

Up from Slavery Study Guide

Up from Slavery by Booker T. Washington

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Contents

Up from Slavery Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
A Slave Among Slaves.....	5
Boyhood Days.....	7
The Struggle for an Education.....	9
Helping Others.....	11
The Reconstruction Period.....	13
Black Race and Red Race.....	14
Early Days at Tuskegee.....	15
Teaching School in a Stable and a Hen House.....	17
Anxious Days and Sleepless Nights.....	19
A Harder Task Than Making Bricks Without Straw.....	20
Making Their Beds Before They Could Lie On Them.....	22
Raising Money.....	23
Two Thousand Miles for a Five-Minute Speech.....	24
The Atlanta Exposition Address.....	25
The Secret of Success in Public Speaking.....	26
Europe.....	27
Last Words.....	28
Characters.....	29
Objects/Places.....	33
Themes.....	35
Style.....	37
Quotes.....	39

Topics for Discussion.....42



Plot Summary

Booker T. Washington is not certain of the date or location of his birth, though he believes he was born near a post office called Hale's Ford in Franklin County, Virginia. He doesn't know his father but says there were rumors that he was a white man from a nearby plantation. Washington spent his early years - from his birth in 1858 or 1859 until the end of the Civil War in 1865 - as a slave on that plantation with his mother, his brother John and his sister Amanda. He later mentions an adopted brother named James. He is known then only as Booker, though his mother named him Booker Taliaferro. It isn't until he has the opportunity to go to school that he selects Washington as his surname.

Washington learns of a school in Hampton, Virginia, for Negroes and that some deserving students are given aid with tuition. He decides that he will go there and works toward that end. In the meantime, he has worked at the salt furnaces and in the coalmines. He spends some time in the employ of a wealthy woman, Mrs. Ruffner, who pays him five dollars per month and teaches him the benefits of cleanliness. When he arrives at Hampton, dirty, disheveled and hungry, the head teacher is not certain he should be admitted. She tells him to sweep a room, which he sweeps several times and then dusts carefully. She decides that it was such a good job that she allows him admittance and offers him a job as a janitor.

He travels home one summer but is away looking for work when his mother dies. He returns after graduation as a teacher and helps his brother John through school then they help their adopted brother James. Washington spends all his time teaching but is called back to Hampton to teach and continue his own studies. He is soon put in charge of a night school as well as a program endeavoring to teach a group of Indians. Both are highly successful and Washington is recommended to oversee the establishment of a Negro school, similar to Hampton, at Tuskegee, Alabama.

Beginning with thirty students in a leaky building, he soon borrows enough money to buy a plantation property. The house had burned but the school began in a stable and hen house, using the slave cabins for student housing. They immediately begin growing crops. Over the years, Washington established a brick-making enterprise and the students completely constructed the buildings on the school grounds. In this way, students were taught the latest and best agricultural methods and a trade - including brick making and carpentry. The girls learned mattress manufacturing, bee keeping, dairy farming and homemaking skills.

Over the years, Washington's fame as an orator grows and he often solicits funding for the school from important and wealthy people. Through it all, he retains his dignity and work ethic, which he works to instill in the students at Tuskegee.



A Slave Among Slaves

A Slave Among Slaves Summary and Analysis

Booker T. Washington is not certain of the date or location of his birth, though he believes he was born near a post office called Hale's Ford in Franklin County, Virginia. He doesn't know his father but says there were rumors that he was a white man from a nearby plantation. Washington spent his early years - from his birth in 1858 or 1859 until the end of the Civil War in 1865 - as a slave on that plantation with his mother, his brother John and his sister Amanda. He is known then only as Booker, though his mother named him Booker Taliaferro. It isn't until he has the opportunity to go to school that he selects Washington as his surname.

They lived in a small cabin that also served as the kitchen for the plantation. Washington describes the cabin in detail, including the potato bin - a hollowed spot in the middle of the floor with boards over it where sweet potatoes were stored. He says that when it is time for moving new potatoes into that storage place, he can usually come away with a potato or two to roast for himself.

Washington says there is little time that isn't spent working, even when he was very young. One of his jobs is to carry the corn to the mill for grinding. The large sack of corn is thrown over the back of a horse, balancing about the same amount on each side of the animal. Many times, the load shifts before he reaches the mill and falls to the ground. He is too small to reload the bag so he sits, cries, and waits for someone to pass by who'll help. Washington says he is always afraid of passing through the woods because the soldiers who find Negro boys will cut their ears off.

There is no animosity among the blacks for their white masters. When the "young masters" return from fighting with injuries, the slaves are every bit as concerned as the whites and just as eager for a turn to care for the injured men.

Washington says that Negroes seldom betray a "specific trust." He tells the story of a slave who is given the chance to buy his freedom for a specific price, and is allowed to work wherever he wants. He works in Ohio and is there when the Emancipation Proclamation is signed. The man - now officially free - still returns to his former master's home and pays the final dollar.

On the day the Emancipation Proclamation is read to the slaves, freeing them immediately, they begin to celebrate. Then they're struck by the fact that they are now responsible for themselves. They wonder where they are to live, what work they are to do and how they'll feed and educate their children. Some have been working for their owners so long they can't conceive of leaving them. Washington says the mood changes from festive to fearful in a short time and the slaves slip away, one at a time, to have a "whispered conversation" with the master about their futures.



It was not unusual for the plantation's kitchen to be removed from the house itself because of the danger of fire. In this case, the kitchen space was used as home for Washington and his family, probably because there wasn't an empty cabin elsewhere on the plantation for the family. The fact that Washington's mother served as the plantation's cook likely made it seem the sensible thing to do, despite the hardship on the family.

It's noteworthy that Washington has a sense of humor about their situation. He says that there was a "cat hole" at one side of the doorway that was included in all the cabins so that the plantation cats could come and go as they pleased. He wonders why there was a need for the cat hole in their cabin, because there were many cracks large enough for the cats to fit through.

The slaves are well informed. Washington credits the "grapevine" for the information and says that the slaves know the issues and what the current events of the day mean. Their biggest downfall is the lack of book learning. Washington notes that the slaves have the ability and willingness to work hard while the whites have been pampered and look upon manual labor as something to be avoided. He says that the blacks and whites were equally unprepared for freedom, just in different ways.



Boyhood Days

Boyhood Days Summary and Analysis

Washington notes that while slaves are overwhelmed with their newly acquired freedom, all seem to want two things - to leave the plantation for at least a few days to prove that they could, and to change their names. Many then return to the plantation, work out some sort of contract with their former owners, and go back to work. Washington and his family are not to be among those.

His stepfather has secured a job and a small cabin in Malden, West Virginia, and sends for the family to join him there. Washington, his mother and two siblings put everything they have into a small cart and walk the several hundred miles to their new home. They arrive in the salt-mining community to find the cabin is just as dilapidated as the one they left behind and that it sits among so many additional cabins that the filth is horrible. Washington and his brother, John, are immediately put to work at the salt furnaces and it's here that Washington learns his first number - eighteen. It was the number assigned their father and all the salt produced by Washington and his brother is placed in a barrel and marked with that number.

