

Peanut Man or Educator

The Legacy of Booker T. Washington

“**W**as he the one who worked with peanuts?” first-time visitors to Booker T. Washington National Monument frequently ask. Park interpreters thus begin a discussion of Booker T. Washington by explaining that he is not George Washington Carver. With that taken care of, we can then begin to help visitors understand just who Booker T. Washington was and what he contributed to the American story.

Booker T. Washington gained international attention in the late-19th and early-20th centuries as an educator, administrator, orator, and author. Tuskegee Institute, the secondary school for blacks he founded in 1881, today is a well-endowed university and the site of Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site.

Publicly accommodating on the issue of segregation, Washington is regarded by many as an “Uncle Tom.” Few are aware that he used his influence to challenge Jim Crow laws in the courts.

Booker T. Washington National Monument, in Franklin County, Virginia, marks the site of the Burroughs tobacco plantation where Washington lived for the first nine years of his life. Born a slave in 1856, Washington experienced both the rigors of slavery and the struggle for freedom that followed for African Americans.

Early Preservation Efforts

The effort to preserve the site of Washington’s birthplace as a historical memorial

began in 1945, when the land was purchased by Sidney J. Philips, a Tuskegee alumnus. Philips was a friend a neighbor of Booker T. Washington’s daughter, Portia, who had initiated the drive to create a memorial to commemorate her father’s life.

By 1946, Philips had established and become first president of the Booker T. Washington Birthplace Memorial. This non-profit organization proposed “to establish a perpetual memorial in commemoration of the life and character of Booker T. Washington” and to set the property apart as a “National Shrine... that the Industrial Education and Interracial Good Will which Washington envisioned...may be preserved....”

The Burroughs home was modified to accommodate the organization’s administrative headquarters and a post office. A replica slave cabin, erected on the presumed site of Washington’s birth, was the only attempt to recreate the historic scene.

Sydney Philips had big plans for the Memorial. His objective was to make the Memorial a “center of unselfish service” to help the Negro. Ultimately, Philips wanted to create a full-scale industrial school in the model of Tuskegee Institute. He was able to use his political influence and personal charisma to accomplish many of his short-term goals. But bringing these plans to fruition proved too costly. The organization declared bankruptcy in 1955 and was forced to auction much of the property.

Transfer to the National Park Service

In 1953, Philips had written the Director of the National Park Service offering to donate the 214-acre birthplace tract to the government. The Park Service conducted a Historic Site Survey and a study of the site’s recreational potential. After reviewing these reports, the Secretary of Interior’s Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments determined that the birthplace site was not worthy of inclusion in the National Park System.

Sydney Philips was undeterred by this rejection. After the Memorial failed, he managed to repurchase the birthplace tract and convey it to a new organization with a very specific purpose. The Booker T. Washington National Monument

Booker T. Washington National Monument, VA. Photo courtesy NPS.



Foundation was created to “promote legislation which will provide for the establishment of the Booker T. Washington National Monument located at his birthplace in Franklin County, Virginia....”

After an intensive letter writing campaign, Philips succeeded in persuading six representatives to introduce identical bills for the establishment of a national monument. Following a hearing in February 1956, the measure was swiftly passed by Congress. President Eisenhower signed the bill authorizing establishment of the Booker T. Washington National Monument on April 2.

The government did not actually take title to the land until June 18, 1957. The condition of the site was far from pristine. The first superintendent found the buildings filthy, the grounds overgrown with weeds, and several years’ accumulation of trash dumped into the streams.

The Park Service embarked upon restoring the historic landscape to provide an appropriate setting in which Booker T. Washington’s story could be interpreted. Eighteen truck loads of trash were removed from the grounds. The wishing well, buildings constructed by the Memorial, as well as several turn-of-the century tobacco barns and sheds were eventually removed.

Archeological work in the area of the cabin reconstruction confirmed the location of a cabin to the southwest of the big house. A photograph of this cabin had been featured in the first edition of Washington’s autobiography, *Up From Slavery*. However, other evidence indicated that this was

not the location of the cabin in which Washington was born.

Nevertheless, a cabin was reconstructed on the southwest side. Speculation that Washington’s family may have moved into the southwest cabin during his boyhood was used to justify the decision. The cabin’s exterior matched the photo illustration used in Washington’s autobiography. The interior was modeled on his description of the birthplace cabin in the same work.

It was decided not to reconstruct the Burroughs house, but the site of the birthplace cabin and big house are identified on the grounds and in the park map and guide. A tobacco barn with some logs from an original Burroughs barn remains on the site. The Park Service constructed a modern visitor center overlooking the historic area in 1966. Portia Washington Pittman cut the ribbon at the dedication ceremony.

