

A Champion of Black Employment

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

By Robert Kyser

Many Americans think about black history in only one dimension: the emancipation of deep South plantation blacks and their progress toward employment, civil rights and equality in accommodations. This is an understandable legacy of the abolitionist movement and the wide distribution of such descriptions as are found in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But the status of blacks at the outbreak of the Civil War was as variegated as was the American landscape from Biloxi to Boston.

The black leaders who emerged in the late 1800s differed from one another and thus their strategies for social change differed as well. Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington diverged widely from one another on the question of how to lift their people — a divergence that resulted largely from their previous experience, as Thomas Sowell reminds us in his article "Up From Slavery" (*Forbes* December 5, 1994). Douglass escaped from slavery in Maryland and migrated to Massachusetts where he became an articulate speaker for the abolitionists, describing life in bondage. Later he broke with the "moral suasion" abolitionists to become more politically active in pressing for emancipation. DuBois was a Northerner descended from antebellum "free persons of color" and educated at Harvard. He had different priorities for the blacks for whom he was working. Washington was a former slave from the Virginia Piedmont, a teacher with missionary zeal to lift the former slaves out of poverty and unemployment through education.

Booker T. Washington was passionately devoted to the upward progress of the other members of his race, but he would come to be accused by other black leaders of being too passive and submissive *vis à vis* his white contemporaries. After all, the Southern blacks of the 1890s were suffering a more severe separation from white society than they had endured under slavery. Their equality in political life and public accommodations was granted by law, but they were intimidated from enjoying those civil liberties. Certainly, said DuBois and others, the times demand a more belligerent posture on the part of post-Reconstruction blacks.

But Washington saw things differently. His background included the development of skills working with the owners of a small tobacco farm. Later his work as a houseboy taught him the value of personal cleanliness and the rewards of labor. The education he received at the Hampton (Virginia) Institute with its emphasis on vocational training as well as the three Rs

was the touch-stone for his career as an educator. He saw the freedman, cut loose from his former provision, as helpless and hopeless without an education and without the skills to make his way in the economy. Many members of his race saw education much differently. For them "book learning" was a way to escape from the need to do hard work to support oneself. As Washington observes in his autobiography, *Up From Slavery* (first published by Doubleday in 1901, now available from Viking Penguin):

At Hampton I not only learned that it was not a disgrace to labour, but learned to love labour, not alone for its financial value, but for labour's own sake and for the independence and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants done brings.

After his graduation from the Hampton Institute Washington returned to West Virginia to teach for a time in his home town, but was soon brought back to Hampton as an instructor. Later he was recommended to a group in the Black Belt of Alabama wishing to found a similar institute for the training of teachers and the industrial education of blacks. Under his directorship the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute was built from scratch (the students literally making the bricks for the first buildings) as an effort worthy of the support of Northern philanthropists.

"Washington found that his brief speech suddenly earned him national recognition among whites as the new spokesperson for a comfortable way to deal with the race problem in America..."

When the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition was opened on September 18, 1895, Frederick Douglass had been dead for a few months, leaving a leadership vacuum on the national scene. Who would help the former slaves in the wake of emancipation? Tuskegee Institute was invited to participate along with Hampton in displays of "Negro" craftsmanship, and Washington was asked to give one of the opening addresses. Working as he did in the deep South and wishing to maintain a stance that would be the most helpful, Washington (who had already earned

a reputation as an accomplished orator) found that his brief speech suddenly earned him national recognition among whites as the new spokesperson for a comfortable way to deal with the race problem in America: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." Ever after, the speech would be hailed or castigated as "the Atlanta compromise."

The now-prominent Washington's contacts with the White House, with Northern industrialists and philanthropists, and with Southern moderates led to the development of "the Tuskegee Machine" through which he could recommend blacks to serve in various capacities. This machine was in high gear when DuBois and others met in 1905 to form the organization which later became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Washington was vilified by these other black leaders for being too accommodating and standing in the way of political and social progress for America's blacks. He died in 1915 at age 59.

A National Park Service Monument has been created at the Burroughs plantation (in reality a small tobacco farm) where Booker was born in 1856. Situated 22 miles south of Roanoke, Virginia, the 200-acre complex features reconstructed farm buildings, hiking trails and demonstrations of pre-Civil War farm life. The monument honors the educator, orator and controversial public figure who devoted his life to helping black Americans live beyond the economic slavery that held them down long after emancipation.

A forgotten aspect of his legacy is that he tried to convince the nation, at the outset of massive European immigration at the end of the last century, to allow its former slaves to participate in the new industrial economy because they were not

those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits... [but rather] people who have, without strikes and labour wars, tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth... ■