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Booker T. Washington

Turning Nothing Good into Something Fine

by Dionna L. Mann

illustrated by Adam Gustavson

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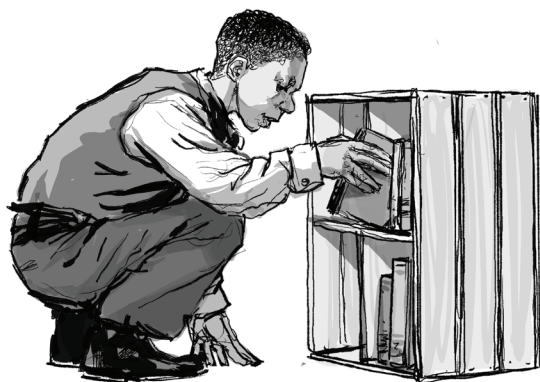
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1:	
Without a Last Name.....	1
CHAPTER 2:	
Food for a Little Belly.....	4
CHAPTER 3:	
These Little Legs at Work	10
CHAPTER 4:	
Sunday—at Last!.....	15
CHAPTER 5:	
When Freedom Came	18
CHAPTER 6:	
A Strange Sort of Freedom.....	23
CHAPTER 7:	
Inside Another Big House.....	32
CHAPTER 8:	
On His Way at Last	37
CHAPTER 9:	
Reaching the Promised Land.....	43

CHAPTER 10:	
After Hampton.....	47
CHAPTER 11:	
Tuskegee.....	52
CHAPTER 12:	
Family Life and Legacy.....	60
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.....	64
MEET THE AUTHOR.....	66
MEET THE ILLUSTRATOR.....	67

1

Without a Last Name

Inside a drafty log cabin no more than fourteen feet wide by sixteen feet long, an enslaved woman named Jane lay on a bed made from rags. She was about to give birth to her second child, a boy.

The year was 1856. It was spring, perhaps the month of April, and the place was Franklin County, Virginia. The farmstead, owned by a man named James Burroughs, lay in the eastern foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, not far from a town called Hale's Ford.

Booker's Birthplace

In his autobiography Up from Slavery, Booker refers to the place of his birth as a plantation belonging to James Burroughs. But the Burroughs place was more of a subsistence farm than a plantation. That's because only a small portion of the land was being used to raise a cash crop—in this case, tobacco. Most of the cultivated land was used to feed and clothe the household. And although Booker calls the Burroughs home "the 'big house,'" it was not a mansion. It was a simple two-story home with a small front porch and five rooms inside.

subsistence: producing only enough food to support life

Jane was not alone as she was about to give birth. Her half sister Sophia was likely there, ready to assist with the delivery. The child's father, on the other hand, was not there, anxiously awaiting the sound of his child's first cry. He would never be there to claim the child as his own. But that wouldn't stop this child from coming into this world with a voice ready to pierce the air, sounding out pure and strong.

Jane's beautiful boy was born. He had light brown skin, reddish hair, gray eyes, and ten fingers and toes. As Jane held the tiny bundle of life in her arms, her eldest, John, just three or four years old at the time, looked on with eyes of wonder. What name would his mother give their new arrival?

Booker.

That's how it often was back then. When an enslaved woman gave birth, the only thing she could give her child was what she had to give—arms of love, a heart of hope, and a first name. She couldn't give her child what every human being deserved: freedom, a future, and a father's love and last name. It was an unfair world little Booker was born into: enslaved, without a voice that could be heard outside the walls of a tiny slave cabin.

But one day, that would change. Freedom would come to all enslaved black Americans, and to Booker, too.

He'd be given a chance to stand up tall. He'd be given a voice that would resound through walls and barriers, through space and time. Never mind not having a father's love or a father's last name. He'd have a name of his own making—Dr. Booker T. Washington. A name so respected that one day, presidents of the United States would ask Booker his opinion about state affairs. He'd be the first black person to dine with a sitting president inside the White House. He'd become an educator who'd use his hands, mind, and voice to lift up others who, like him, had been born into slavery on a bed of rags. Booker would become known throughout the nation as a man who could turn nothing good into something fine.

A Last Name at Last

After freedom came to all black Americans, many former slaves needed a last name. Some took the last name of their enslavers. Others chose a last name for themselves and their children.

Who Was Booker's Father?

In his autobiography, Booker wrote of his father, "I do not even know his name. . . . Whoever he was, I never heard of his taking the least interest in me or providing in any way for my rearing." Booker's father's identity remained a mystery throughout his life, but based on his skin, eye, and hair color, Booker knew one thing for certain. His father was a white man.

2

Food for a Little Belly

As Booker grew, his little legs did not stray far from his mother, Jane. He'd look on with curious eyes as his mother worked hard to prepare all the meals for the Burroughs family. The Burroughses owned the 207-acre farm where as many as ten enslaved individuals lived. Besides Booker himself, and eventually a little sister named Amanda, there was Booker's mother, his brother John, his aunt Sophia, his cousin Sallie, his uncle Monroe, and perhaps a few more family members. Booker, his mother, and his siblings all lived together in a tiny log cabin that also served as the Burroughses' kitchen. A few yards from this cabin sat the big house, where James Burroughs, his wife, and as many as ten of their fourteen children lived.

From the break of dawn until the sun set, Booker's mother worked hard in that tiny kitchen cabin to provide well-prepared and tasty dishes for the Burroughses. She drew water from a nearby spring and brought it to her cabin. She stoked the fire inside the hearth. She brewed coffee and tea. She kneaded the bread dough. She fetched

kneaded: mixed by pressing, squeezing, and pulling

the eggs. She butchered the chickens. She diced the herbs, chopped the vegetables, stirred the stew, fried the chicken . . . all without thanks or payment.

As Booker got big enough to stand on his own two feet, he likely helped his mother prepare the Burroughses' food. Maybe it was his job to stir whatever was bubbling in the pots hanging above the fire so the bottom wouldn't burn. Maybe he helped his mother pile the food high on platters before taking it inside the big house. Maybe, late at night, he helped his mother clean up all the dishes and pots and pans so she could be ready for the next day's work.



It's easy to imagine how little Booker's sense of injustice must have grown within him as he grew older and realized the delicious meals his mother was preparing were not for him or his family to eat. It was all for the folks living in the big house. Booker and his siblings only got to taste what was left clinging to the bottom of the pot. Of course, his mother did what she could for her children. Late at night and on Sundays, she made her family's meals out of the rations of food the Burroughs family gave them. The most common foods enslaved folks ate were cornmeal mush with fatback pork, hoecakes, cornbread, and salted herrings. Perhaps Booker's family had similar staples. On rare occasions, Jane would awaken her children late at night and surprise them with a few pieces of fried chicken or some cooked eggs. How had Mother conjured up such a meal for them? Booker didn't know, but he sure must have appreciated it!

When Booker got older, he often fended for himself to fill his belly. He'd grab a piece of meat from here or a cup of milk from there. Whenever he dared, he'd sneak a sweet potato from the root cellar found inside the floor of his family's cabin and place it on the fire to roast. *Mmmm! Mmm! What a treat!*

rations: fixed, limited amounts of food

staples: necessary items, usually food

fended for himself: took care of meeting his own needs

root cellar: a pit used to store food, most commonly root vegetables

On those mornings when Booker's stomach was quite empty, he'd run to where the flint corn was being boiled for the pigs and cows to eat in hopes of getting some of the plump kernels to satisfy his hunger pains. If he arrived after the animals had been fed, he'd scrounge about the animals' pens and troughs, hoping to find some boiled corn the animals had missed. "Some people may think that this was a pretty bad way in which to get one's food," Booker later wrote, "but, leaving out the name and the associations, there was nothing very bad about it. Any one who has eaten hard-boiled corn knows it has a delicious taste."

Throughout all his years in Virginia, Booker never recalled a time when his family was able to sit down at a dinner table with plates and forks and cups in order to enjoy a family meal in the same manner as the Burroughs family.

At least on Sundays Booker and the other enslaved folks on the farm could claim their own time, that is, time away from doing work to benefit the Burroughs family, and time to do work to benefit themselves. Booker and his brother, John, could help their mom tend to their family's needs then. Apples, pears, and other

flint corn: a variety of corn with very hard kernels

scrounge: search in different places for something that is in limited supply

wild edibles—persimmons, pawpaws, gooseberries, red chanterelle mushrooms, black walnuts, chestnuts, pokeweed greens, and the like—grew in the woods surrounding the Burroughs farm. Perhaps Booker and John climbed trees or foraged in the woods in search of something sweet or sour and nutritious to bring to their mother to add to their wanting diet. Perhaps they tended to their own little garden on Sundays, helping harvest fruit and vegetables like okra, beets, tomatoes, pumpkin, and watermelon.

Booker and John may have also set traps with Uncle Monroe on Sundays. There certainly would have been all kinds of small game to be found roaming in the woods—rabbit, squirrel, quail, and pheasant. How lovely the meat would have tasted in a stew or roasted over a fire! And no doubt Booker tagged along when John went fishing down at Gill's Creek. What a treat a meal of fried catfish, roasted vegetables, and hoecakes topped with the family's special Sunday ration of molasses would have been to enjoy together!

Even though Booker and his family were all enslaved,

persimmons: sweet, orange, tomato-shaped fruits that grow on trees

pawpaws: lumpy, green-skinned fruits that grow on trees and taste similar to bananas and mangoes

red chanterelle mushrooms: bright red, edible mushrooms

pokeweed greens: young leaves and stems of a poisonous plant that must be carefully prepared to be safe to eat

Booker's mother kept that fact from him for as long as she could. But that did not keep Booker from understanding that his—and his family's—lot in life was nothing but work, work, and more work with little to nothing to show for it. It was a life with limited food to eat, with barely any clothing, not to mention sleeping in a cold cabin on a bed of rags. It was a life, as he put it, "in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings."

The Burroughs Farm

At the start of the Civil War, there were between seven and ten enslaved black individuals on the Burroughs farm. They included Booker's mother, Jane, who was about forty-one years old; his older brother, John, who was about nine; his little sister, Amanda, who was about two; his aunt Sophia, who was about forty-two; a strong farmhand named Lee; a girl of around thirteen named either Mary Jane or Sallie, who was likely Booker's cousin; and Booker himself, who was about five years old.

3

These Little Legs at Work

By the age of four or five, Booker was working from sunup to sundown. One of his jobs was to fan the Burroughses while they sat at the dining table in the big house. Booker stood at the edge of the dining room and pulled a rope that made a large paper fan above the table swing back and forth. When the weather was warm, the fan cooled the family and kept the flies away from the food. No doubt, all that pulling made Booker's arms sore. But he had no choice but to do as he was told.

Booker had a much harder job outdoors. He had to fetch water for the field workers to drink. Under the hot sun, step by step, to a nearby spring, Booker's little legs carried him. Back and forth, he filled and refilled his pail with the spring water that kept the workers hydrated. Sweat must have poured down Booker's tow shirt as he tromped up and down the hilly terrain, barefoot. It was difficult work for a small child. Did a smile of satisfaction spread across Booker's face when Uncle Monroe cooled his tongue on a tin cup filled with water, wiped his chin clean, and thanked Booker for the refreshment? Perhaps.

pail: bucket

hydrated: having enough water in one's body



What Was a Tow Shirt?

A tow shirt was a long shirt, usually made of linen, that went past the knees. It was more of a dress or gown than a shirt, and it was worn by children when they were very young.

Booker was about six when his tasks first took him away from the farm. That's likely when he got his first grown-up shirt and his first pair of shoes. How uncomfortable they were! The shoes were made of rough leather with unforgiving wooden soles. Ouch! The shirt was made from flax, a coarse plant fiber. Ouch times ten! Booker described wearing a new flax shirt for the first time as torture. Only having a tooth pulled would be worse.

“It is almost equal to the feeling that one would experience if he had a dozen or more chestnut burrs, or a hundred small pin-points, in contact with his flesh,” he wrote. Thankfully, John would wear Booker’s new shirts for him until the fabric was broken in, becoming worn and softer, which made the experience slightly less painful.

As uncomfortable as Booker’s new shirt and shoes were, they did offer him some protection for the times he had to trek the three miles from the Burroughs farm to Hale’s Ford, passing through woods along the way. Hale’s Ford was a small town with a post office, a tobacco factory, a tannery, mills, and other small industries. One of Booker’s responsibilities, when he was big enough, was to take the harvested corn to the mill to be ground into cornmeal. Off he’d go, mounted on a horse loaded with a big bag of corn. Perhaps it was Uncle Monroe who placed the heavy bag of grain across the horse’s back before Booker left the farm, arranging it so the weight was evenly distributed on both sides. Whoever it was, they were stronger than little Booker, because when the bag shifted along the way—as it so often did—and gravity caused both him and the heavy grain to slip off the horse, Booker was not strong enough to hoist the bag back up.

There was Booker, all by himself in the dense forest,

tannery: a place where animal hides are prepared for use

waiting for hours for a passerby to stop and help him get the big bag back in place. While he waited alone in the woods, fear would overwhelm him. Would some dangerous men come jumping out at him, ready to harm him? He had heard tales of scary people lurking in the woods. How his heart must have pounded with worry! Thankfully, no harm ever fell upon Booker as he made those trips to the mill. Still, whenever he returned to the farm later than expected, he got an earful of scoldings from those in charge.

Booker was also responsible for accompanying Laura Burroughs, the second-youngest Burroughs daughter, on her trips to the small school where she taught during the week. Booker would hold on to Miss Burroughs's books as they rode along on horseback toward the schoolhouse. He longed to be able to read the books he was holding. But Booker was not allowed to go inside the schoolhouse to learn. The only thing Booker could do upon arriving at the schoolhouse was peer in through the doorway before disappointedly heading back to the Burroughs farm. Despite the injustice, Booker determined in his heart that one day, he was going to get an education. He was going to learn how to read.

"I determined, when quite a small child, that, if I accomplished nothing else in life, I would in some way get enough education to enable me to read common books and newspapers." —Booker T. Washington

Learning to Read

In Virginia, it was never against the law to teach an enslaved person how to read or write. It was, however, against the law for black people—both free and enslaved—to assemble together in order to be taught those skills. Some enslavers, however, did teach those whom they enslaved how to read and write. Sometimes it was so they could read the Bible.

At least Booker, when he returned from the schoolhouse to the Burroughs farm, was not expected to work in the fields—not yet. John was likely old enough though. Children as young as eight were expected to work just as hard as the adults in the fields. Just imagine the amount of work that was being done in the fields by the small enslaved community living on the Burroughs farm. In one growing season, they produced 250 bushels of wheat, 450 bushels of corn, 100 bushels of oats, 2,000 pounds of tobacco, 30 pounds of wool, 20 bushels of sweet potatoes, 75 pounds of butter, 23 bushels of flaxseed, and 10 pounds of flax. Besides all of that, they also grew Irish potatoes, peas, and beans for their own consumption.