Interpreting the Site

Interpretation of the site has evolved over the past 40 years. The park at first relied upon audio stations with recorded messages and paintings of plantation scenes. When the visitor center was built, interpretation was primarily done by means of an audio-visual presentation and exhibits. This interpretation attempted to steer clear of the controversial aspects of Washington’s life.

Park planners had some very real concerns about public reaction to the interpretation of Booker T. Washington’s life. A Ku Klux Klan rally near the park on the night before the visitor center dedication was an indication of the attitudes of some in the local community. Booker T. Washington continues to be a controversial historic figure among black and white Americans.

In the late 1960s, the park Interpretive Prospectus was changed to include the development and interpretation of the site as a living history farm. Additional buildings were reconstructed to recreate the plantation scene including a smokehouse, blacksmith shed, privy, and corn crib.

The park hired a farmer to plant crops and maintain a small number of livestock and other domestic animals that would have been raised in the mid-19th-century. Costumed interpreters provided information on Washington’s experiences as a slave on the Burroughs plantation.

The living history farm concept proved to be both a blessing and a curse. It was a dynamic approach to interpretation that made the site come alive. Increased activity at the site attracted visitors in larger numbers than ever before and did much to alleviate the negative attitude of the community toward the park.

Booker T. Washington. Photo courtesy Library of Congress.



On the other hand, it became all too easy for the park to focus on farm life and crafts to the exclusion of slavery and other relevant subjects. As the park became a more popular attraction, it sacrificed substance for showmanship. The park is now in the process of getting back on track interpretively.

Current Trends

There are hundreds of living history farms where crafts such as candle-making and basket weaving are appropriate to the themes and purpose of the site. Doing generic farm interpretation would be a waste of our site's unique opportunities.

Booker T. Washington National Monument is one of a small number of African-American historical sites in the national park system. It is unique in that the interpretation of slavery is a primary theme. The significant story the park was created to tell is not about the people in the big house; it is about those who lived in back of the big house.

The park still uses costumed interpretation, but it is just one of many interpretive methods. In the summer of 1996, the park installed a new permanent exhibit in the visitor center. The exhibit, "The Great Educator," does not shy away from controversial issues nor do the newly installed wayside exhibits.

An academic symposium comparing and contrasting the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois is scheduled for the fall of 1997.

The institution of slavery, emancipation, the Reconstruction era, racism, and the African-American quest for education are important themes in our interpretation of Washington's life. These are historic issues with which many feel America has not yet come to terms.

Perspectives on American history have changed considerably since the 1950s. Critical viewpoints on Booker T. Washington continue to be revised. As interpreters, we strive to present a variety of historical perspectives in keeping with current research. Our interpretation at Booker T. Washington National Monument must continue to evolve if it is to remain useful.

We will probably always get questions about peanut butter. But now we are also getting more questions about slavery, Washington's critics, and the Jim Crow era. The current interpretive thrust has led to a more in-depth discussion of issues and to provocation.

Qefiri Colbert is a park ranger and living history coordinator for Booker T. Washington National Monument. Previously she was a distinguished interpreter at the Frederick Douglass NHS in Washington, DC.

Charles Pinckney National Historic Site

The mission for Charles Pinckney National Historic Site calls for the interpretation of the lives of all the members of the farm community, black and white, slave and free, poor and rich. That interpretation surrounds the story of Charles Pinckney, statesman, politician, signer and significant author of the United States Constitution.

In an era when politicians were unpaid and expected to support themselves on family income, Charles Pinckney was enabled by the vast wealth amassed by him and his family on South Carolina plantations which produced indigo and rice long before planters thought of turning to cotton. While these colonial aristocrats were excellent merchants and businessmen, amazingly they possessed neither the proper seed for this "Carolina Gold," as rice was known, nor the skills required to plant and harvest. They turned to Africa for both. Madagascar provided the seed and West Africa the skilled laborers who produced the foodstuff marketed by the white merchants in Europe.

Today the contributions of people of African descent are being unearthed by National Park Service archeologists. Historians, working behind the scenes, are developing the threads of African contributions in the fields of language, food, agriculture, mechanics, and craftsmanship. These are illuminated for visitors through exhibits, park literature, periodic archeological investigations, and a video presentation.

Charles Pinckney's "Snee Farm" is set apart from the bustling community surrounding it. Here a visitor is given a quiet view of a late 18th century farm and an opportunity to discover how all the people who once inhabited this site came together with the peculiar institution of slavery to unite and form a new order.

While at the park visitors may review many publications describing the black experience in the era from 1770 though the end of slavery which are available for purchase. Periodically history comes alive as a volunteer basket maker from the local community demonstrates her considerable talents in the making of sweetgrass baskets. As her nimble hands deftly sew marsh grass, pine straw, and bulrush into works of art, we learn that this skill, too, came with slavery, from Africa.

—Michael A. Allen
Park Ranger



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