How Booker T. Washington

Up From Slave
By Lauren Tarshis

millions of former slaves

go to school
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 ragged 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 couldn't take another step.

He found a spot where the wooden sidewalk was raised up 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. Not just any school—the Hampton Institute, one of the only boarding schools in the world for a boy like Booker: a former slave. The school was 500 miles from Booker's hometown in West Virginia. The first part of the journey wasn't 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 and walked until finally he arrived in Richmond. But now he was stranded, and he still had 82 miles to go.

If anyone noticed the ragged boy sleeping under the sidewalk, they 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 Americans who were slaves, 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 any of 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's Southern states.

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 the summer and freezing in the winter. They slept on a bed made of 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 and swat away flies so they wouldn't set their sticky feet upon the food. Booker’s mouth watered as he breathed in the delicious smells of juicy meats and buttery potatoes. But the flies had a better chance of tasting that food than Booker did.

Actually, though, it wasn’t his owners’ food that Booker hungered for most. It was an education. If only he could learn to read! He'd caught glimpses of school when he carried the Burroughses' daughters’ books to their schoolhouse. He’d gaze through the window, watching the kids at their desks, straining to hear the teacher calling out spelling words and math problems. To him, it seemed like paradise.

Booker didn’t dare set foot into that school. It was illegal for a slave to learn to read or write in Virginia and other Southern states. 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 just glancing at a newspaper. They were sold, or whipped, or even killed.

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, a brutal war broke out in America. The Civil War pitted America’s Northern states against the South. Booker heard about the war as he swatted flies in the Burroughses’ dining room—about brutal 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 of 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 violently disagreed, and many were willing to fight to the death to keep their slaves.

The Civil War would rage for four years and kill as many as 750,000 men from the North and South. In 1863, when Booker was 7, President Abraham Lincoln signed a law called the Emancipation Proclamation, which officially freed all of the slaves in the states fighting against the North, including Virginia.

Two years later, when the war ended, Booker and his family were free.

**Broken Bodies**

But life for most freed black people in the South was little better than life as a slave. The family moved to Malden, West Virginia, 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 go. The family needed every penny. 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 this was the only kind of work available to most former slaves. Without an education, Booker realized, he’d never be truly free.

And so even in the dark and sweaty mine, Booker began to educate himself.

He learned to recognize the numbers etched into the sides of the 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 school started to offer classes at night, Booker would rush over 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, old men hunched over from decades of picking cotton. Across the South, former slaves were starving for education. Yet there were not nearly enough schools and teachers to teach them.

A Fire Inside

But one day, Booker heard two men talking about the Hampton Institute, a special school created to train black students to become teachers or get jobs in other trades. Booker held his breath as he listened to the men talk. Their words were like sparks that lit a fire inside him. It didn’t matter that the school was 500 miles away and that it cost $70 a year, a fortune for Booker’s family.

Booker had to go to Hampton.

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

Those voices whispered in Booker’s dreams as he slept under the sidewalk. He woke up hungry and aching but determined. He found a job helping unload a ship, and within a few days he’d earned enough to buy food for the last part of his journey to Hampton.

Booker finally made it to the school. He became a star student, paying his school fees by working as the school’s janitor. After Hampton, he returned to Malden to teach, and then he went to college.

In 1881, he founded the Tuskegee Institute, which became a celebrated college for black students. But Booker didn’t stop there. Over the next three decades, he became one of the best-known people 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.

As Booker wrote, “If you want to lift yourself up, lift someone else up.”

No wonder Booker T. Washington rose up so high.
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