Torn Apart

When an enslaved woman became a mother, she knew her child was considered the property of her enslaver. She knew that her child, when he or she got older, could be torn away from her and sold to another enslaver. If that happened, her precious child might be forced to live far, far away from her. The mother might never see or hear from her child again. Imagine the mother's heartache!

4

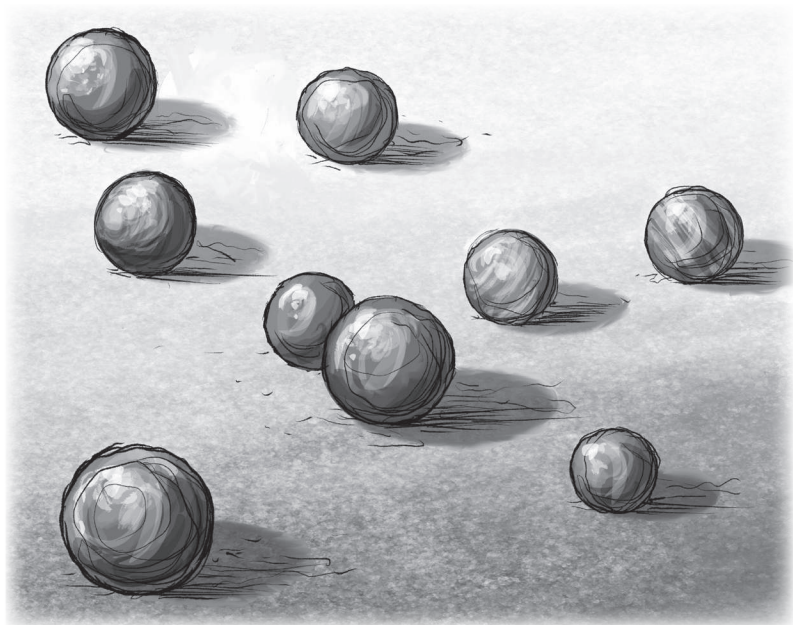
Sunday—at Last!

It was all work and no play for Booker, sun up till sundown, day after day, week after week, month after month. But on Sundays, enslaved workers were given their own time. Did Jane encourage her children to set aside some time on Sundays to do something that would refresh their tired souls? To go out and have some fun? It's easy to imagine she did.

Booker's brother, John, occasionally found time to play marbles. Where did John get his marbles? Some of them were store-bought. Perhaps they were given to him by Mr. or Mrs. Burroughs as a reward for doing a job exceptionally well. But most of John's marbles were bits of Virginia clay he had fashioned into spheres and made hard by firing them in the fireplace.

Perhaps, too, Booker played with some of the Burroughs grandchildren who might have been around on Sunday. Booker recalled that Mr. Burroughs and his sons worked alongside the enslaved folks in the fields. There was no overseer to come between Booker's family and the

overseer: someone who supervises other workers



family inside the big house. And so it's possible that when the children were very young, they were allowed to play together (though Booker did not mention doing so in his autobiography).

In fact, Booker did not paint an exceptionally cruel picture of his enslavers. He even corresponded with Laura Burroughs later in life, as did his brother. Despite the injustices of his family being treated like property, Booker did not fill his heart with hate. He placed the blame on the laws that allowed the institution of slavery to exist in the United States. Though he never forgot how his family had suffered under the yoke of slavery, he chose to focus on the things that had brought him joy.

As a child on the Burroughs farm, he learned to love the soil and the worms burrowing within it. He loved the farm animals—the cows, chickens, and pigs. He loved the sound of the birds, the trees and flowers, and all creeping things. Booker never lost that love of working outside in nature, even when he got older and lived in his own big house.

5

When Freedom Came

From the time he was little, Booker heard whisperings among those enslaved on the farm. There was a war being fought between the North and the South, and they knew that if the North won, it would mean their freedom. When Booker was about nine, those whisperings grew louder and more urgent. How his ears must have tuned in to the latest news! If he went into town to get the grain ground at the mill, he listened. If he accompanied the ladies of the house on a picnic, he listened. If someone inside the big house read aloud from the newspaper, he listened. Enslaved folks everywhere were listening and sharing what they heard with one another. Who would win—the Union or the Confederacy? Would freedom at last come for all those held in bondage in the United States?

Early one morning in 1865, the answer came to the Burroughs farm.

Booker, his mother, his brother, his sister, and all the other enslaved folks left off their duties as they

were summoned to the big house. Mrs. Burroughs, her daughters, and at least one son who had been injured during the fighting were gathered on the porch, waiting for them. (James Burroughs was not present, for he had died from lung disease a few years before.) Standing in front of the big house was a man the enslaved folks didn't recognize. Booker stood close to his mother. Everyone looked so serious. Who was this man who looked so official? What was it he wanted them all to hear?

The man, likely a Union officer, unfolded an official document and began to read. Everyone paid close attention. How incredible the man's words must have sounded to Booker! Unimaginable, even! The war between the states was over. The North had won. Slavery was abolished throughout the United States! At last!

A great deal of celebrating followed on the Day That Freedom Came. There was singing. There was dancing. There was joy. But what would Booker's mother do when morning came? Would she keep on cooking for the Burroughs family without pay while deciding what to do next? If she stopped, would they allow her to keep living on their land? Would they give her some of the land to work as her own? After all, she had slaved for them her entire life without any payment. No doubt Booker's mother pondered deeply about what to do next.

How Freedom Came

Though President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, enslavers in Virginia did not free those whom they considered their property at that time. However, after Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered his army to Union general Ulysses S. Grant in Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on April 9, 1865, all those held in bondage in the United States were granted their freedom.

"As the great day drew nearer, there was more singing in the slave quarters than usual. It was bolder, had more ring, and lasted later into the night. Most of the verses of the plantation songs had some reference to freedom. True, they had sung those same verses before, but they had been careful to explain that the 'freedom' in these songs referred to the next world, and had no connection with life in this world. Now they gradually threw off the mask, and were not afraid to let it be known that the 'freedom' in their songs meant freedom of the body in this world." —Booker T. Washington

Not long before the start of the Civil War, Booker's mother, Jane, had married an enslaved man named Washington "Wash" Ferguson. Wash's enslaver was a man named Josiah "Old Cy" Ferguson, who owned a large tobacco farm across the way from the Burroughs farm. Soon after their union, Wash and Jane had a child together. Her name was Amanda. She was Booker's little sister.

Old Cy treated those whom he enslaved with cruelty, and Wash was not the kind of person to be ruled by a heavy hand. And so Old Cy decided to hire Wash out—that is, to send Wash away to work for someone else while Old Cy got paid for the work. Wash ended up working at a salt-producing factory in Malden, Virginia (now West Virginia), located in the Kanawha Valley, on the banks of the Kanawha River. The factory workers mined, cleaned, and packed salt.

Once the Civil War broke out, that western portion of Virginia remained with the Union, and West Virginia was born. Wash was therefore considered a free man in the newly formed state. To keep him enslaved, Old Cy brought Wash back to Virginia and hired him out to a tobacco factory in Lynchburg. But in 1864, when a troop of Union soldiers commanded by General David Hunter came marching through Lynchburg with a statue of George Washington, Wash decided to join them. With every step he took alongside those Union soldiers, Wash was leaving slavery further and further behind him. Eventually, he made his way back to Malden, where he was now considered free. This time, he'd earn a salary he could keep.

After freedom came, Wash sent for his wife and her children. Somehow, he arranged for Jane to have the use of a wagon. It was most likely a horse- or mule-drawn

wagon that could be used to help the family carry their belongings to Malden, West Virginia, some two hundred miles away. Booker was excited about the adventure that lay ahead of him, even though it meant leaving behind the only place he had ever called home, as well as Uncle Monroe, Aunt Sophia, and at least one cousin called Sallie. Would this be the last time he'd set eyes on the Burroughs farm, where birds and deer and bees ran free but where he had been enslaved? There was no way for young Booker to know what his future held, but he and his family were on their way.

Marriage

In the South in Booker's day, enslaved couples who wanted to marry had no legal way to do so. Sometimes, a few words were spoken by a preacher of the black community. Sometimes the couple would jump a broom before witnesses. Some enslavers acknowledged these unions, while others did not. Because enslaved workers were considered property that could be sold, a couple could be separated from each other at any time, just as they could be separated from their children. After the Civil War ended, couples living together as husband and wife were finally able to legalize their marriages. Many states passed laws recognizing existing marriages between formerly enslaved people. In Virginia, that law was the Cohabitation Act of 1866. Couples were granted official marriage certificates, which also declared their children as legitimate.

6

A Strange Sort of Freedom

Booker's mother must have felt more than a little anxious as she began her journey from Virginia to West Virginia. She had three young children to look after. John was about twelve or thirteen years old, Booker nine, and Amanda six. Of course, her children could carry themselves on their own two feet, and Wash had sent a wagon to help them transport their heavy load. Still, she was going into unknown territory and was now suffering from asthma. But freedom was spurring her on as she and her children made their way toward Malden, West Virginia, one step after the other for about two hundred miles.

No doubt Booker's legs grew weary as he and his family climbed up mountain roads and scrambled over creeks and rivers, into forests, along trails, and through towns. The travelers must have felt exhausted as the sun began to set each day. They must have been hungry, too, as they searched for a spot to camp overnight and cook over an open fire.

Most nights, Booker and his family slept on the ground, beneath the moon and stars. Other times, they climbed into the wagon and found a spot to lie down. Did Booker snuggle up against his brother and sister to stay warm as early autumn temperatures began to dip? Did he and John take turns staying awake at night so as to stir the fire to keep bobcats and bears away? Were they alone each night as they camped, or were there other freed individuals seeking a new life westward also camping nearby? It is easy to imagine young Booker pulling a quilt over his head, trying to block out unfamiliar rattles and howls and hoots as he tried to fall asleep in the dark.

One night, Booker's mother spotted an abandoned log cabin. What a nice change it would be for the family to spend a night out of the elements, safe from the wild. But no sooner had Jane gotten a fire roaring in the fireplace than—*hisssssss*! A big black snake came creepy-crawling out of the chimney, protesting the human intrusion! The snake won ownership of that cabin, and Booker's family quickly moved back outdoors.

Day after day, from one week into the next, Booker and his family traveled without the convenience of paved roads, until at last they arrived in Malden, West Virginia. How satisfying to finally walk into a family home where they were all together and considered free!

However, it didn't take long for Booker to realize that his life in Malden was going to be just as hard as the life he had left behind.

Booker found Malden to be very different from the Burroughs farm. It was full of all kinds of smells and sounds that made him feel uneasy. In the streets at night, Booker heard rowdy people quarreling and fighting. There was noise from railroad cars chugging through the town. The salt factory filled the air with stinky, sooty smoke. Life in Malden was quite shocking to Booker. He had grown up in the quiet countryside with air kissed by honeysuckle breezes. And now here he was, stuck inside a very loud and smelly city.

But the worst thing about his move to Malden was the fact that he would not be allowed to attend the new school for black children that was opening in nearby Tinkersville. Wash had other plans for Booker and John. They were going to work alongside him at the salt mines, packing down salt into barrels. Booker protested. He wanted to attend school! He wanted to be able to read! And there was no law saying he couldn't go! But Wash's wishes overruled Booker's. And to make things worse, every dollar Booker earned would go straight into Wash's pocket.

Salt Mines

In Booker's day, salt was a commodity used to preserve meat. The springs along the Kanawha River in Malden provided salt, so companies sprang up in the area to mine this natural resource. The company that Wash worked for used steam-powered machines to mine the salt. The machines pumped salty water up from deep underground and into furnaces. Once the water evaporated, trays of salt were left behind. Men like Wash collected the salt, shoveled it into barrels, then packed it down. Because salt packers were paid per barrel, the more barrels a man packed, the more money he took home.

Despite having to work in the salt mines, Booker kept begging his mother for a chance to attend school. His stepfather kept saying no. He insisted that Booker and John continue to help with the family's living expenses. But Booker was determined to become a reader, and he took every opportunity to learn. In fact, the first figure or symbol he learned to recognize was the number 18, for that was the number assigned to Wash at the salt mines. At the end of each day in the mines, Booker watched his boss write the number 18 on each of his stepfather's barrels of salt. "I soon learned," Booker later wrote, "to recognize that figure wherever I saw it, and after a while got to the point where I could make that figure, though I knew nothing about any other figures or letters."

commodity: something that can be bought and sold

Booker's mother knew that her son longed to learn much more than how the number 18 looked when written. One day, she brought home Noah Webster's "Blue Back Speller" (so called because of its instantly recognizable blue cover). It was a book for learning how to read, spell, and pronounce words. Booker was so happy to have it! He carried his little blue book everywhere and did his best to understand the squiggles, lines, and curves on its pages.

But what Booker really needed was someone to explain how to use this little book. He needed a teacher. His stepfather still wouldn't allow him to attend school during the day—but the teacher at the Tinkersville school, William H. Davis, was offering night lessons. The lessons were mostly for adults, but no one stopped Booker from attending. Even his stepfather didn't mind as long as he put in a full day of work first. At last, Booker was learning how to read!

William H. Davis

The first schoolteacher for black children in the Malden area of West Virginia was William H. Davis. He was a black man from Ohio and a Civil War veteran whose cavalry regiment had guarded President Abraham Lincoln during the war.

Still, Booker wanted to be able to attend public school with the other children. In time, Booker's stepfather allowed him to go during the day under one condition:

work at the salt factory from 4:00 to 9:00 a.m. That meant Booker would have to rise well before the sun. It meant shoveling salt while other kids were still in bed. And because school started at 9:00, it meant missing the beginning of his first lesson each day. But oh, the things he'd be able to learn the rest of the day! Booker agreed to Wash's condition.

"The first day I entered school . . . was the happiest day that I have ever known," Booker recalled.

On the first day of school, his teacher asked for his full name to record in the roll book. Up until this point in his life, Booker had been known only by his first name. In fact, he didn't have a last name. He had to come up with something. "Booker Washington," he said, as though it had been his name his entire life.

Why did Booker choose Washington as his last name? No one knows for sure. Some wonder if it was because his stepfather's first name was Washington. Others wonder if Booker had chosen his name in honor of George Washington, the first president of the United States. Later, Booker's mother told him that she had, earlier in his life, used Taliaferro in addition to his first name. After learning this, Booker began using Taliaferro as his middle name. That is how he became Booker Taliaferro Washington, or Booker T. Washington.

The Fergusons

Booker's stepfather's last name was Ferguson, likely because it had been the name of Wash's past enslaver. At some point, Booker's mother's last name also became Ferguson, as did his sister Amanda's until she was married.

Booker loved attending school. He felt like he was basking in the light of knowledge. But he did wish he didn't have to miss the start of each school day. So he came up with a clever plan to arrive at school on time.

Early each morning, when no one was looking, Booker would change the hands of the office clock. It was the one the workmen used to begin and end their shifts. Sneakily, Booker moved the hands on the clock forward by half an hour each day. Now he could leave work at 8:30 a.m.

