



Perhaps his greatest strength was his boundless determination to succeed. From an early age, he displayed an intense desire to get an education. What separated him from most of his peers was that he recognized both the value and the dignity of hard work. This was applied not only to his studies, but by necessity, to the other aspects of his life.

After spending his childhood days working at the plantation, in the salt furnaces of West Virginia, and in the coal mines, he managed to scrape together enough money (or so he thought) to travel to Hampton, Virginia. There he planned to study at the Hampton Institute, a school whose mission it was to train black teachers. He was attracted there in part due to the school's policy of allowing students of little or no means to work their way through school.

Unfortunately, Washington underestimated the cost of the journey,

and found himself in dire financial straits by the time he reached Richmond. Fiercely determined to complete his journey, he worked by day unloading cargo at the docks, and slept by night under a wooden sidewalk rather than spend any of his wages on lodging. Eventually, he succeeded in reaching the school, arriving once again without a penny to his name.

The school's headmistress was a little skeptical of this ragtag youth who presented himself at her office, asking not only to be admitted as a student but for a job as well. She told him that she could take him on as a janitor, if he could prove his worth with a simple test. She asked him to sweep and dust in a nearby room. So determined was he to make a good impression that he swept the floor three times, and likewise dusted until every corner of the room was dirt free, and all surfaces were spotless. When he announced that he was finished, the headmistress literally applied the white glove test, and was astonished

that she could not find a trace of dust or dirt anywhere in the room. Needless to say, Washington was both hired and admitted on the spot.

Thus began a lifelong pursuit of education and hard physical labor, neither of which he ever shied away from. In fact, it was his belief that no education could be truly complete or valuable without learning the value and meaning of hard physical work. He attributed his unique attitude toward his experience as a slave, which taught him some important life lessons.

He had watched as the white plantation owners, who believed that manual labor was beneath their dignity, lapsed into a state of increasing helplessness as they left all physical work to their slaves. The slaves, never having received proper training in the trades, did the best that they could, but the net result was that the plantations fell into disrepair. The unfortunate result of this was that after emancipation, blacks were not properly prepared for making their way in the world, and whites were similarly unprepared to assume the duties that had once been performed by their slaves.

This was compounded by the attitude, now held by both races, that manual labor was beneath their dignity. Washington resolved that he would embrace both hard physical labor and his academic studies with equal enthusiasm, and this turned out to be the key to his success. In his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, he explains:

*The individual who can do something that the world wants done will, in the end, make*

*his way regardless of race. One man may go into a community prepared to supply the people there with an analysis of Greek sentences. The community may not at the time be prepared for, or feel the need of, Greek analysis, but it may feel its need of bricks and houses and wagons. If the man can supply the need for those, then, it will lead eventually to a demand for the first product, and with the demand will come the ability to appreciate it and to profit by it.*

Washington exemplified this work ethic throughout his academic career, and soon after graduation, he found great pleasure in the service of his fellow man. As a young teacher, he never refused or discouraged any student, regardless of ability to pay or his workload.

He was soon recognized, and rewarded with the challenge of establishing a school in Tuskegee, Alabama, that would share the mission of the Hampton Institute in Virginia. Applying his unparalleled determination to the project, he succeeded in securing funds to purchase the land of an old plantation, and together with his students, over a period of many years, he cleared land, erected buildings, and established agricultural and industrial enterprises on the school's grounds. These enterprises helped to subsidize the cost of boarding the school's growing population, as well as affording students the opportunity to earn their own way.

This served the purpose of giving the students the satisfaction of having built their own school, as well as teaching them the value of hard physical labor, in addition to the pursuits of book

learning. The students were thus prepared for whatever challenges lay ahead of them, and at the same time, they learned that there was no shame in any kind of work.

It was not long before the school's reputation was well-established, and Washington found himself spending a great deal of his time traveling to cities in the north, in pursuit of funding for expansion of the school, as well as scholarship money to an increasing number of needy students. Eventually, this led to an honorary degree from Harvard, and a nationwide reputation as a forceful and effective public speaker. True to his character, he declined many invitations to tour the country as an orator, since he was exclusively committed to two things: the ongoing success of Tuskegee Institute, and the continued advancement of his people. He adamantly stuck to his personal pledge that he would never become a public speaker to enrich himself, but rather, to advance the causes that he so dearly espoused.

His ethic also included a belief in being consistent in his message; he resolved never to say anything to a northern audience that he would not say to a southern audience, and never to say anything to a white audience that he would not say to a black or mixed audience. His tried-and-true character notwithstanding, Booker T. Washington often found himself and his words at the center of controversy.

Some blacks resented his contention that true justice could only result from a civilized and respectful interaction



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