Washington begins working at learning and somehow his mother lays her hands on a reading primer. With no one to teach him, progress is painfully slow but then the freed blacks in the area begin to consider the possibility of a school. They eventually find a teacher and school opens but Washington's stepfather forces him to continue to work. He does manage to catch some night classes and spends every minute he can honing whatever skills he's taught. When he finally comes to an agreement with his stepfather to work early in the morning, attend a few hours of school and return to work two more hours, he's excited but faced with an immediate dilemma. The children all have at least two names, and he's never been called anything except Booker. When he's called upon to give his name, he says "Booker Washington" without hesitation. He later learns that his mother had named him Booker Taliaferro and he immediately adopts the entire name as his own.

Washington is to work until 9 a.m. but school also starts at 9 a.m. He's so eager to reach school on time that he changes the time on the clock in his section of the mill, moving the time ahead a half hour each morning. The overseer eventually discovers what's happening and puts the clock in a locked case. Washington notes that he wasn't trying to do harm to anyone, but was merely looking for a way to get to school on time.

He later goes to work in the coalmines and says the job is dirty and dangerous. One of the dangers is that men who work in the mines lose their drive and are content to merely work in the mines. He won't remain in the mine long.

It's interesting to note the desire for learning and the lengths Washington will go in order to fulfill the desire. He was young and it's likely that he often went without sufficient



sleep in order to study while still meeting his work obligations. He notes early on that he can't remember a time when he wasn't required to perform some sort of labor and that the lessons he got from that were more valuable than any other in his life. It's already standing him in good stead as he faces the requirement to work and still makes time for studying.

One of the things Washington faced as a young man starting school for the first time is the need to fit in. All the other young men in his school have a cap - a fashion statement that quickly becomes requisite in order to be accepted. When Washington tells his mother of this problem, she had two options. She could have put the family in debt to buy her son a cap, but she cuts two pieces of scrap denim and makes him a cap. He says that he learns another valuable lesson from her decision.

Washington talks at length about the different situations faced by blacks and whites of the day. He says a young white man believes that he cannot fail at anything because he'll be letting down the entire family - including the generations that came before. The blacks seldom know their families prior to their own parents and perhaps their grandparents. He says he later comes to find that he doesn't envy the whites nearly as much as he once did.



The Struggle for an Education

The Struggle for an Education Summary and Analysis

While working in the coalmines, Washington overhears two men talking about a Negro school - the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia. Washington has no idea where Hampton is even located but says he can't wait to find a way to go there. He then hears of a vacancy in the home of the man who owns the salt mine and coal mine, General Lewis Ruffner. Mrs. Ruffner is known to be strict and several boys have worked for her only a few weeks before quitting. She pays five dollars per month and Washington soon discovers that she simply requires precision, order and honesty, which he provides. He stays for some time and says that she is pleased with his work. Again, he says that the lessons of cleanliness he learns there are valuable throughout his lifetime.

Mrs. Ruffner allows him to attend school for an hour a day during the winter months and encourages him in his efforts toward education. Washington then decides that it's time to begin the trip to Hampton. He gathers what little money he has and is immediately given small donations by many of the people in his community who simply want to see him succeed. His brother is also able to scrape together a small amount to help.

When Washington leaves for Hampton, he soon discovers that he doesn't have enough money for the entire trip. He gives up the public transportation and hitches rides when he can, walking the rest of the way. At Richmond, he's flat broke and spends a night under a boardwalk. The next morning, he notes that a ship is being unloaded and he asks for a job. He earns enough for breakfast and continues to work for several more days, gathering enough money to make the rest of the journey.

Upon arrival at Hampton, he's met by the head teacher and admits that he is tired, dirty and ragged, presenting a less-than-desirable picture. The head teacher, Miss Mary F. Mackie, sends him to sweep the recitation room. He sweeps three times then dusts four times. When she inspects the room, she finds no dust, grants Washington admittance and then offers him a job as a janitor.

He then meets General Samuel C. Armstrong, a man who had an incredible impact on the students at Hampton. Just before his death, Armstrong would spend time with Washington and Washington notes that even then he was selfless and working toward a particular goal.

Room and board at Hampton is ten dollars per month, which Washington works off as a janitor. His tuition is met by a patron, Mrs. S. Griffitts Morgan of New Bedford, Mass. He is helped by teachers who have access to barrels of used clothing and his brother, John, continues to send small amounts of money when he can.

The dedication shown by Washington is not unique. He says there were others who were willing to make whatever sacrifices were necessary in order to gain an education. He notes that he is among the youngest students at Hampton with many who are in their forties. Some of those are also supporting elderly parents or families. Many are simply not able to grasp the book learning, but stay at their studies to learn all they can.

Washington tells the story of overcrowding at Hampton, caused by the sheer number of people who want the chance to learn. He says that General Armstrong calls for volunteers willing to give up their dormitory rooms to other students. Many do so at the General's request though it means they spend a miserable winter in tents. Washington says that the prevailing attitude is that what one accomplishes is an accomplishment for all those left at home. He also says the teachers who were so willing to give of themselves were more appreciated than they could ever know.

Helping Others

Helping Others Summary and Analysis

As summer vacation time rolls around at the end of Washington's first year of school, he has nowhere to go, and no money to go home. He gets a job at a restaurant and though he saves in every way possible, ends the summer without the sixteen dollars he still owes Hampton. The treasurer, General J.F.B. Marshall, tells him to return to school and that he's trusted to pay the debt when he can.

At the end of his second year, due to gifts from his mother, brother and a Hampton teacher, Washington goes home for summer vacation. The miners are on strike, and there is no work to be found. Yet, Washington is invited to the homes of each family and speaks at Sunday-school and other gatherings. His mother dies while he is away looking for a job. Their home falls into disarray along with all the family members. Washington is able to work a little and returns early to Hampton to help prepare the school for the return of students.

Washington completes his studies with honors and returns to Malden where he is hired as a teacher. His days start by eight o'clock and don't end until ten o'clock at night. He teaches day classes that include the importance of brushing teeth and keeping clothing neat. He also teaches night classes and the demand for seating is high. He tutors whenever he finds someone he believes capable of attending Hampton and teaches Sunday-schools in Malden and at a nearby town. He saves enough to send his brother John to Hampton and they together send their adopted brother James. Both finish and land successful careers.

Washington talks briefly about the Ku Klux Klan saying that racial tensions once caused a fight between the blacks and whites. Mr. Ruffner, owner of the mines, stood up for the blacks and was severely injured. Washington says that he mentions the Ku Klux Klan only to say that great changes have occurred over the course of his lifetime and that no one in the South would continue to permit the existence of such a group.

While working at the restaurant, Washington finds a ten-dollar bill. When he tells the proprietor, the man keeps the money himself. Washington says it was a hard lesson, but that it wasn't discouraging. He doesn't indicate whether he should have kept the money for himself, but only refers to the greediness of the proprietor. Washington is later hired as a waiter at a classy restaurant and is so inept that he's chastised by the men he's waiting on. He is demoted to carrying dishes but watches carefully and soon learns how to wait tables.