For a while, Booker's plan worked just fine. But the clock mix-up each day left the furnace boss scratching his head. Why was the clock not keeping time properly? Why was it off by exactly thirty minutes? The boss eventually realized that it was a case of sabotage! His solution? He locked the clock in a case. "I did not mean to inconvenience anybody," Booker wrote years later. "I simply meant to reach that schoolhouse in time."

In the end, it didn't matter. Before long, Booker's stepfather changed his mind and took him out of school to work full-time in one of Malden's coal mines.

sabotage: destruction or interference that prevents something from working correctly

Once again, Booker had no say in the matter.

Booker found himself deep down under the earth, working inside the coal mine. It was dark. It was damp. It was dismal. But Booker was determined not to despair. He took his Webster speller down into the coal mine with him. Whenever he could take a break, he'd read by the lamp of his coal miner's hat.



Booker's mother felt bad for her son. He came home covered in coal dust, exhausted, and sad. She knew Booker wanted to be in school more than anything, so she hired someone to teach him at night. Every day, after working in the mine, Booker walked to the teacher's home. This teacher, however, was nothing like Mr. Davis. He knew little more than Booker did! Booker was close to despair.

Little did Booker know, there would one day be an opportunity for him to escape the darkness of the coal mine.

7

Inside Another Big House

When Booker was about eleven or twelve, a glimmer of hope arrived. He was working inside the coal mine when he overheard two men talking about a school in Virginia called the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. It was a school where young black people could receive an education. Deserving students who could not afford the tuition were allowed to work at the school to cover the cost, learning a useful trade in the process.

“As they went on describing the school,” Booker wrote, “it seemed to me that it must be the greatest place on earth, and not even Heaven presented more attractions for me at that time than did the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia.”

The possibility of attending Hampton lit a fire within Booker’s heart. He would find his way to Hampton no matter what it took. Day and night, whether in the coal mine or walking beneath the moon, Booker thought about Hampton. He shared his dream with his mother.

tuition: money paid to attend school

He shared his dream with his stepfather. He shared his dream with John and Amanda and with anyone else who would listen. But once again, Wash's opinion overruled all others. Booker would not be allowed to return to school to prepare himself for Hampton.

Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute

Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute was opened on April 1, 1868, by a white man named Samuel Armstrong, who had been a Union general. Armstrong, having led black troops during the Civil War, knew that men of color could be just as brave, smart, and capable as anyone else. He believed emancipated black people "deserved as good a chance as any people" to receive education—both intellectual and industrial. And so Armstrong convinced the American Missionary Association to fund the purchase of 150 acres in Hampton, Virginia, for the purpose of opening a new school for black students. The school was named the Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute. Today, it is a historically black university called Hampton University.

Booker's mother wanted to help her son achieve his goal of attending Hampton. But she knew he'd never get there if he kept working in the coal mine. When she heard that Viola Ruffner, the wife of the man who owned both the salt factory and the coal mine, was looking for a boy to help her with various tasks inside and outside of her home, she arranged for Booker to fill the role. Mrs. Ruffner had been a schoolteacher when she lived up north. Her home was full of interesting books that

Booker might have access to, especially as it was a live-in position. Perhaps Booker's mother hoped Mrs. Ruffner would see how clever her son was and want to help him.

But Booker was wary. Mrs. Ruffner was known to be very demanding. She had frequent bad moods and was quick to criticize. Several others had tried and failed to please her. All quit or were fired. Could Booker be prompt enough, diligent enough, thorough enough for Mrs. Ruffner's liking? Could he win her over? He would certainly do his best.

Though it was easier than working in a coal mine, Booker found it challenging working for Mrs. Ruffner. He worked day and night to complete her endless list of tasks. If she asked him to cut the grass, he would do so on his knees with shears. If she asked him to paint a fence post, he would set to work with a brush, bending and kneeling for hours. If she asked him to tend her vegetable garden, he would spend all afternoon beneath the sun with a hoe. No matter what Mrs. Ruffner had on her to-do list, be it selling peaches or sweeping the floor or pruning the roses or dusting the furniture, Booker did it. True, he was getting paid. But it was only five to six dollars a month. And worst of all, his salary was being sent to Wash, his stepfather. And what about school? Mrs. Ruffner didn't teach him anything, nor did she allow him enough free time during the day to attend school. It wasn't long before Booker lost heart.

One day, without telling Mrs. Ruffner, Booker went down to the docks on the Kanawha River and asked one of the steamboat captains if he could join the staff as a waiter. The captain said yes, and Booker climbed aboard. But no sooner had the boat left its dock for Cincinnati than the steamboat's waitstaff realized that Booker had no idea how to wait tables. The captain was determined to kick Booker off the boat at first dock, but Booker pleaded with him. Thankfully, the captain allowed Booker to stay on board as the steamboat traveled to Cincinnati and then back again to Malden—as long as Booker kept his distance from the dining room.

When Booker returned to Malden a few days later, he swallowed his pride and went to see Mrs. Ruffner. Whatever he said to his demanding employer, Booker won over Mrs. Ruffner's heart. She rehired him, giving him another chance to prove himself. Booker worked harder than ever. Eventually, Mrs. Ruffner agreed to let him take lessons in the evenings and attend school during the winter months, when there was less work to be done in the yard. She also helped Booker start his own personal library, giving him books from her own library. He proudly added each title to a bookshelf that he made himself using a dry-goods box. How he loved being able to read those books!

Booker grew to appreciate Mrs. Ruffner, and she grew to appreciate Booker. Mrs. Ruffner was more than pleased with how Booker applied elbow grease to every job she gave him. She valued his quiet, unassuming manner. She appreciated his earnestness of purpose, honesty, and faithfulness. And she could see his kindness and thoughtfulness toward others.

“From fearing Mrs. Ruffner,” Booker recalled, “I soon learned to look upon her as one of my best friends.” Booker had turned nothing good into something fine.



8

On His Way at Last

By the fall of 1872, Booker had been working for Mrs. Ruffner for about four years. His mind was made up to leave Malden and attend the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia. He planned to enroll in the fall session. But Booker didn't have anything saved—nearly all his earnings had gone to Wash. True, he hoped to work in exchange for his tuition. But how would he get there? Hampton, Virginia, was about four hundred miles from Malden, West Virginia. Could he walk the entire way? Even if he could, he'd still need money for food and lodging.

When Booker told his mother of his plans to leave despite his lack of funds, she was worried. It sounded impossible. It was a dangerous world out there for a young black man of just sixteen years to travel alone through unfamiliar territory. But he was not deterred.

Soon, everyone in Booker's community was stepping in to help Booker fulfill his dream to become a Hampton student. His mother donated what she could to his cause. His brother gave whatever he could spare. Church members added to Booker's fund, be it a nickel or

a quarter. Someone even gave him a handkerchief to carry in his pocket.

In just a short time, Booker had several dollars in his pocket. He purchased an outfit for his travels—perhaps a secondhand suit so he could arrive looking his best. He planned his route. He packed some food and the rest of his clothes in a small satchel. On the day of his departure, he kissed his mother goodbye. It's easy to imagine her eyes brimming with tears. Would this be the last time she'd see her son?

Booker, however, was nothing but excited. He was on his way, ready to turn nothing into something fine!

With his satchel slung over his shoulder, Booker headed off to the train station in Charleston, West Virginia, ten miles from Malden. No one knows how Booker got to the train depot, but we do know he got there. And when he arrived, he placed his coins on the counter to purchase his first ever train fare. It wasn't enough to cover the entire distance to Hampton, but it was enough to get him a lot closer. As the train blew its whistle and began puffing down the track, excitement pulsed through Booker's veins.

