

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

Nationally Renowned Educator & African American Leader

Booker Taliaferro Washington was the most influential African American leader and educator of his time in the United States. Born a slave in 1856 in Hales Ford, Virginia, Washington eventually rose to prominence as the founder of Alabama's Tuskegee Institute in 1881. As a result of his work as an educator and public speaker, Washington also became influential in business and politics.



Although unable to attend school until after the Civil War due to laws prohibiting the education of slaves, young Washington had carried the schoolbooks for one of his master's daughters, getting a tantalizing glimpse of the world of education. "I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study would be about the same as getting into paradise," he later wrote. At the age of eleven he took a job at a salt mine that began at 4 a.m. so that he could attend school later in the day. At age 16 he walked 500 miles to enroll in the newly established Hampton Institute, where he had heard even poor black students could get an education.

Excelling as a student at Hampton Institute, Washington was recommended by the Hampton principal to Alabamans who were trying to establish a school for African Americans in their state. Tuskegee Institute was founded by Booker T. Washington in 1881 under a charter from the Alabama legislature for the purpose of training teachers in Alabama. Tuskegee's program provided students with both academic and vocational training. The students, under Washington's direction, built their own buildings, produced their own food, and provided for most of their own basic necessities. The Tuskegee faculty utilized each of these activities to teach the students basic skills that they could share with African American communities throughout the South.

Washington owned a summer home in Fort Salonga beginning in early 1911 and spent several summers there. The two-story house near Cousins Lane with a view of the Long Island Sound, stands quietly, almost hidden by prickly bushes that border its half-acre lot. Washington was asked to be the speaker for the Northport High School graduating class of 1900, during one of his visits to Long Island. His white neighbors organized to try to buy him out when rumors spread that he wanted to buy additional land to create a school for black students. It is also said that he lived in a home that now serves as a restaurant in the Huntington Village.

For more information contact the
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Or look for the following materials in the
Northport Public Library:
African Americans in Northport, An Untold Story, by Thelma Jackson, 2002
Up From Slavery, an autobiography by Booker T. Washington