

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
reads like fiction—
but it's all true



UP *From* SLAVE

HOW BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

HELPED MILLIONS OF FORMER

**BY
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**AS YOU READ,
THINK ABOUT:**

Why was education important to Booker T. Washington?

On a cold October night in 1872, a 16-year-old boy named Booker Washington walked through the dark streets of Richmond, Virginia. The howls of wild dogs echoed through the cold air. Thieves lurked in snaking alleys. Booker shivered in his threadbare clothes.

He was hundreds of miles from his home in West Virginia, and he knew not one soul in Richmond. He had no money, no food, and nowhere to spend the night. Walking fast was a good trick for keeping warm, but sometime around midnight, Booker's tired muscles started to ache so badly he could not take another step.

He found a spot where the wooden sidewalk was raised off the ground. Underneath was a space just big enough for a skinny boy like Booker to curl up for the night. He crawled into the dark, **dank** opening. He closed his eyes, trying not to think about the rats and snakes that might be curled up all around him.

Two weeks before, Booker had left home with a few dollars in his pocket and a dream in his heart: to go to school. But not just any school; Booker longed to attend the Hampton Institute, one of few boarding schools in the world that would accept a former slave like him.



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SLAVES GO TO SCHOOL

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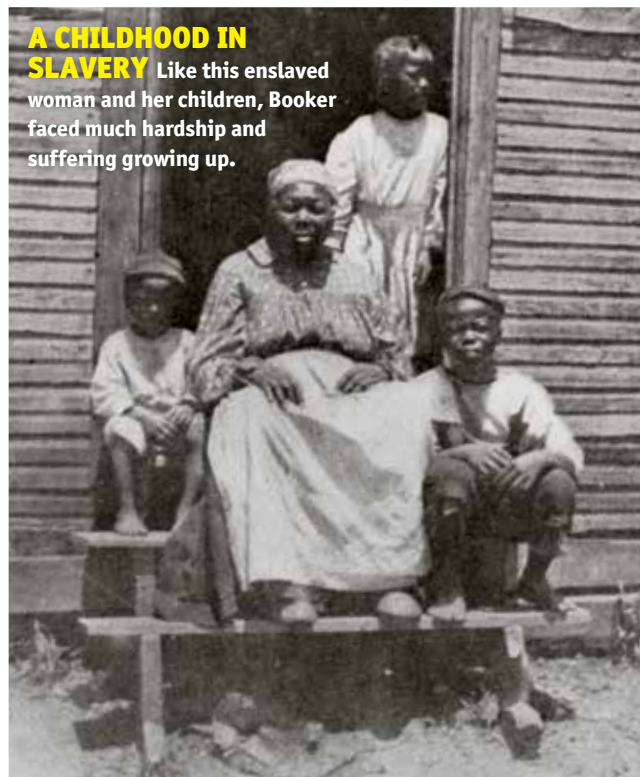
The Hampton Institute was 500 miles from Booker's hometown in West Virginia. The first part of the journey hadn't been so bad—a long train ride and a bumpy trip on a stagecoach. But then he ran out of money. So he walked. He walked and walked until finally he arrived in Richmond. Then he was stranded, and he still had 82 miles to go.

Anyone who noticed the ragged boy sleeping under the sidewalk would have assumed he was just another former slave, starving and without hope. Nobody would have guessed that one day, Booker T. Washington would be one of the most famous men on Earth.

A Piece of Property

Booker was born in Virginia sometime in 1856. Like most enslaved Americans, he never knew his actual birthday. For his owners, Elizabeth and James Burroughs, the birth of a new slave was no more important than the arrival of a new calf. Booker wasn't legally a person, after all; he was a piece of property to be used and sold when his owners didn't want him anymore.

Booker's mother, Jane, loved her three children fiercely, but she had no control over what



happened to them. Where Booker lived, what he ate, and how he spent every minute of every day was up to his owners. This was the reality for the 4 million enslaved people in America.

Booker was luckier than many. The Burroughses rarely whipped or beat their slaves. Still, life was harsh. Booker's family lived in a tiny shack that was roasting in summer and freezing in winter. They slept on filthy rags spread across the dirt floor. Supper was sometimes leftover pig slop.

One of Booker's first jobs was to stand in the Burroughses' dining room swatting away flies so they wouldn't set their sticky feet upon the food. Booker's mouth watered as he breathed in the **tantalizing** smells of juicy meats and buttery

potatoes. But the flies had a better chance of tasting that food than Booker did.

However, it wasn't his owners' food for which Booker most hungered. It was education. If only he could learn to read! He'd caught glimpses of school when he had carried the Burroughses' daughters' books to their schoolhouse. He'd gaze through the window, mesmerized, watching the kids at their desks and straining to hear the

teacher call out spelling words and math problems. To Booker, school seemed like paradise.

But Booker did not dare set foot in that school. In Virginia and other Southern states, it was illegal for a slave to learn to read or write. An education gives a person power, and the last thing a slave owner wanted was a powerful slave—a slave who could read a map and plot his escape to the North, a slave who could read books filled with ideas and inspiration. Booker knew what happened to slaves caught glancing at a newspaper. They were sold, or whipped, or even killed.

And so day after day, Booker walked the Burroughs girls to school, struggling to keep his eyes off the forbidden books he carried in his arms. He prayed for the day

that his life would change.

As it would turn out, that day was not so far away.