When Booker disembarked from the train, he was still far from his destination, and he had little money remaining in his pockets. That must have been disappointing. But Booker was up to the challenge.

He'd catch a stagecoach or hitch a ride on a passerby's horse-drawn wagon if he had to. He'd walk as many miles as needed. The important thing was arriving in time to enroll in Hampton's fall session.

At one point on the road to Hampton, Booker heard the *clomp-clomp-clomp* of stagecoach horses approaching from behind. He quickly checked his pockets. He had enough to pay his fare. He flagged the coach down and climbed aboard. The journey went smoothly until late that evening, when the driver stopped at a plain, unpainted house in the middle of nowhere. It was an inn. The passengers climbed out of the coach and went inside. No doubt Booker looked forward to a hot meal and a room for the night—if the money he had left was enough to cover the cost.

One by one, the owner of the inn assigned the passengers rooms, until only Booker remained. Booker worried the cost would be too much for his meager budget. But the owner did not ask Booker for his money. He simply ignored him. Finally, Booker asked about a room.

The incredulous owner glared at Booker! He had no intention of offering Booker a room or a meal. The reason? The color of Booker's skin. Booker was left out

in the cold without food or shelter. Poor Booker! He was forced to stay outside all night, listening to the lullaby of hoot owls, crickets, and cicadas. In the morning, he returned to his seat in the stagecoach.

After several more days of travel, Booker arrived in Richmond, Virginia, a little worse for wear. He was dirty, hungry, and penniless. He was in a big and unfamiliar city. And yet again, he had no place to stay. Worst of all, he was still eighty miles from Hampton! But his most immediate need was a meal. On the streets of Richmond, he passed several food stands. He could smell fried chicken and half-moon apple pies, but he had no way to purchase even a morsel.

By midnight, Booker could walk no more. He spied a cramped space beneath a raised walkway made of wood planks near the water. He crawled in, used his satchel for a pillow, and fell fast asleep.

When Booker awoke the next morning, his hunger prompted him to come up with a plan to get something to eat. Seeing men working on the docks by the river, he went in search of work. Booker noticed a group of men unloading some pig iron from a large cargo ship. He approached the captain of the ship and asked if he would be willing to pay him a little for helping the men.



The captain agreed. “I worked long enough to earn money for my breakfast,” Booker later wrote, “and it seems to me, as I remember it now, to have been about the best breakfast that I have ever eaten.”

The captain was so pleased with Booker’s work that he hired him for several more days. Each day, Booker got paid. Each day, Booker ate. But Booker decided not to use any of his money for lodging. Instead, with his satchel as a pillow and the sound of tramping feet overhead, he continued to sleep under the walkway. He was determined to use his earnings to pay for a train ticket to complete his journey to Hampton. And in just a few days, Booker had enough!

Booker thanked the captain for his human kindness. He went down to the train depot, paid his fare, and was riding the rails once again. This time, the final destination was Hampton, Virginia.

"Many years after that the coloured citizens of Richmond very kindly tendered me a reception at which there must have been two thousand people present. This reception was held not far from the spot where I slept the first night I spent in that city, and I must confess that my mind was more upon the sidewalk that first gave me shelter than upon the reception, agreeable and cordial as it was."—Booker T. Washington

9

Reaching the Promised Land

When Booker reached the campus of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute overlooking the Hampton River, he felt as if he had reached the promised land. Never mind that he had only fifty cents in his pocket. Never mind that he must have been a sorry sight, having slept under a walkway, unable to bathe, for several days. Never mind the struggle to get there. From this moment, he could begin a new life, one full of purpose and doing good for others. All he had to do was swing open the door of the main campus building, a handsome three-story brick building, and enroll as a student.

Booker entered the building and approached the first person he saw: Mary F. Mackie, Hampton's Lady Principal, who was also in charge of student housing. Booker asked to be enrolled, but when Miss Mackie took in the disheveled man who stood before her, she found it hard to believe he was actually student material. Was he really there to be a student, or was he just looking for a hot meal? She was unsure, so she asked him

disheveled: looking untidy or disorderly

some questions. Booker tried to reassure her of his intentions, but Miss Mackie wasn't convinced. She assigned Booker a clean bed for the night, but she did not enroll him as a student.

Booker, however, was not going to give up. He needed to get his name on the school's registry while he had a chance. Instead of retreating to the room he had been given, he stood to one side and watched Miss Mackie enroll one young black person after another, all the while ignoring Booker.

As the sun began to slip toward dusk, Booker realized he needed to say something, do something—take some sort of action that would convince Miss Mackie that he, too, was worthy of being a Hampton student! Booker approached her and pleaded his case one last time. This time, instead of dismissing Booker, she decided to test him. But her examination would have nothing to do with how well Booker could read and write or do sums. It would, in her mind, have everything to do with how serious-minded Booker would be about his studies.

Miss Mackie beckoned for Booker to follow her as she made her way toward a large recitation room. She opened the door to the room and handed Booker a broom. Then she instructed him to clean it. Booker immediately realized that this was his chance to

prove to Miss Mackie how much he wanted to attend Hampton. It was his chance to apply elbow grease to his problem. It was his chance to turn nothing good into something fine.

Thankfully, having worked for Mrs. Ruffner, Booker knew a thing or two about making a room sparkle and shine. “I think that I must have swept that room over as many as three times and dusted it the same number of times,” he wrote.

Miss Mackie returned with a white handkerchief to check on his work. She wiped her handkerchief on the tables, the benches, and the baseboards. When Miss Mackie lifted her cloth, there was not one particle of dust! Her eyes began to sparkle. She smiled.

“I guess we will try you as a student,” she said at last. At that moment, Booker’s heart swelled with happiness. He was now a Hampton student.

“The sweeping of that room was my college examination, and never did any youth pass an examination for entrance into Harvard or Yale that gave him more genuine satisfaction. I have passed several examinations since then, but I have always felt that this was the best one I ever passed.”—Booker T. Washington

From 1872 through 1875, Booker worked as a janitor to pay his way as a student at Hampton. He worked hard at his studies. He worked hard at learning trades.



He worked hard to improve his public speaking abilities. After three years of applying elbow grease to his every endeavor, Booker could debate. He could lay bricks. He could farm effectively. And most importantly, he knew how to share what he learned with others. Booker graduated from Hampton with honors in 1875, ready to seize his future with his own hands. Little did he know that one day, in the not-so-distant future, he'd become one of Hampton's most distinguished alumni.

alumni: people who have graduated from a particular school

10

After Hampton

After graduating from Hampton, Booker decided to return to Malden to start his career as a teacher at the same Tinkersville school he had all too briefly attended. Though his mother had died the year before, many members of his family were still living in Malden—Wash, John, Amanda, and a young man named James whom his mother had adopted after finding him abandoned in a stable. But having family in Malden wasn't the only reason he wanted to return. He wanted to give back to the community that had helped him get to Hampton.

For the next few years, Booker taught in a schoolroom full of young, eager learners who were just like he had been when he had wanted nothing more than to attend school. He taught older black folks during night school. He taught Sunday school at two different churches. He set up a debating society and gave lessons and lectures on everyday living. One of his favorite topics to lecture on was the importance of using a toothbrush and taking regular baths.

Several of Booker's students left Malden to attend Hampton, just as he had. So did his brothers, John and James. Booker enjoyed giving back in this way. It made him feel fulfilled. All around Malden, Booker's reputation as a fine citizen grew. Both black and white people enjoyed listening to Booker speak. He had a way with words that moved people to action.

