



The Story of the Negro

Booker T. Washington

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The Story of the Negro is a history of Americans of African descent before and after slavery. Originally produced in two volumes, and published here for the first time in one paperback volume, the first part covers Africa and the history of slavery in the United States while the second part carries the history from the Civil War to the first part of the twentieth century. Booker T. Washington was born into slavery, worked menial jobs in order to acquire an education, and became the most important voice of African American interests beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The Story of the Negro is valuable in part because it is full of significant information taken from hundreds of obscure sources that would be nearly impossible to assemble today. For instance, Washington discusses the rise of African American comedy with names, places, and dates; elsewhere he traces the growth and spread of African American home ownership and independent businesses in the United States; and his discussion of slavery is informed by his own life. Washington wanted African Americans to understand and embrace their heritage, not be ashamed of it. He explains, as an example, the role of music in the lives of the slaves and then notes how, nearly a generation later, many African Americans were "embarrassed" by this music and did not want to learn traditional songs. Washington is able to reflect on the first fifty years of his life embracing a range of experiences from share-cropping to dinner at the White House. It is just this autobiographical element that makes the volume compelling.

Washington, with his indefatigable optimism, worked his entire life to achieve equality for African Americans through practical means. Founder of the first business association (the National Negro Business League), leader of the Tuskegee Institute, where George Washington Carver conducted research, and supporter of numerous social programs designed to improve the welfare of African Americans, Washington was considered during his lifetime the spokesperson for African Americans by white society, particularly those in positions of power. This led to criticism from within the African American community, most notably from W. E. B. Du Bois, who considered Washington too accommodating of the white majority, but it took Washington's farsightedness to recognize that the immediate concerns of education, employment, and self-reflection were necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of racial equality.

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