The Civil War

In 1861, when Booker was about 5 years old, war broke out in America. The Civil War pitted the states of the North against the states of the South. Booker heard about the war as he swatted flies in the Burroughses' dining room—about gruesome battles that left thousands of men dead on blood-soaked fields. He learned that the Southern states wanted to rip themselves away from America and form a new country of their own.

What amazed Booker was that all this terrible fighting was mainly about him—about slaves. Northern states had banned slavery

decades before, and most Northerners believed it should be **abolished** in the South too. Southerners **vehemently** disagreed, and many were willing to fight to the death to keep their slaves.

The Civil War raged for four years and killed about 750,000 men. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which officially freed all slaves in the states fighting against the North, which

included Virginia. When the Civil War ended, Booker and his family were free.

Truly Free?

But life for most freed black people in the South was little better than life as a slave. Booker and his family moved to Malden, West Virginia,



HAMPTON INSTITUTE, 1899
Students at the Hampton Institute learned skills that would enable them to find jobs. Here, students learn cheese making. Above: Hampton students perform in a musical group.

where Booker's stepfather had found a job in a salt mine. Within weeks, Booker and his brother were working there too. A school opened in a nearby town, but Booker and his brother couldn't enroll. Their family needed every cent they could get, so instead of going to school, Booker spent long days in the dark mine. Instead of learning to read and write, he learned how to shovel salt into barrels. It was the kind of work that broke a person's body and spirit, yet it was the only kind of work available to most former slaves.

Without an education, Booker realized, he would never be truly free. And so in that dark and sweaty mine, Booker began to educate himself.

He learned to recognize the numbers etched into the sides of barrels. As he shoveled, he whispered his ABCs. His mother scraped together some pennies and bought Booker an old spelling book. Booker memorized it.

When the nearby school began offering classes at night, Booker would rush over after work from the mine, his stomach empty, his skin crusted with sweat and salt. The tiny schoolhouse was always packed, and not only with kids. There were grandmothers, mothers with babies, and old men hunched over from decades of picking cotton. Across the South, former slaves were starving for education. But there were not nearly enough schools and teachers to teach them.

A Fire Inside

Then one day, Booker heard two men talking about the Hampton Institute, a special school created to train black students to become teachers or to get jobs in other trades.

Booker held his breath as he listened to the men talk. Their words sparked a fire inside him. It didn't matter that Hampton was 500 miles away or that it cost \$70 a year, a fortune for Booker's family.

Booker *had* to go there.

POEM

His hands dug

Up from Slavery.

Yanked the weeds
Sprouted from seeds
sown on the Civil War's battleground:

Once emancipated, stay enslaved to common labor.

But this grassroots **griot**
fed his people the true story.

He believed black men and women could rise
by starting down on their knees
to build, brick by brick,
the foundation for a school
to call their own.

Tuskegee—
the all-black Institute for an "industrial education."

A kind of learning that comes
with Grade-A elbow grease
to teach
its lessons.

Eager Educator.
The "Great Accommodator."

Preached the Gospel According to Booker T.:

*To achieve racial harmony
Black people should take pride
in skilled service-work*

rendered with the utmost dignity.

Poem by Andrea Davis Pinkney

For two years, Booker worked and worked, saving every cent he could. The day he left, half the town of Malden showed up to see him off. They pressed pennies and nickels into his hands, hugged him tight, told him they had no doubts he would achieve his dream.

Those voices whispered to him as he slept under that sidewalk in Richmond. When he awoke, he was **ravenous** and aching but determined. He found a job helping unload a ship.

Within a few days, Booker had earned enough to buy food for the final part of his journey to Hampton Institute.

An Inspiration

Booker finally made it to Hampton. He became a star student, paying his school fees by working as the school's janitor.

Booker's time at Hampton gave him clear ideas about what kind of education would be most useful to America's former slaves, who were known as freedmen and freedwomen. At Hampton, students didn't only learn to read and write and do math problems. They also learned skills like sewing, cheese making, blacksmithing. Booker became a passionate believer in what was known as industrial education. He carried

these ideas with him after he left Hampton to teach in Malden, and then to attend college.

In 1881, Booker became the director of the Tuskegee Institute, a new college in Alabama for black students. A gifted **orator**, he began to spread his ideas about industrial education around the country. What good was knowing Greek or reading Shakespeare, Booker asked, if you didn't have skills that would lead to a well-paid job?

Some people criticized Booker. Was he saying that blacks shouldn't become as educated as whites? Did he believe that blacks were capable of working only with their hands—and not their minds?

Today, most historians believe that Booker T. Washington was simply being **pragmatic**. His goal was to help former slaves escape poverty and lead lives of dignity.

Over the next three decades, Booker became one of the best-known figures in the U.S., a writer and speaker who inspired people around the world. He used his fame to raise money for thousands of schools for black students across the South.

"If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else," Booker famously wrote.

No wonder Booker T. Washington rose up so high. ●



A FAMILY MAN

Washington (center) with his wife, Margaret (left), his daughter, Portia, and his sons, Ernest (left) and Booker Jr.

WRITING CONTEST

What challenges did Booker T. Washington face in getting an education? Why was education so important to former slaves? Answer both questions in a short essay. Support your ideas with details from the article and (optionally) poem and video. Send your essay to **BOOKER T. CONTEST**. Five winners will get a signed copy of *Hand in Hand* by Andrea Davis Pinkney.



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