Washington says that he worked side-by-side at the college with Miss Mackie - a member of a "cultured" Northern family. He says that most people wanted an education believing that it would end the need for manual labor. At Hampton, under the guidance of Miss Mackie, he was taught that labor has its rewards and is nothing to be ashamed

of. He points out the cultured woman who was willing to wash windows in order to make the lives of students more pleasant. He says those lessons have remained with him over the years.

The Reconstruction Period

The Reconstruction Period Summary and Analysis

Washington notes that the Negroes were obsessed with holding public office and with learning Greek and Latin. He says neither was especially beneficial for several reasons. Those who were earning seventy-five or one hundred dollars a month were often in debt before the end of every month. Men who earned only four dollars per month would spend two of that on a buggy ride up Pennsylvania Avenue to convince people they were worth more.

Washington says that many of those who held offices were uneducated and unable to find work after they left office. By the same token, many who got an inkling of education became teachers or preachers. The young girls who were taught by their mothers to be laundresses went to school for six or eight years, coming away with no more desire to work in the laundry but with a desire to have better clothes and other things. Washington says that their desires were increased but their ability to meet those desires was not.

In Washington's mind, the Negroes suddenly faced with freedom and all it entailed would have been better served had the Federal Government made plans for teaching them. He says that they needed not only book knowledge, but should have been taught that working at manual labor was not shameful. Those who are schooled in the more affluent schools where their needs are met were even less prepared for facing life after school, according to Washington. While he notes that many said they were "called" to preach or teach when they obviously weren't qualified, Washington says that many - including some politicians - were interested in bettering the lives of others.



Black Race and Red Race

Black Race and Red Race Summary and Analysis

Washington, still teaching in Malden, was contacted by General Armstrong about a position at Hampton, Washington was to take over a new project of the school - overseeing some seventy-five Indians who were to be educated. Washington soon discovers that the Indians are willing to learn, respond well to kindness and constantly seek ways to make Washington's life more comfortable.

Soon after this, Washington is put in charge of a night school that he dubs "The Plucky Class." From twelve students, the class soon expands to more than twenty. The students work during the day, attending class at night. They earn money to help pay tuition to Hampton's regular school, and their night classes give them a head start on the regular classes.

Washington notes that the blacks at Hampton - with only a few exceptions - were more than willing to accept the Indians into their school. They agreed to room with them in order to help them learn English and the ways of civilization. Washington says he wonders what other race would so gracefully have accepted the influx of another race into a school that had been wholly their own. The reader should keep in mind that the book is written around 1900, well before the race riots over integration of public schools in the 1960s. It's interesting to consider what Washington's thoughts on that situation would have been.

While overseeing the Indians, Washington is to travel with a young boy who is ill. Twice on the trip, the Indian boy is accepted into establishments while Washington is turned away because of his color.



Early Days at Tuskegee

Early Days at Tuskegee Summary and Analysis

In June of 1881, Washington is hired to oversee a "normal school" in Tuskegee. He arrives to find no accommodations but plenty of anxious students. He travels the country, dropping in unannounced to visit with families of the area. He notes that the people are poor but tend toward something of excess. For example, a family with only a single fork in their possession is making payments on a sixty-dollar organ that is seldom played. Others have elaborate clocks that seldom work correctly or sewing machines that are seldom used.

Washington also notes that the major foods are corn bread, peas and pork fat. Though families have the land available to grow vegetables, they plant only cotton, often to the front door of the cabin. They typically sleep in a single room and Washington says they always provide him some sleeping place, sometimes on a section of another bed. Families work five days each week, spend Saturdays in town and Sundays at some type of meeting.

Washington notes that schools are poorly equipped, and teachers unprepared for teaching. He points out that there are exceptions to these examples.

Washington says that the people of Tuskegee want to be sure that he's absorbed into their politics. He's urged to remember to vote by a man who says that he and the other blacks listen to the whites, discover which way they plan to vote on an issue, then the black vote the opposite.

Washington notes that the people of Tuskegee do not anticipate finding a black man qualified to oversee their school but write General Armstrong at Hampton for suggestions of a white man who might be interested. Armstrong recommends Washington and they immediately accept. In typical fashion, Washington good-humoredly talks about the deplorable conditions. He says that on rainy days, a student would hold an umbrella over his head while he listened to recitations because the roof leaked. He says his landlady sometimes did the same while he ate breakfast.

Washington makes no effort to explain the reason these former slaves have opted for some item of excess, such as the organ. It seems likely that the opportunity for ownership is too much to pass up, even when it puts the family in debt. He only alludes to the fact that people are planting cotton in an effort to gain the cash that will be earned from that crop rather than using any of the land for producing vegetables that could improve the family's health and eliminate the need to live solely on expensive cornmeal and other foodstuffs purchased from town.

Washington writes that the country families go to town on Saturday where they spend at least half a day and sometimes all day. Though he doesn't openly condemn the



practice, he does say that the shopping for the family - considering the small amount of money available - could be done by one person in a matter of minutes. Washington's own work ethic may be the basis for a measure of intolerance on this point. He sees so many things about the homes, farms and schools that could be improved that he simply doesn't seem to understand that some need time away from their daily chores and their daily grind. It seems that he - who has always had hope of bettering his life - doesn't understand those who don't.



Teaching School in a Stable and a Hen House

Teaching School in a Stable and a Hen House Summary and Analysis

After a month of traveling around the region recruiting students and visiting families, Washington is somewhat defeated. He says that he wonders if he - a single person - can impact the lives of these people, but determines to do his best. He believes a mere education from books is not what the people need. Mr. George W. Campbell, a former slave owner, and Mr. Lewis Adams, a former slave, become Washington's mentors as they work to establish the school. Adams learned to read and write while in slavery and mastered shoemaking, harnessmaking and tinsmithing. Washington says he totally trusts the judgment of both men.

School begins on July 4, 1881, with thirty students, all aged fifteen or older who have had some prior education. Many were teachers. Washington says that they tended to seek out specific subjects - Greek and Latin, for example - as ways to prove their superiority. While much of their previous education has not been based on practically applicable subjects, he says that the students are anxious to learn whatever he hands them.

The class soon grows to fifty and he's joined by Olivia A. Davidson, his co-teacher, a graduate of Hampton and Washington's future wife. They immediately begin conferring on the future of the school and want to put some focus on agriculture, since most of the families depended on agriculture for a living. They learn that many of the students want an education so that they no longer have to work with their hands. To address that, Washington finds the remains of a plantation for sale for five hundred dollars. General Marshall, treasurer of Hampton, lends him half and he's to repay that loan along with the balance due the owner. The students clean the stable, hen house and cabins on the property and move in. Washington immediately sets out to plant a crop. The teachers think it might be beneath their dignity to toil on the land but Washington leads the way, using an ax to help clear twenty acres for planting.

Meanwhile, Miss Davidson holds "festivals" to raise money for the repayment of the cost of the school. Washington notes that almost every family - even white families - gives something toward the effort.

