

Booker T. Washington

Born in 1858 the son of a slave and himself a slave, Booker T. Washington gained his freedom through emancipation. He worked his way through Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University) and attended college at Wayland Seminary (now Virginia Union University). In 1881 he was named as the first leader of the new Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. His heart for young blacks led him to raise funds to establish and operate thousands of small community schools and institutions of higher education for the betterment of blacks throughout the South. This work continued for many years after his death. Washington argued that the surest way for blacks to gain equal social rights was to demonstrate “industry, thrift, intelligence and property.”

Booker T. Washington is known for his great educational work for under-privileged students of former slaves after the Civil War. He is more commonly known for his great unifying speeches and overcoming great odds in his own life.

From <http://bookertequity.com/about.html>:

However, some of his greatest accomplishments are hardly ever mentioned. He grew up as he describes “in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings”. With nothing more than desire burning in his heart, the young Booker T. was able to learn how to read and eventually start a school for former slaves and children of former slaves.

If his upbringing wasn't enough of a challenge, the launching of this school was even more challenging. Eventually he was able to start this school out of a barn with a dirt floor and when it rained, he had to teach with an umbrella. Most students did not know how to read, write, or even have a basic understanding of hygiene. Young Washington had to teach the basics and then teach them to become successful business owners and investors.

His philosophy was simply to teach his students to have deep faith in God, strong character, and practical business skills, along with the basic skills of personal hygiene, reading, and writing.

What is remarkable is that after 40 years, his school produced more self-made millionaires than the top three schools in the country combined (Harvard, Yale, and Princeton). He did not do it with the best and the brightest, unlike those Ivy League schools, but those who had a desire to change the conditions of their lives. Eventually, during Washington's tenure, the barn that they called a school turned into 107 buildings on 2,000 acres with over 1,500 students and 200 teachers.

“I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has had to overcome while trying to succeed.”