. The racial climate was already strained due to previous attacks on soldiers by local residents. Townspeople assumed that the soldiers had done the shooting in retaliation for the previous attacks. All of the black soldiers vehemently denied their involvement, however, and there was no compelling evidence or proof whatsoever of their guilt. In spite of Washington's pleas not to do so, President Roosevelt dishonorably dismissed three companies of the black troops, creating an uproar among blacks and liberal whites.

Exasperated with Washington's low-key responses in the Atlanta and Brownsville cases, his old friend Fortune finally broke with him. More serious for Washington was the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. Melvin J. Chism, a northern confidant of Emmett Scott, had infiltrated Trotter's Boston Suffrage League and later the Niagara Movement, the forerunner of the NAACP, and reported the activities of both groups back to Tuskegee. Characteristically, Washington had a spy planted at the NAACP's founding meeting. Nonetheless he was unable to prevent the creation of the NAACP, the membership of which included blacks, sympathetic white progressives, Jews, and even a few white southerners, or to influence its agenda, which included a broad-based call for a major assault on all fronts against racial injustice and white supremacy. Washington's old nemesis Du Bois became editor of the organization's monthly magazine, the *Crisis*. Although Washington privately supported many of the goals of the NAACP, his concern was its threat to his own power within the black community.

An ugly incident that took place in New York City on the evening of 19 March 1911 illustrates how little protection was then afforded to a black person, even one as eminent as Washington, under certain circumstances. While scanning the residents' directory in the vestibule of an apartment building in search of a friend, Washington was assaulted and repeatedly struck on the head by Henry Ulrich, a white resident of the apartment. Ulrich first claimed that Washington was a burglar; the second version of his story was that the black educator was looking through the keyhole of a white woman's apartment and that he had made an improper advance toward Ulrich's wife. Washington charged him with assault, and the ensuing trial received much national publicity. Washington won considerable support from the black community, even from his critics. Ulrich's acquittal in the face of overwhelming evidence illustrated the difficulties that even a prominent black man could have with the American justice system in the early twentieth century.

Washington died of overwork and arteriosclerosis at Tuskegee, shortly after returning from New York City, where he had been hospitalized.

Assessments of Washington by his contemporaries and, later, by historians have been wide-ranging and contentious, revealing, if nothing else, his complexity and many-sidedness. In the 1960s his secret life emerged as scholars began to plumb the one million documents in his collected papers. They reveal a much more complex, manipulative, secretive, vain, and at times deceptive individual than the inspiring and benign image that Washington himself so assiduously cultivated in his own lifetime. Indeed, he likely enjoyed leading this "double life."

To most of his students and faculty at Tuskegee, and to millions of poor blacks nationwide, he was a self-made and beneficent, if stern, Moses leading them out of slavery and into the promised land. He tirelessly preached an upbeat, optimistic view of the future of his fellow blacks. "When persons ask me," he said once, "how, in the midst of what sometimes seem hopelessly discouraging conditions, I can have such faith in the future of my race in this country, I remind them of the wilderness through which and out of which a good Providence has already led us." When he also wrote that he would "permit no man, no matter what his color, to narrow and degrade my soul by making me hate him," he was undoubtedly sincere. His message to his fellow blacks that hard work, good citizenship, patient fortitude in the face of adversity, and love would ultimately conquer the hatred of the white man was appealing to the majority of whites of his time and foreshadowed the similar message of a later leader, [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)

Washington's hardscrabble "up from slavery" background made it difficult for him to communicate with his college-educated critics, such as Trotter and Du Bois. They in turn, from the comfort of their editorial offices in the North, were perhaps unable to fathom the pressures and constraints from the white community that southern educators like Washington had to deal with on a daily basis. Yet their point that the race needed lawyers and doctors as well as farmers and bricklayers was valid, and the growing crescendo of criticism against Washington on this issue made



the last decade of his life probably his most difficult. The irony, of course, was that Washington was secretly supporting the campaign against legal segregation and racial violence and for full civil rights. But he was unwilling to reveal his covert role for fear that it would undercut his power base among blacks and sympathetic whites, and he was doubtlessly right.

Close analysis of Washington's autobiographies and speeches reveals a vagueness and subtlety to his message lost on most people of his time, whites and blacks alike. He never said that American minorities would forever forgo the right to vote, to gain a full education, or to enjoy the fruits of an integrated society. But he strategically chose not to force the issue in the face of the overwhelming white hostility that was the reality of American race relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this sense, he did what he had to do to assure the survival of himself and the people for whom he spoke.

## Bibliography

Most of Washington's papers are in the Library of Congress. A smaller but important collection is at Tuskegee Institute. The major published collection is *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan and Raymond W. Smock (14 vols. 1972-1989). The earliest biography, Emmett J. Scott and Lyman Beecher Stowe, *Booker T. Washington: Builder of a Civilization* (1916), is predictably laudatory, with long passages from his writings. Basil Mathews, *Booker T. Washington, Educator and Interracial Interpreter* (1948), is inadequate. Samuel R. Spencer, Jr., *Booker T. Washington and the Negro's Place in American Life* (1955), is brief and balanced. The most-comprehensive biography is Harlan's superb two-volume *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* (1972) and *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915* (1983); Harlan was the first biographer to plunge into the massive Washington correspondence and ferret out his secret machinations. Hugh Hawkins, ed., *Booker T. Washington and His Critics: The Problem of Negro Leadership* (1962), and Emma Lou Thornbrough, ed., *Booker T. Washington* (1969), are useful collections of historical assessments. August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (1963), is a significant study of Washington and his critics. Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro* (1965), has a good assessment of the Atlanta Compromise speech and nationwide reactions to it. August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto* (1976), has a short but perceptive portrayal of Washington. An obituary is in the *New York Times*, 15 Nov. 1915.

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## Online Resources

- Booker T. Washington, *My Larger Education; Being Chapters from My Experience*, 1911  
<http://metalab.unc.edu/docsouth/washeducation/menu.html>  
From the Documenting the American South Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography*, 1901  
<http://metalab.unc.edu/docsouth/washington/menu.html>  
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