In 1877, a committee of white folks in nearby Charleston asked Booker to use his voice on their behalf. Legislators in West Virginia wanted to move the state capital from Wheeling to a more central location, and the people would vote on which city would be the new capital. The committee wanted Booker to travel the state, speaking to crowds of West Virginians about why they should vote for Charleston. Booker agreed—and succeeded.

Some time after his speaking tour of West Virginia, Booker received an invitation from his friend General Samuel Armstrong, Hampton's founder, to give Hampton Institute's 1879 commencement speech. Booker was quite surprised, and happy, too. Of course, he said yes. As he rode the train from Charleston to Hampton, Booker couldn't help but think of how much his life had changed in the nearly seven years since he had first made the journey.

commencement speech: a speech delivered to students at graduation

He titled his speech “The Force That Wins.” As he stood before the graduating class, his words poured out like rain, gentle yet powerful. His speech inspired not only the students but also his former teachers. General Armstrong was so impressed that he invited Booker to teach at Hampton. Once again, Booker said yes.



Wayland Seminary

In 1878, Booker became a student at Wayland Seminary located in Washington, D.C.'s Foggy Bottom neighborhood. The school had been opened by the National Theological Institute, an institute created by the American Baptist Home Mission Society, not long after the Civil War. At that time, its mission was to educate black people so they could become preachers and teachers in the South. Booker spent eight months there. Though he came away favoring the learning model of Hampton that emphasized industrial training, he wrote: "I derived a great deal of benefit from the studies which I pursued, and I came into contact with some strong men and women."

Booker approached teaching at Hampton with the same eagerness he had cleaning the recitation room for Miss Mackie that first day so many years ago. Armstrong had recently decided to make two major changes: The previous year, Hampton had started accepting Indigenous students, and now it would be offering night classes for the first time. Booker was chosen to lead the night classes, teaching black youths who worked all day to earn their tuition. He also took on a guiding role with the young Indigenous men, helping them adjust to their new surroundings. Though it was tiring work, Booker enjoyed it very much.

House Father

One year, Booker shared a dormitory building with seventy-five young Indigenous men, filling the role of “house father.” He looked after them, sort of like a big brother who offers advice and counsel.

Booker also found time to continue his own learning as a student. He especially enjoyed spending time with and learning from General Armstrong. Later, he wrote of Armstrong, “From his example in this respect I learned the lesson that great men cultivate love, and that only little men cherish a spirit of hatred. I learned that assistance given to the weak makes the one who gives it strong; and that oppression of the unfortunate makes one weak.”

11

Tuskegee

One day, while twenty-five-year-old Booker was working at Hampton, General Armstrong pulled him aside. Armstrong had received a request from a few men living in Alabama who had petitioned the state to open a “normal school” for black people in Tuskegee. They had the state’s approval, but they didn’t have a principal for the school. They wondered if Armstrong could recommend someone for the job. Armstrong asked the men if they were willing to hire a black man. When they replied yes, he recommended Booker for the position. Was Booker willing to go? Of course he was!

Normal School

A “normal” school prepared individuals to become teachers. The graduates could be hired as teachers even though they did not have a bachelor’s degree.

When Booker arrived in Alabama, he expected to find at least one school building in place for this institution he had been asked to lead. To his surprise,

petitioned: requested, often in formal written form

the only thing constructed was an idea for a school. The state of Alabama had promised two thousand dollars for the school, but that money had been allocated for teacher salaries. "The task before me," Booker wrote, "did not seem a very encouraging one. It seemed much like making bricks without straw."

Booker's new school had thirty students enrolled when it opened. And where did he teach them? In the only place he could find: a run-down shanty near an old, equally run-down church. The roof leaked, so when it rained, one of Booker's students had to hold an umbrella over his head. His students were so thirsty for knowledge that they didn't seem to mind the conditions. They were just happy to have a willing teacher. By the end of the first month, the class had grown to almost fifty students.

It wasn't long before Booker had more students than he could teach. He wrote to a fellow Hampton graduate, Olivia America Davidson, to see if she would come to assist him, even though his school was little more than a broken-down shack filled to the brim with eager learners. Would she be up to the challenge?

Before attending Hampton, Olivia America Davidson had taught in the South in some equally challenging environments. She was highly intelligent, hardworking, and selfless. These were qualities that

would be needed when building an institution from the ground up. A few weeks later, Olivia arrived in Tuskegee. Together, Olivia and Booker came up with a plan to get their students out of the leaking shanty and nearby church and into an institution that would rival Hampton. But it wasn't going to be easy.

The first step was procuring land. One day, Booker heard that a former plantation in Tuskegee was for sale. The mansion on it had burned down, so the price was only \$500. Even though Booker's school didn't have the funds to pay for the land, he and Olivia still inquired about purchasing it. The owner of the land would accept a down payment of \$200, with the rest of the money to be paid with interest. But where would Booker find the money for the down payment?

Booker borrowed the money for the \$200 down payment from General J. F. B. Marshall, Hampton's treasurer, promising to use his salary to repay the loan. The money was exchanged, and the one hundred acres of land now belonged to Booker's school. He and Olivia began fundraising at once. Before long, they had raised

procuring: gaining possession of

down payment: part of the full price of a purchase that must be paid up front, allowing the rest to be paid over time

interest: an extra charge for borrowing money, usually a percentage of the amount borrowed

enough to repay General Marshall and pay the rest of the money for the land. Of course, a lot more than \$500 would be needed to erect all the buildings that would be needed for Booker's school in Tuskegee to become a dignified place worthy of higher learning.

Booker and Olivia kept up with their fundraising efforts. Both white and black folks from Tuskegee donated what they could for the school. Some gave eggs. Others gave quilts. Some gave nickels, others quarters. Olivia organized local festivals to raise funds. They were well-attended.

Booker found financial supporters everywhere he turned. Folks at Hampton gave funds. A white sawmill owner who lived nearby offered to provide all the lumber they needed, with only Booker's word that he would be repaid.

And when all local sources of funds seemed exhausted, Olivia traveled up north to look for more. She had attended a normal school in Massachusetts after graduating from Hampton, and she still had contacts there. She also spoke in public about how important it was for the throngs of black people who were impoverished down south to be educated. She spoke at churches. She spoke to educational foundations.

She spoke to those with means. Olivia bent any willing ear for the sake of her and Booker's school, and people responded by giving their financial support.

As soon as they had enough money, Booker and Olivia began to make plans to erect handsome brick buildings on the property. Just as Booker had done while enrolled as a student at Hampton, his students paid off their tuition by working for the school. Booker and his students set to work designing the buildings, laying the foundations, and making and placing the bricks. They did the plastering and painting, as well as laying the wood floors, and they built every cabinet, bench, bed, and desk. How proud they all must have been, applying elbow grease to the problem and seeing something arise from nothing! Many of those first buildings still stand today—a testimony to the work ethic Booker passed on.



testimony: evidence

In time, Tuskegee grew both in enrollment and in the courses it offered. Booker assembled a faculty of amazing black men to handle the load. Renowned botanist George Washington Carver headed up the agricultural department. Robert Robinson Taylor, the first black student to graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the first accredited black architect in the nation, headed up the mechanical trades department. And David A. Williston, a professional landscape architect, headed up the horticulture and landscape design department.