There seems to be a misconception among both blacks and whites regarding education. The whites fear that educated blacks will leave the country, meaning there will be none available to work farms or for domestic duties. The blacks feel their lives will be easier with no need for manual labor once they have an education. It's up to Washington to deal with these misconceptions and he does so with the blacks by taking ax in hand and helping clear land. There have also been poor judgments made in what should be

taught and what should be learned. Many believe that learning Greek, Latin or some complicated subject makes them somehow better than those who don't have that knowledge. Washington gently begins showing them that the ability to apply knowledge is vital. He notes that some claim to know principles of banking but none of them have ever had a bank account.

Washington makes the point that almost every family in the area supported the school in one way or another. He tells of an older woman who said she'd spent most of her life as a slave, but that she knew he was trying to educate blacks, and she believed in that cause. She gives him six eggs that she'd "been saving" and asked that he use it for the furtherance of the educating of those students. While Washington says he receives many other gifts, none touched him as that one.



Anxious Days and Sleepless Nights

Anxious Days and Sleepless Nights Summary and Analysis

Washington notes that the people of the region have all but forgotten the true meaning of the Christmas season. Instead, they use it as a time for ignoring work and drinking to excess. He begins working to instill the truth of the Bible into his students and reports at the time of writing the book that the word has traveled out from those students.

There's an effort from the beginning to make the school a part of the community and to encourage the community's support. Washington feels the effort is successful and says that he never called upon anyone in the community for help that they didn't give if it was in their power to do so. Within a few months, they raise enough money to pay for the property and to repay General Armstrong. He notes that some people give more often and more generously than others. A mill owner provides the lumber needed for a large central building with the agreement that they would pay when they could. General Armstrong once loaned all his personal savings to the school. Miss Davidson travels the country, asking for support and two Northern ladies donate first four hundred dollars, then six thousand annually. Mr. A.H. Porter donated a "generous sum" toward the first hall, which was then named Porter Hall.

Washington says there followed years of insecurity and that he felt personally responsible for the success of the school. He says that if whites had attempted the project, it would be assumed that it would succeed. By the same token, some expected the project to fail simply because blacks were behind it. He says that he knows that people are watching to see if blacks are capable of such an undertaking and that their failure would be a blow to black educational endeavors everywhere.

It's interesting to note the form of the various "donations." Washington is quick to point out that people give according to their means. There is one man who says that he raised two pigs and donated one to the school, challenging everyone else to do the same. Some men donated their time to help erect the building.

Washington notes that the attitude of students against manual labor gradually begins to change. He doesn't discuss the attitudes of whites as the work ethic at the school becomes evident. While whites had originally opposed the educating of blacks because they believed the blacks would no longer want to work on the land leaving the South with a shortage of workers in the fields, they are seeing even Washington himself do manual labor. It seems it must have had some impact, but Washington doesn't discuss it.



A Harder Task Than Making Bricks Without Straw

A Harder Task Than Making Bricks Without Straw Summary and Analysis

Washington says that from the beginning, he wanted to show the students how labor could be something other than drudgery by using the latest methods. With that in mind, he establishes a policy requiring that students do the building. They need bricks for the foundation of the first hall and Washington admits that he had always felt sorry for the children of Israel who were forced to make bricks with no straw. He says he also thought making bricks would be easy. As they begin the process, he discovers that's not the case. They fail at their first four attempts at building a kiln, even with outside help. When they finally succeed, they are able to fill a need Washington had seen in the community - production of bricks for sale. That enterprise brought in money for the school and provided students a trade upon leaving. Students also learned to build wagons and houses for the same reasons.

Washington meets Rev. Robert C. Bedford shortly before the completion of Porter Hall and Bedford, a white man who pastors a colored church, agrees to deliver the Thanksgiving message in the new building. Bedford becomes a school trustee and works diligently for the school, taking on those tasks others find ultimately distasteful. Mr. Warren Logan soon joins the school staff as treasurer and principal whenever Washington is away. Logan seems to be never discouraged and believes in the ultimate success of the enterprise.

It takes time for the school's newest program - a boarding program - to come together. During that time, there were too few dishes, nowhere to cook and no dining hall. The meals were cooked outdoors and were seldom ready on time without some problem. Washington says that students grumbled and that he became discouraged during this time, but that he and the students later saw it as a natural part of the building process and necessary to their success.

Washington notes that people of the community began buying bricks from the school. The students produced quality bricks but there was also no nearby competition, meaning the school filled a need for anyone who needed bricks. When the people come to buy bricks, they become acquainted with the students and faculty. Washington sees this as another way to promote the school and to make it a part of the community.

When the bricks cost so much effort, students become disgusted and want to give up. It seems incredible that Washington wants to continue working on the project despite four failed attempts. At one point, he even sells a watch to raise fifteen dollars to use for beginning the project over again. While others would have given up, he persevered and the students and school greatly benefited. Washington notes that some students still

objected to the labor part of the school, preferring only to study. Some parents still want their children to focus only on book learning, sending notes or even arriving in person to demand that their children be excluded from manual labor. Washington says he simply ignored the complaints and believes it was the best course of action.



Making Their Beds Before They Could Lie On Them

Making Their Beds Before They Could Lie On Them Summary and Analysis

During the early years of the Tuskegee school, Hampton's Treasurer General J.F.B. Marshall, head teacher Miss Mackie and General Armstrong each visited the school. All were impressed with the progress. Teachers were largely recruited from Hampton. The students themselves were willing to endure whatever hardships were necessary. For example, Washington was often unable to sleep for worrying about the students. He got up one night to check on some young men and discovered they were sitting around a fire sharing the one blanket the school had been able to provide for them. Despite the conditions, enrollment continues to grow and students often embarrass Washington by insisting that they carry books and other burdens for him.

Washington notes that he never received a single insult from Southerners. He is traveling on a train when two women who recognize him insist that he dine with them. He tries to extract himself but they continue to insist and he gives in, expecting any moment to be confronted because he is a black man dining in the white section. As soon as dinner is over, he escapes to the smoking car, expecting there to be berated by the men. Instead, each greets him and engages in conversations about his work.

Cleanliness is absolutely required by Washington and he insists that every student have and use a toothbrush. He makes this rule so important that a student arriving with only a single possession will be sure to have a toothbrush.

Washington is constantly learning things from others and says that he learned an important lesson from Armstrong. Armstrong was welcomed by white Southerners as well as blacks and the General, though he had fought against the South in the Civil War, held no animosity toward the race. Armstrong taught Washington that it's a waste of time and energy to hold racial prejudice. Washington says that he's become convinced that the whites' hatred of blacks has harmed the white race much more than the black. It's interesting to note here that Washington admits to the white and black racial issue while he has often tended to insist that there is little or no animosity between the races.

Washington sought from the beginning to instill a sense of ownership in the students. He says that being responsible for the construction and work on the plantation accomplished that. On the rare occasion a student marked or defaced property, another would invariably chastise the action, often saying something to the effect that he or she helped with the construction.



Raising Money

Raising Money Summary and Analysis

Washington talks at length about the details of raising money for the school. As enrollment increases, school officials decide they need another dormitory. Miss Davidson begins another fundraising campaign and students begin digging the foundation of another building. Washington travels with Armstrong around larger Northern cities, gathering support and donations as he goes. As always, he cites the things he learns while studying human nature. One of those things is that the calm, self-possessed people are the ones who are most successful at whatever they set about doing. He also notes that it's important to present the facts of the Tuskegee school without appearing to "beg" in order to garner support of the very wealthy.

