

## Lesson Thirteen

# Booker T. Washington

### LESSON IDEA

Booker T. Washington's life is a remarkable story of a rise from the depths of poverty and slavery to the heights of achievement and humanitarian service. It provides many lessons for us that could only be possible in freedom.

### VISUAL AID

None recommended for this lesson.

**T**HE SUBJECT of tonight's lesson was born on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia, on April 5, 1856, about five years prior to the start of the Civil War. Since his mother was a slave, so was he. It was customary at the time for slaves to be given only one name, so he was named merely Booker. Years later, he would choose his full name: Booker Taliaferro ("Tolliver") Washington.

Booker was a victim of the evil system of buying and selling human beings that had existed in the United States since colonial days. How was it possible for slavery to become so widely accepted in our country, where so much had been risked to achieve freedom? [Encourage each family member to express an opinion.]

For untold centuries, trade in human beings had been considered a respectable business. Blacks from Africa were sold in Europe 500 years before Columbus set sail on the journey that led to the discovery of America. From tribes in the heart of Africa to kings and queens in Europe, men of all stations in life engaged in, and profited from, the slave trade. Spanish conquistadores fostered the trade wherever they went. Thousands of slaves were owned by wealthy Spanish and Portuguese families in the American colonies. Black slaves had landed at Jamestown,

Virginia, even before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620.

Slavery had existed for so long, and had become so entrenched, that it could not be easily eliminated. Many of the Founders were opposed to it, but recognized that many persons, especially in the South, depended on slave labor for their very existence. The problem was complicated by the fact that slaves were considered property, and the framers of the Constitution did not believe that the new government could or should infringe on property rights by outlawing slavery.

**I**N HIS INSPIRING autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington recalls the miseries of slavery during his early childhood years. He also describes the elation felt by the slaves when President Abraham Lincoln issued

his Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, and how his mother, tears running down her cheeks, kissed her children and told them the good news that they were free.

But the initial euphoria was soon replaced by fear, gloom, and despondency as it gradually dawned on the newly-freed slaves that they were responsible for their own welfare, but were largely unprepared for the responsibility.

The experience had a lasting impact on young Booker. He resolved, at whatever cost, to acquire an education. His determination later broadened to become an unquenchable desire to help others of his race cope with the demands of citizenship. It is a tribute to his character that Booker was not bitter toward the white men who had held him and his loved ones in slavery. Rather, he expressed sympathy and understanding for slave owners, viewing them as other victims of an evil system.

Booker soon realized that achieving a good edu-



Booker T. Washington at work in his study.

cation was easier said than done. He had to overcome many obstacles. With their new freedom, Booker and his family (mother, stepfather, brother, and sister) moved to Malden, West Virginia. He describes how the "little clothing and few household goods" they owned were placed in a cart, while "the children walked the greater portion of the distance, which was several hundred miles." The trip took several weeks, "and most of the time we slept in the open air and did our cooking over a log fire out-of-doors."

Nor was life less onerous after family arrived in Malden. At first, due to poverty, Booker was unable to attend school because he had to work, first in a salt mine and later in a coal mine. He eventually arranged to attend school for a few months by beginning his work shift at the salt mine at 4:00 a.m., then attending classes, then returning to the mine. It was during this time that he chose the rest of his name to satisfy school record-keeping requirements.

One day, while working in the coal mine, Booker heard two men discuss a school in Virginia that had been established to train blacks to become self-supporting teachers and farmers. He resolved to attend, and was soon on his way to the Hampton Institute. He did not have sufficient funds for the trip, so was forced to sleep outdoors and pause now and then along the way to earn money for food. He arrived at Hampton hungry, tired, dirty, and with only 50 cents in his pocket. As you can imagine, he did not make a very favorable impression on the head mistress in charge of admissions. As a test, she gave him a broom and told him that a class room needed sweeping.

Booker viewed this the assignment as his "entrance examination," and set about to do the best job possible. In his own words, "I swept the recitation room three times. Then I got a dusting cloth and I dusted it four times. All the woodwork around the walls, every bench, table, and desk, I went over four times with my dusting cloth." Needless to say, he passed the "exam" with flying colors. He was accepted at the Institute, and was given the opportunity to earn his board as a janitor. In time, the Institute director located a benefactor who provided his full tuition.

#### FOR YOUNGER AMERICANS

Tonight's lesson is appropriate for children of all grade levels. There is much to be learned from Booker T. Washington's life that can inspire and motivate youngsters today.

Two traits that exemplified Booker's outlook were an ability to focus on worthwhile, non-selfish goals, and an unswerving determination to overcome obstacles that might stand in the way of achieving them. What events from tonight's lesson illustrate those aspects of his character?

Washington was not yet seven years old when the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. Had he remained in slavery, do you think any of his marvelous accomplishments would have been possible? What lessons from his life and works apply to us today?

**L**IFE AT HAMPTON was an unending series of revelations for young Booker. He recalls, for example, that he had never before had meals at regular hours, or eaten off a tablecloth, or used a napkin, bathtub, or toothbrush. He had never had sheets on his bed, so did not know if he should sleep under them, over them, or between them. He learned the value of cleanliness, not only for promoting good health, but "in inspiring self-respect and promoting virtue." He was introduced to the Bible, and began a life-long habit of reading Scriptures each morning. Through the example of his teachers, he learned the meaning of service to others.

After graduating with honors, Booker returned to West Virginia to teach in a school for black students. He opened a night school, established a reading room and debating society, and taught in two Sunday Schools. But his greatest opportunity did not come in West Virginia, or even Virginia, but in a state that he had never visited.

After teaching for two years in Malden, Booker was invited to return to Hampton as "House Father" for a number of American Indians who had recently enrolled at the Institute. Shortly thereafter, the Institute director was asked to either start a school for blacks at Tuskegee, Alabama, or recommend another white person for the job. He replied that he was not interested in the assignment himself, and did not know any qualified white prospects. But if a black would be acceptable, he suggested Booker T. Washington. The answer was received shortly thereafter:

