

TAKECHARGE PRESENTS:

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON AND THE ROAD TO CIVIC LEADERSHIP

The inspirational leader was determined to forge a path to equality through education bringing forth generations of black men and women who rose through the ranks of society by economic prosperity.

PART TWO OF A THREE PART SERIES

Washington describes slavery with an intent to emphasize the concrete conditions of slavery. It is meant to deemphasize the specific agents of that institution — the slaveholder or overseer — and allows him to draw out the broader set of conditions of the institutions aligned with social slavery: namely, succumbing to a narrative that one doesn't need to earn social standing through one's achievements and beliefs, that identity alone is enough to warrant equal standing in society. Although he believed in the inherent value of every human and held firm to that enumerated truth, "All men are created equal," he was a firm believer that through education and the acquisition of knowledge, and often mastering a trade, would provide the economic standing to earn African-Americans the station on equal footing with white Americans.



TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE

Following Washington's graduation from Hampton in 1875, he returned to Malden, where for two years he taught children in a day school and adults at night. Following studies at Wayland Seminary, Washington, D.C. from 1878-79, he joined the staff of Hampton by his old mentor, General Armstrong.

In 1881, the Alabama legislature approved \$2,000 for a "colored" school, the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (now known as Tuskegee University). **General Armstrong was**

asked to recommend a white man to run the school, but instead recommended Washington. Classes were first held in an old church, while Washington traveled all over the countryside promoting the school and raising money. He reassured white people that nothing in the Tuskegee program would threaten white supremacy or pose any economic competition to white people.

As a nod to independence, he opened the Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University) in Tuskegee, Alabama on July 4, 1881. There was no

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON AND THE ROAD TO CIVIC LEADERSHIP

land and no building, only a stipend and an idea. Under Washington's leadership, the school would become the largest educational institution in Alabama by the turn of the century, balancing a commitment to education with the idea that education should speak to the economic needs of the students.

At the time of his death, it had more than 100 well-equipped buildings, 1,500 students, a 200-member faculty teaching 38 trades and professions, and a nearly \$2 million endowment. Washington put much of himself into the school's curriculum, stressing the virtues of patience, enterprise, and thrift.

GROWING POLITICAL AND EDUCATIONAL INFLUENCE

In 1901, **President Theodore Roosevelt invited Washington to the White House, making him the first African American to be so honored.** But the fact that Roosevelt asked Washington to dine with him (inferring the two were equal) was unprecedented and controversial. Both President Roosevelt and his successor, President William Howard Taft, used Washington as an adviser on racial matters.

Washington's influence among whites was such that he became an arbiter of sorts, determining which black individuals and institutions were deemed worthy to benefit from government patronage. Washington was friends with Presidents Roosevelt, McKinley, and Taft. Additionally, he befriended other leading men of his day, including steel industrialist Andrew Carnegie, Standard Oil's John D. Rockefeller, Henry Huttleston Rogers, George Eastman, the inventor and founder of Kodak, and Sears,

Roebuck & Company President Julius Rosenwald, who funded a pilot program of over 100 elementary schools, designed and operated by Tuskegee. Rosenwald and Carnegie took a "matching fund" approach to expand to 4,977 schools, 217 teacher homes, and 163 shop buildings in 15 States.

There was even an "An Agricultural College on Wheels" founded in Washington's name that taught over 2,000 farmers in 28 States. Through his commitment to these endeavors, Washington was the father of a civic and cultural movement amongst free black men and women that would have a multi-generational and worldwide influence.

Before his death, Washington went on to receive honorary degrees from Harvard University (1896) and Dartmouth College (1901). He authored a dozen books and his autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, which reflects on the legacy of Tuskegee and his hope for the race in the coming years. He is optimistic about both because of the large distance he himself has traveled.

Washington was a product of the belief that self-reliance and responsibility were the pillars of education; from there the possibilities were bound only by one's imagination. Washington became the curator and inheritor of the next crucial step in raising the station of the free black man and furthering the idea that education should speak to economic prospects. He used his popularity and political intuition to influence many of the powerful leaders in the nation and the world. Through such connections and inroads into the political establishment, Washington became one of the most powerful advocates for the advancement of black people in America at the time and ever since.

“ASSOCIATE YOURSELF WITH PEOPLE OF GOOD QUALITY, FOR IT IS BETTER TO BE ALONE THAN IN BAD COMPANY.

— BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