Washington notes that many people thank him for allowing them the opportunity to support such a worthy cause. He says that there are a few who are uninterested and even discouraging, but there are many more who have the attitude that Washington and others like him are doing "our work." Washington is told of a man who might be interested in donating, and he walks two miles to the man's house to make a case for the school. The man treats him cordially but doesn't make a donation. Washington says he believes the trip and time were wasted but that he wouldn't have been doing his duty to do otherwise. Years later, the man sends a ten thousand dollar donation, thanking Washington for the time they spent together.

General Armstrong - who was over Hampton and could likely have found plenty of places for any additional funding - takes it upon himself to help Washington raise money for Tuskegee. Washington notes that there's no indication that Armstrong thinks he's taking something from Hampton, but that he's benefiting the Negroes in general.

It's interesting to note that one method Washington employs is to explain that the money being donated for a specific building goes not only to secure materials for that building but directly impacts the education of the students. He says that by having a building project, the students have the opportunity to learn all aspects of construction, giving them a trade to fall back on after they leave school.



Two Thousand Miles for a Five-Minute Speech

Two Thousand Miles for a Five-Minute Speech Summary and Analysis

Washington was once scheduled to speak in Boston but invited to speak in the South. He travels the two thousand miles, makes a five-minute speech to a group of influential people, the boards a train back to Boston. He says it was worth the effort because of the people he reached and the speaking engagements that came from that one event.

As Washington's speaking engagements increase, he is aware that he carries a great burden because many whites are waiting for him to misspeak. This is especially true when he's called upon to speak at the opening of the Atlanta Cotton states and International Exposition on September 18, 1895. Washington spends lots of time working on his speech, knowing that there are Northern whites, Southern whites and blacks in the audience. Many of the newspapers speculate as to the topic of his speech and many whites are opposed to a black man being allowed to speak at all. Washington is the only black invited and notes that the committee overseeing the event paid him a huge compliment by offering no direction with regard to what he should or should not say.

He says that he always remembers that no two audiences are the same, but that this time he's faced with an incredible array of people - from the North, South and both major races. He says he prays about his speech but is still fearful of the outcome.

Washington offers a brief glimpse into his personal life by saying that Miss Davidson and he are married in 1885 and that she dies in 1889. He says that she "literally wore herself out in her never ceasing efforts in behalf of the work that she so dearly loved." They have two sons, Baker Taliaferro - who mastered brick making at Tuskegee - and Ernest Davidson. Later, Washington writes about an 1895 invitation to speak at the opening of the Atlanta Cotton states and International Exposition. He travels to the event with his three children and "Mrs. Washington, but doesn't offer the identity of the current Mrs. Washington until much later in the book.

The Atlanta Exposition Address

The Atlanta Exposition Address Summary and Analysis

Washington's address focuses on the need of blacks and whites to work together. He says that the options are to work together to pull the South upward from the current situation or to allow some to pull against progress. There is an outpouring of approval following his speech and he is inundated with offers from publishers and speech circuits but turn down all in favor of continuing his work at Tuskegee. Washington was invited to speak at the important event of the Atlanta Exposition. He was later invited to serve on an educational juror's board. Also, President Grover Cleveland set aside an hour to visit with Negroes in the Negro exhibit of the Exposition. He cites these as reasons to believe that things are improving for the black race.

Washington takes the stand that the rights due the blacks will happen and that blacks should conduct themselves in such a way that they deserve those rights. He says that no one can fail to give merit where it's due and that includes whites bestowing rights on the blacks. Washington does say that free suffrage is right, "as a rule." He then adds that "protection of the ballot" is acceptable, "for a while at least," and that there should be a test for both races to determine the right to vote.

It's interesting that Washington says there were some "reactionary" blacks who felt his speech did not adequately address their rights. He says these soon came around to understanding the intention of his address. Again, it seems that Washington is indicating that racial tensions don't really exist or that they are minor. This could be attributed to the people he associates with or could be his own idea of how things should be. He does say that he's sometimes called upon to "express myself more freely than I do upon the political condition and the political future of my race." He then says he believes there will come a time when the black man will be accorded all the rights to which he is entitled, but that it will happen because the whites agree rather than because of any action the blacks take.



The Secret of Success in Public Speaking

The Secret of Success in Public Speaking Summary and Analysis

Washington says that he never ceases to be nervous before a speech but that he loves the moment he connects with his audience. He says businessmen make the best audience because they are quick to catch a point, but that he likes to speak to others as well, including college students.

He says he is asked how the school can operate while he's so often away and he attributes it to the organization itself. He says there are those who can take over any particular aspect of the operation in his absence and that he's taken the attitude that he doesn't need to do those things that others can do as well. He says he reads and relaxes on the trains during his travels, unless he's interrupted by someone who recognizes him. He loves to plant in his garden at Tuskegee and raises pigs and fowl. He spends time with his three children and wife and enjoys nature.

Washington's lack of tolerance for those who aren't industrious again shows through in his comment that there are many people simply wanting to waste his time. He cites a case in which he receives a card indicating that he has a visitor. Thinking it's urgent, he hurries to meet the man who says that he heard Washington's speech of the previous night and "came in this morning to hear you talk some more."



Europe

Europe Summary and Analysis

Washington marries Margaret James Murray in 1893. She is a teacher and Lady Principal at Tuskegee and the couple share an intense interest in the success of the school. She is also involved in several area organizations and works with local people in an array of capacities. Washington's daughter, Portia, has learned the skill of dressmaking, has a talent for music and teaches at Tuskegee. Baker is a brick maker and aspires to be an architect. Earnest is planning to be a physician and spends part of his time working with a local physician.

While in Boston, some patrons notice Washington seems tired and raise the money for a trip to Europe. They also raise the money for the operation of the school while he's away and insist that he and his wife take the vacation. Washington notes that he decides to accept because "every avenue of escape" had been eliminated. Both Washington and his wife hate the thought of leaving work behind and Washington admits to feeling guilty at the thought of vacationing while others work. He also worries that some will think he is becoming "stuck up." They finally agree to go and as they are about to depart receive a letter indicating two generous women had given the money for a new building to house the girls' industries.

They travel around Europe and Washington describes the trip in some detail, including the impression of the economical use of land in Holland. He meets and visits with many people including Mark Twain and Susan B. Anthony. He is invited to many speaking engagements and turns down all but a few. While in Europe, he's invited by city and state officials and influential people of Charleston to speak and Washington accepts, noting that it's a great honor.

Washington is literally forced on a three-month vacation to Europe and it's now that he talks more about his family and his personal life than at any other pointing the book. It seems as if he is on vacation from the school and now has time to focus on family. While he hasn't had a vacation in eighteen years of his association with Tuskegee, he admits that the cares start to ease the moment the ship leaves the wharf.

Washington is reading the biography of Fredrick Douglas. He completes a passage outlining the fact that Douglas had been forced to remain on the deck of a particular ship and was not allowed to enter a cabin when there's a request from the passengers of the St. Louis that Washington speak at a concert the following evening. Washington uses this to indicate that race feelings are certainly changing.