Like Hampton, Tuskegee's mission was for every student to graduate not only with book learning but also with industrial training. Whether they became farmers, nurses, cabinet makers, brickmasons, or teachers, Booker wanted them to be able to use their hands to care for their families and build up their communities. The Tuskegee Normal School for Colored Teachers—later renamed Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, and now known as Tuskegee University—was Booker's crowning achievement.

renowned: well-known and celebrated

botanist: someone who studies plants

accredited: having official certification or credentials

horticulture: the science of growing plants

brickmasons: people who build by laying bricks

Notable Tuskegee Students

John A. Lankford took courses at Tuskegee in the 1890s. He later became the first black architect to be licensed in Virginia and the District of Columbia. He and his brother owned a successful architectural firm in Washington, D.C. Later in life, he was an architectural consultant for the U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Navy.

Elizabeth Evelyn Wright graduated from Tuskegee in 1894. She became an educator and social reformer. In 1897, she founded Denmark Industrial School (now Voorhees University), located in Denmark, South Carolina.

Arthur Wergs Mitchell attended Tuskegee in 1901–2. He was the only black representative in the U.S. Congress from 1935 to 1943 and the first black member of Congress from the Democratic Party.

Gertrude DeWitt Nelson earned a nursing degree from Tuskegee in 1929. She was a military, civilian, and American Red Cross nurse. She achieved the rank of major before retiring from the U.S. Army Nurse Corps.

Ralph Waldo Ellison studied music at Tuskegee from 1933 to 1936. In 1953, he became the first black author to win the National Book Award, for his novel *Invisible Man*.

Percy Ellis Sutton was a student at Tuskegee in the 1940s. He became a Tuskegee Airman, a civil rights defense attorney, a New York legislator, and a broadcasting executive.

Lonnie Johnson, an inventor, earned a bachelor of science in mechanical engineering from Tuskegee in 1973, followed by a master's degree in nuclear engineering in 1975. He worked on the Galileo spacecraft mission to Jupiter. NASA has awarded him multiple achievement awards for his work in spacecraft system design.

12

Family Life and Legacy

Besides being a leader in education, Booker was also a family man. In 1882, he married Fannie Norton Smith. She was from Malden, West Virginia, and had been tutored by Booker in preparation for attending Hampton. After her graduation from Hampton, they got married. They moved into a large house near the Tuskegee campus and lived there with four other Tuskegee teachers. Fannie quickly settled in and began helping her husband in his work at Tuskegee, where she helped expand the course offerings for female students and created the home economics department. In 1883, Booker and Fannie had a daughter, Portia Marshall Washington. Sadly, Fannie died the year after Portia was born, possibly from injuries caused by falling off a farm wagon.

In 1886, Booker married Olivia, who was by then the Lady Principal at Tuskegee. They had two boys together, Booker Taliaferro Washington Jr. and Ernest Davidson Washington. Tragically, Olivia died from tuberculosis

home economics: the study of skills that are useful for taking care of a household

tuberculosis: a bacterial infection of the lungs that causes fever and difficulty breathing

in 1889, not long after the birth of their youngest son. Booker was left to grieve the loss of another companion.

In 1893, Booker married again. This time, his bride was Margaret James Murray. She had become the Lady Principal of Tuskegee after Olivia's death. Booker and Margaret did not have any children together, but Margaret cared for all three of Booker's children as if they were her own. Booker bought two acres of land from the college. He built a large, beautiful home on the land, far larger than the Burroughs home where he had been enslaved. He called his big house The Oaks. It is still standing today, with the original furnishings still in his study.



Tuskegee and its founder became widely known throughout the United States. Booker traveled far and wide, giving speeches about the value of industriousness and the importance of learning a trade. He also shared his views on the racial divide that existed in the United States and how he thought everyone could and should live together in peace. While not everyone agreed with his philosophies, all agreed that Booker was a great man, an excellent educator, and an orator of the highest degree. He was honest, hardworking, and a gentleman in the truest sense of the word.

Three U.S. presidents—Theodore Roosevelt, William McKinley, and William Howard Taft—wanted to consult with him. He became the first black man to dine with the president at the White House when he was invited by Roosevelt.

He published a number of books, several of which are still in print today. He and a Tuskegee trustee, Julius Rosenwald, instituted a building program that raised thousands of well-built schools across the rural South for black children to attend. Booker also founded the National Negro Business League in 1900 in Boston. Harvard University and Dartmouth College awarded him honorary doctoral degrees for his work in education.

industriousness: the quality of working hard to get things done

philosophies: ideas about how people should live

orator: public speaker

On November 14, 1915, Dr. Booker T. Washington died from kidney failure caused by untreated high blood pressure. He was fifty-nine years old. His wife, Margaret, was by his side. At the time of his death, Tuskegee had two hundred faculty members and 1,500 students learning forty different trades (called “majors” today). It had one hundred fully equipped buildings and a two-million-dollar endowment.

Today, in the heart of the Tuskegee campus, a monument called *Lifting the Veil* stands to honor the man who was born on a bed of rags. The inscription at its base reads, “He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry.” Booker used his life to turn nothing good into something fine.

Discussion Questions

1. Consider how John wore little Booker's new shirt for him while the material was coarse and scratchy. What kind of brother was John to Booker? Do you think that influenced the person Booker grew up to be?
2. What do you think Booker meant when he said his enslavers were not "especially cruel . . . as compared with many others"?
3. Though he didn't miss being enslaved, what did Booker miss about living in Virginia after he had moved to Malden, West Virginia? What do you make of his attempts to focus on the fond memories from his time in slavery?
4. Why do you think Booker wanted to be able to read more than anything? Once he learned to read, why do you think he still wanted to attend school?
5. Booker chose his own last name. What do you think it meant to him to choose a last name? If you could choose your own last name, what would it be, and why?
6. Why do you think Mrs. Ruffner rehired Booker after he had left without telling her?

7. When he was stuck in Richmond on his way to Hampton, why do you think Booker continued to sleep under the boardwalk even after he had earned enough money for lodging?
8. Do you think it was right for Miss Mackie to assume Booker was not serious about attending Hampton just because he arrived in a disheveled manner? Why or why not?
9. Why do you think Miss Mackie tested Booker the way she did when he asked to enroll at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute? How do you think that test helped her make her decision?
10. How do you think Booker felt when he arrived in Tuskegee to run a school for higher learning but found not even one building set up for the school's opening? What do you think he meant when he wrote: "The task before me did not seem a very encouraging one. It seemed much like making bricks without straw."
11. Considering the racial divide in the country in Booker's lifetime, what kinds of questions do you think the three presidents of the United States asked Booker, and why do you think they consulted him?
12. What is one of your favorite quotes from Booker found in this book, and why?

Meet the Author



Dionna L. Mann is a children's book author of fiction and nonfiction. Her work has appeared in *Ladybug*, *Cricket*, and *Spider*. As a work-for-hire author, she's written for Scholastic, Lerner, Capstone, Sports Illustrated Kids, and other educational markets. Dionna loves discovering lesser-known individuals who shine within the margins of African-American history and sharing their stories with young readers. Dionna's debut novel, *Mama's Chicken and Dumplings*, was released from Margaret Ferguson Books, an imprint of Holiday House Books for Young Readers, on August 6, 2024. Find Dionna online at dionnalmann.com.

Meet the Illustrator



Adam Gustavson is the illustrator of over thirty books for children, as well as the author/illustrator of *The Froggies Do NOT Want to Sleep* and *The Aliens Do NOT Want to Go Home*. Adam holds a master's degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York and serves on the faculty of Rowan University. He is the lead instructor at Renaissance Art Studio in Millburn, NJ, which he co-owns with his wife, Denise. He lives in New Jersey with his charming family and two peculiar little dogs.

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