

## Lesson Thirteen

# Booker T. Washington

### LESSON IDEA

Booker T. Washington's life is a remarkable story of a rise from the depths of poverty and slavery to the heights of achievement and humanitarian service. It provides many lessons for us that could only be possible in freedom.

### VISUAL AID

None recommended for this lesson.

**T**HE SUBJECT of tonight's lesson was born on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia, on April 5, 1856, about five years prior to the start of the Civil War. Since his mother was a slave, so was he. It was customary at the time for slaves to be given only one name, so he was named merely Booker. Years later, he would choose his full name: Booker Taliaferro ("Tolliver") Washington.

Booker was a victim of the evil system of buying and selling human beings that had existed in the United States since colonial days. How was it possible for slavery to become so widely accepted in our country, where so much had been risked to achieve freedom? [Encourage each family member to express an opinion.]

For untold centuries, trade in human beings had been considered a respectable business. Blacks from Africa were sold in Europe 500 years before Columbus set sail on the journey that led to the discovery of America. From tribes in the heart of Africa to kings and queens in Europe, men of all stations in life engaged in, and profited from, the slave trade. Spanish conquistadores fostered the trade wherever they went. Thousands of slaves were owned by wealthy Spanish and Portuguese families in the American colonies. Black slaves had landed at Jamestown,

Virginia, even before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620.

Slavery had existed for so long, and had become so entrenched, that it could not be easily eliminated. Many of the Founders were opposed to it, but recognized that many persons, especially in the South, depended on slave labor for their very existence. The problem was complicated by the fact that slaves were considered property, and the framers of the Constitution did not believe that the new government could or should infringe on property rights by outlawing slavery.

**I**N HIS INSPIRING autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington recalls the miseries of slavery during his early childhood years. He also describes the elation felt by the slaves when President Abraham Lincoln issued

his Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, and how his mother, tears running down her cheeks, kissed her children and told them the good news that they were free.

But the initial euphoria was soon replaced by fear, gloom, and despondency as it gradually dawned on the newly-freed slaves that they were responsible for their own welfare, but were largely unprepared for the responsibility.

The experience had a lasting impact on young Booker. He resolved, at whatever cost, to acquire an education. His determination later broadened to become an unquenchable desire to help others of his race cope with the demands of citizenship. It is a tribute to his character that Booker was not bitter toward the white men who had held him and his loved ones in slavery. Rather, he expressed sympathy and understanding for slave owners, viewing them as other victims of an evil system.

Booker soon realized that achieving a good edu-



Booker T. Washington at work in his study.