Last Words

Last Words Summary and Analysis

Washington receives word that General Armstrong, though paralyzed, wishes to visit Tuskegee and railroad owners volunteer to run a special train for him. He continues to work on ways to raise the standard of living for - not only the Negro - but for all poor people in the South. The General stays two months and dies a short time later. Soon after, Washington is notified that Harvard University wishes to confer upon him an honorary degree - the first Negro to receive the honor. During his address, Washington notes that it may be difficult for the person living in a mansion to realize the importance of the poor farmer in the South. He says that Harvard is addressing the problem by raising up the masses.

Washington learns that President McKinley is to visit Atlanta and travels to Washington, D.C., twice to ask the President to take time to visit the Tuskegee school as well. With recent race riots, the President says he wants to take actions that will show his support for the blacks and agrees to visit the school in mid-December. The President, members of the Cabinet, their families, several generals, a host of newspaper reporters and member of the Alabama Legislature turned up for the day, which was deemed a rousing success.

As Washington closes his autobiography, he notes that it wasn't by design that he is in Richmond - the city where he slept so many years earlier under a boardwalk without a nickel to his name. He notes that he's made an address at the Hall of Music - the first time a black man has been permitted to speak in that setting. He says that in his address, he thanked both races for welcoming him back to the state of his birth.

When the Tuskegee school is preparing for the Presidential visit, the entire town turns out to help decorate and prepare. Washington says that he'd always planned to have the school be part of the community but only then realized the depth of pride the townspeople had in the school.

Washington writes briefly about lynchings, saying that he appealed to the legislature for justice for blacks on this issue. He then says that he sees brief signs of struggle, but that he knows they will pass. At one point, he predicts that blacks will see another "half century" of problems before the racial issues are solved. He continues to be optimistic about the acceptance of blacks that it will all take time and that they must be patient, and the acceptance of whites to embrace this race that had previously been held as property.



Characters

Booker Taliaferro Washington

Born a slave just before the Civil War, Washington is known only as Booker though his mother had bestowed the middle name on him as well. It's not until he has the opportunity to go to school that he does what all former slaves of the period do - chooses a last name. From his earliest memory, he has always been at some job. He also had a thirst for knowledge. At some point, his mother got him a reader but Washington made little progress on his own without a teacher. He wants to attend school but his stepfather insists that he work at the salt furnaces alongside his brother, John. Washington finally has the opportunity to work in the mornings until nine o'clock, and then go to school with the understanding that he is to work an additional two hours in the afternoon. He does this for some time but then is sent to work in the coalmines. He sees that many men who work in the mines loose their will to do anything more and he soon finds a job as a servant for a wealthy woman, though he's told she's very strict. He discovers that he can please her and he does, earning the right to attend school for an hour each day during the winter months.

Washington hears of a Negro school at Hampton, Virginia, and heads there. He doesn't have enough money for the trip and is soon hitching rides where he can. He even takes a job for several days in Richmond unloading iron to make enough money to buy food for the rest of the journey. Upon his arrival, he's disheveled and dirty and almost doesn't gain admittance. He's told to sweep a room and he does so - several times and dusts. He earns the respect of the head teacher and admittance to school with an offer to work as a janitor. He excels, returning to his hometown to teach for two years where he helps his brother prepare for school at Hampton and to complete his own education. He then returns to Hampton as a teacher before being offered the position to oversee a new school at Tuskegee. He founds that school in a leaky building, soon moving to a burned-out plantation and builds to the point of a well-respected institute. He realizes the need to teach practical application though many of his race want only to learn subjects such as Greek or Latin.

He devotes his life to the school at Tuskegee, marries three times and loses two wives to death, has three children and eventually becomes a respected orator and spokesman for the black race.

General Samuel S. Armstrong

Armstrong is a man Washington meets and greatly admires at Hampton. The General's influence was so strong that when he requests volunteers to give up their dormitory rooms to other students, almost all the older students do so, spending a miserably cold winter in tents. It's General Armstrong who seeks a patron willing to donate the cost of Washington's annual tuition at Hampton. Armstrong later travels with Washington



around Northern cities in search of financing for the Tuskegee school. When Armstrong becomes ill, he asks to again visit Tuskegee. He spends a matter of months with Washington who says that Armstrong - even in his illness - never ceases to work for the betterment of the Negro race but doesn't end his dedication there. Armstrong teaches Washington that he is just as interested in helping the poor whites in the South. Washington says that Armstrong's visit leaves him ready to rededicate himself to his cause. He says that if Armstrong, sick as he was, could work so hard, he - Washington - could do the same. Armstrong dies soon after his visit with Washington.

Miss Mary F. Mackie

Mackie is the head teacher at Hampton. It is Miss Mackie who sent Washington to sweep the recitation room, which turned out to be his college entrance exams. He does a thorough job, and she offers him a position as janitor. One year, just before school is to start at Hampton, Miss Mackie asks Washington to arrive at school early. The two of them clean, working side-by-side. Washington says this impressed him because she was a cultured Northern lady and was willing to labor in order to make the lives of the students better upon their arrival. She remains his friend through the years and he says her advice and encouragement were always welcome. Miss Mackie later visits Tuskegee and says she is impressed with the achievements made over a short period.

John

John is Washington's older brother. One of Washington's early memories is of the flax shirts he was forced to wear. They were incredibly scratchy and John would sometimes wear his younger brother's shirt to break it in so that it wasn't so scratchy. When Washington is ready to go to Hampton, John scrapes together what little money he can to help with the trip. He remains a coalmine worker while Washington finishes school, occasionally sending money to the school and helping support the family. When Washington gets a job as a teacher, he helps John go to school, which launches his brother on a successful career.

Mama

Washington never calls his mother by name but remembers the many things she did for him and his family. Mama apparently stole a chicken to feed her children while they were slaves. Washington says she woke them in the middle of the night to feed them and that he supposed she had taken the chicken from their owners. When Washington's stepfather sends for the family, Mama undertakes the trip with apparent ease though she'd never been on that type of journey before. She sympathizes with her son's desire to learn and somehow gets him a book though she can't help him read because she herself doesn't know how. She seems to want him to attend school but Washington never says whether she simply doesn't stand up to his stepfather who demands that the children work, or if the family simply couldn't make ends meet without his income. She



dies while Washington is away from home and he notes that it's among the bleakest days of his life.

Miss Olivia A. Davidson

Davidson is Washington's co-teacher at the Tuskegee school, and the woman who was to become his second wife and mother of his two sons. She was born and schooled in Ohio but was willing to go South because of the need for teachers. She also attended Hampton and the Massachusetts State Normal School at Framingham. Miss Davidson holds "festivals" to auction off cakes, pies and other food as fundraisers to pay for the new school location. She approaches both black and white families and is never, to Washington's memory, turned down.

Miss Viola Ruffner

Ruffner is the woman Washington works for while living with his mother. He leaves the coalmine for the position though most young men had only stayed with her for a week or two. Washington says he soon learns that she wants order and honesty and that he gained valuable lessons while in her employ. He is paid five dollars each month and is allowed to attend day school for an hour during the winter months, continuing his studies at night. Her husband is later severely injured in a racial dispute and never fully recovers.

Fannie M. Smith

Smith is Washington's first wife, a graduate of Hampton. They are married in the summer of 1882, and she is also devoted to the school at Tuskegee. They have one daughter, Portia M. Washington, before Fannie's death. Washington's references to her in this book are extremely limited.

Rev. Robert C. Bedford

Bedford is the white pastor of a colored church in Montgomery, Ala., who preaches the Thanksgiving sermon at Tuskegee. Bedford becomes a trustee of the school and, at the time of the writing of this book, was still involved in that capacity. Washington notes that he is always willing to serve at whatever task others find most disagreeable.

Lewis Adams

Adams is a former slave who helps with the establishment of the normal school in Tuskegee. Adams learned shoemaking, harnessmaking and tinsmithing during his days as a slave and works as a mechanic when Washington meets him. He had somehow learned to read and write while he was still a slave.

Mrs. S. Griffitts Morgan

Morgan is the woman of New Bedford, Mass., who pays Washington's tuition at Hampton.



Objects/Places

Hale's Crossing appears in non-fiction

Hale's Crossing is the place of Washington's birth. The exact place and date are unknown though he was born near a post office.

Franklin County, Virginia appears in non-fiction

Franklin County is the location of the plantation where Washington was born and served his years as a slave.

Malden, West Virginia appears in non-fiction

Malden is where Washington's step-father is when he sends for the family. The town was then located about five miles from Charleston. The community's economy is based around salt production and coalmines. Washington himself returns to the town to teach for two years and is instrumental in having the nearby town of Charleston declared the state capital.

Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute appears in non-fiction

Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute is the school in Virginia for Negroes. Washington hears about the school while working in the mines and immediately begins considering how he might be able to attend. He does attend, graduates with honors, returns there to teach and is launched into his own career in education from that institution.

Fortress Monroe appears in non-fiction

Fortress Monroe is the location of the restaurant where Washington works during his first summer vacation from Hampton.

Ku Klux Klan appears in non-fiction

Referred to only briefly by Washington, the Ku Klux Klan is a secret society of whites dedicated to quelling any political activity by Negroes.



Tuskegee appears in non-fiction

Tuskegee is the town where Washington was called to take charge of a "normal school" for colored children of the area.

The Black Belt appears in non-fiction

The Black Belt is the area of the South with rich, black soil where slave ownership was especially profitable. After the Civil War, the term became used politically as an indication of the areas where blacks outnumbered whites.

The Friesland appears in non-fiction

The Friesland is the steamer the Washingtons board as they leave for their trip to Europe.

The Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute appears in non-fiction

The Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute is the school Washington founded and supervised. The school began in a leaky building, then moved to a burned plantation with only a few usable buildings where teaching was done in a hen house and stable. It became the learning center for thousands under Washington's careful administration.



Themes

The Dignity of Hard Work

Washington notes at the very beginning of his autobiography that he doesn't remember a time when he wasn't engaged in some sort of labor. He says even as a small child he had work to do and that he was taught to do it well. As a slave, he worked on the plantation. Later, he worked in the salt furnaces and then in the coalmine. When given an opportunity to work for a rather strict woman, thus leaving the coalmine, Washington took the job. He quickly learned that the lady simply wanted order and rather than being angry that she wanted things done in a particular way, he learned to do them to her satisfaction. Upon his arrival at the Hampton school, he was told to sweep a room. Rather than just sweeping, he swept three times and dusted four. When the head teacher inspected, she was so impressed at his diligence that she allowed him to attend school and gave him a job as a janitor. He did that job so well that his salary was increased to cover all his monthly room and board fee.

When he opened the Tuskegee school, there were those who felt they were above the manual labor Washington required. He led by example, taking an ax himself and helping clear land for planting. He continues in this way and goes so far as to insist that students - and himself - learn to make bricks and to construct their own buildings and furniture. He notes that some want to beg their way out of the manual labor, others try to buy their way out and still others have their parents intervene. Washington never allows a student to attend unless that student is willing to work.

The lessons are handed down to his children as well. Washington writes of a letter he received from his oldest son requesting that he be allowed to work a full day instead of a half day so that he could save money for school. The one intolerance Washington seems to show is for those who don't work as hard as he or those who object to working.

Pride in Oneself

Washington talks at several points about the wonder of a toothbrush. He says that having a toothbrush was the one mandate that all students face upon their arrival at the Tuskegee school. He himself learned the value of a toothbrush and proper bathing while at Hampton. He works to instill those lessons upon every student at Tuskegee in the hope that they would take that knowledge with them when they went into the countryside. He makes this such a priority that students who arrive with only a single possession make certain that possession is a toothbrush.

He's similarly concerned about clothing. He says that while at Hampton, he had one suit and that it was quite a challenge to keep that suit neat while performing his janitorial duties but that he managed. As overseer of Tuskegee, he instills the need for personal



neatness on his students. They are required to have no grease spots on their clothing and no buttons missing, and Washington or teachers inspect students regularly to be certain the policy is being followed exactly.

The home is another point of pride Washington focuses on. As he begins to create the curriculum for Tuskegee, he notes that some students can pinpoint an obscure location on a map but have no idea how to properly set a table. As the school comes into enough money to arrange for the proper care of the students, they are taught these things that they might bring them also into their own homes. Washington writes that it's difficult to teach students to sleep between two sheets when the school is struggling and hasn't the money to provide two sheets per student, but says he was determined to teach those lessons as well as the academic learning.

Unselfish Gifts

Washington is only one of many in this book that bestows unselfish gifts upon others. His brother is one of the first to show this kind of love to Washington. He notes that when he's dreaming of Hampton, it's his brother John who gathers the few dollars he can scrape together to help Washington on his journey. Through the years of school, John and Washington's mother send money when they can to help him meet expenses. Washington in turn puts money toward John's education as soon as he finishes school and begins teaching. The two of them together put money toward the education of their adopted brother, James.

Washington talks at length about General Armstrong and his dedication to the Negro race. He says that Armstrong at one point takes Washington on a fundraising trip throughout the North, introducing him to an array of people who help support the Tuskegee school. All this is done at the expense of Armstrong's own university at Hampton and without benefiting Hampton in any way. With only a short time left to live, Armstrong spends time with Washington and Washington notes that the General is continually thinking of ways to promote the blacks and the poor whites of the South. In Armstrong's case, the majority of his unselfish gift was time. This is also true to a great degree of Washington.

Numerous donors help fund the Tuskegee school. Washington talks of some who thank him for the opportunity to donate and some who say that he's doing "our work." They mean that it's work they themselves should be doing, but that Washington has taken on the actual labor of this task. Those people not only make unselfish gifts of money and materials, they recognize Washington's sacrifices. Washington says that one of the most unselfish gifts he witnessed was an older black woman who presented him with a half dozen eggs that she'd been saving, and that she asked him to use them for the furtherance of the education of the young black people of his race.



Style

Perspective

The book is written in first person and is limited to Washington's point of view. There are few direct quotes and a limited number of quotes from other sources. The majority of the book is exposition. This point of view is absolutely necessary for the understanding of the book because it is the story of the author's rise from slavery as well as his attempts to bring his people from the depths of slavery.

There is some information about Washington's family and his family life, especially from his younger years. However, there is a definite lack on this topic in his later life. For example, he explains that he was married to Fannie Smith in 1882 and that they had one child, Portia M. Washington before Fannie's death. The reader knows that Fannie was dedicated to the school but that's the extent of the information provided on the subject. There's no indication of when Fannie died and no other reference to the daughter, Portia, until many chapters later. Any reader who picks up this book looking only for personal information is likely to be disappointed. However, the book does delve deeply into Washington's love of learning and his efforts to pass that on to others. It's likely that because this is the subject near and dear to his own heart, he expected readers would be more interested in those events than in the details of his personal life. It may also be that Washington was simply too sensitive to fully discuss some things - such as the death of his wife. He does devote some time to introducing his family and telling of their interests and occupations, though these references are secondary to Washington's educational enterprises.

Tone

Washington writes in a very straightforward manner with only an occasional out-dated word or phrase. Otherwise, the writing is very easily understood and concepts are not so in-depth as to prove a problem for any reader. His views on racial relations seem to be naive on several levels, but that could be based on attitudes of friends, families and colleagues. It could also be that the attitudes have changed over the decades since Washington's life. For example, he says that the Negroes who were released from slavery did not hate their white owners but felt that slave masters were simply victims of the institution of slavery. He also notes that the Ku Klux Klan was active only briefly and that the attitudes of people in the South were such that they would not tolerate the existence of such an organization for long. The truth is that the KKK remained active for many years after the 1870s events Washington refers to.

Washington often sees the humor of a situation. For example, he talks of the "cat hole" in their slave cabin. The hole was cut so that the plantation cats could come and go as they pleased but Washington says there were plenty of other places in the drafty cabin where the cats could gain entry just as easily. In his opening sentence, he says that he

doesn't know exactly where or exactly when he was born, but believes that he must have been born "someplace at sometime."

Structure

The book is divided into seventeen chapters, roughly equal in length. Each chapter is numbered and then named. The chapter titles are indications of the contents of that chapter. For example, the chapter entitled "A Slave Among Slaves" describes Washington's early life living with other slaves on the plantation. A later chapter, "Teaching School in a Stable and a Hen House" describes the move to a piece of property that was once a plantation but with few buildings remaining other than a hen house and stable. Both were immediately put to use as recitation rooms as the students moved into the former slave quarters.

There is an introduction written by James Robinson, a teacher and writer, that discusses Washington's life and some specific details of the book. It's an adequate overview, preparing the reader for what's ahead and setting the political and racial stage of Washington's time. The book also includes an index that is helpful in finding specific references.



Quotes

"I was born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia. I am not quite sure of the exact place or exact date of my birth, but at any rate I suspect I must have been born somewhere and at sometime."

Chapter One, Page 1

"Ever since I have been old enough to think for myself, I have entertained the idea that, notwithstanding the cruel wrongs inflicted upon us, the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did."

Chapter One, Page 10

"There was never a time in my youth, no matter how dark and discouraging the days might be, when one resolve did not continually remain with me, and that was a determination to secure an education at any cost."

Chapter Two, page 21

"Without asking as to whether I had any money, the man at the desk firmly refused to even consider the matter of providing me with food or lodging. This was my first experience in finding out what the color of my meant. In some way I managed to keep warm by walking about, and so got through the night. My whole soul was so bent upon reaching Hampton that I did not have time to cherish any bitterness toward the hotel-keeper."

Chapter Three, Page 27

"When I first went to Hampton I do not recall that I had ever slept in a bed that had two sheets on it. In those days there were not many buildings there and room was very precious. There were seven other boys in the same room with me; most of them however, students who had been there for sometime. The sheets were quite a puzzle to me. The first night I slept under both of them and the second night I slept on top of both of them; but by watching the other boys I learned my lesson in this, and have been trying to follow it ever since and to teach it to others."

Chapter Three, Page 34.

"One of the chief ambitions which spurred me on at Hampton was that I might be able to get to be in a position in which I could better make my mother comfortable and happy. She had so often expressed the wish that she might be permitted to live to see her children educated and started out into the world."

Chapter Four, Page 40



"I have referred to this unpleasant part of the history of the South simply for the purpose of calling attention to the great change that has taken place since the days of the "Ku Klux." Today there are no such organizations in the South, and the fact that such ever existed is almost forgotten by both races. There are few places in the South now where public sentiment would permit such organizations to exist."

Chapter Four, Page 45

"I remember there came into our neighborhood one of this class, who was in search of a school to teach, and the question arose while he was there as to the shape of the earth and how he would teach the children concerning this subject. He explained his position in the matter by saying that he was prepared to teach that the earth is either flat or round, according to the preference of a majority of his patrons."

Chapter Five, Page 47

"The more we talked with the students, who were then coming to us from several parts of the state, the more we found that the chief ambition among a large portion of them was to get an education so that they would not have to work any longer with their hands."

Chapter Eight, Page 73

"All the industries at Tuskegee have been started in natural and logical order, growing out of the needs of a community settlement. We began with farming, because we wanted something to eat."

Chapter Nine, Page 81

"My experience is that there is something in human nature which always make an individual recognize and reward merit, no matter under what color of skin the merit is found. I have found, too, that it is the visible, the tangible, that goes a long ways in softening prejudices. The actual sight of a first-class house that a Negro has built is ten times more potent than pages of discussion about a house that he ought to build or perhaps could build."

Chapter Ten, Page 89

"Every individual responds to confidence, and this is not more true of any race than of the Negroes. Let them once understand that you are unselfishly interested in them, and you can lead them to any extent."

Chapter Eleven, Page 100

"More than once, just before I was to make an important address, this nervous strain has been so great that I have resolved never again to speak in public. I not only feel



nervous before speaking, but after I have finished I usually feel a sense of regret because it seems to me as if I had left out of my address the main thing and the best thing I had meant to say."

Chapter Fifteen, Page 141

"They then informed me that Mr. Henry L. Higginson, and some other good friends who I know do not want their names made public, were then raising a sum of money which would be sufficient to keep the school in operation while I was away. At this point I was compelled to surrender. Every avenue of escape had been closed."

Chapter Sixteen, Page 159

Topics for Discussion

How did Washington get his name? What about others of his race after slavery?

Describe Washington's years as a slave. What was the level of knowledge slaves held of current events? How did they come by their information?

How did Washington come to be in Mrs. Ruffner's employ? What had he heard about her? What did he come to find to be the truth? What does he learn from her?

How does Washington learn of Hampton? What does he endure to get there? What do the people of his community think of it? What happens when he arrives? How does he gain entrance?

What are some of the lessons Washington learns from others? Name some of the people he admired and explain why he admired them.

Describe the establishment of the Tuskegee school. What did the first students expect? What did they get?

What was Washington's view on manual labor? What do the students think of this? Describe Washington's reasoning for having students make bricks, build houses and furniture, and grow crops. Do these plans work as he expects?

How does Washington come to travel to Europe? What are his reasons for wanting to remain at Tuskegee? Why does he finally agree to go?

What are Washington's views on race relations? Is he correct in his opinion?