Up From Slavery

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Word Count: 1,886

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A Selection from the
Autobiography of Booker T. Washington
Illustrated by Tad Butler

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This autobiography was originally published by Doubleday, Page, and Company 1901. Some of the text has been reordered to create a more chronological narrative.

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Correlation

LEVEL X	
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Reading Recovery	40
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Table of Contents

This book is the first chapter of the autobiography of Booker T. Washington. An autobiography is a life story told by the person who lived it. Booker T. Washington was born a slave in Virginia. After the Civil War, he worked in a salt mine, even though he was only nine years old. Washington was determined to get an education, and he paid for college by working as a janitor at the college he attended. He became a well-known teacher, speaker, and writer. In 1881, he founded the Tuskegee Institute, an African-American college in Alabama.

This chapter of his autobiography talks about his life as a slave and how the slaves were freed.

Home Life

I was born a slave on a **plantation** in Virginia. I am not sure of the exact place or date I was born. The first things I remember are the plantation and the slave **quarters**, which were where the slaves had their cabins.

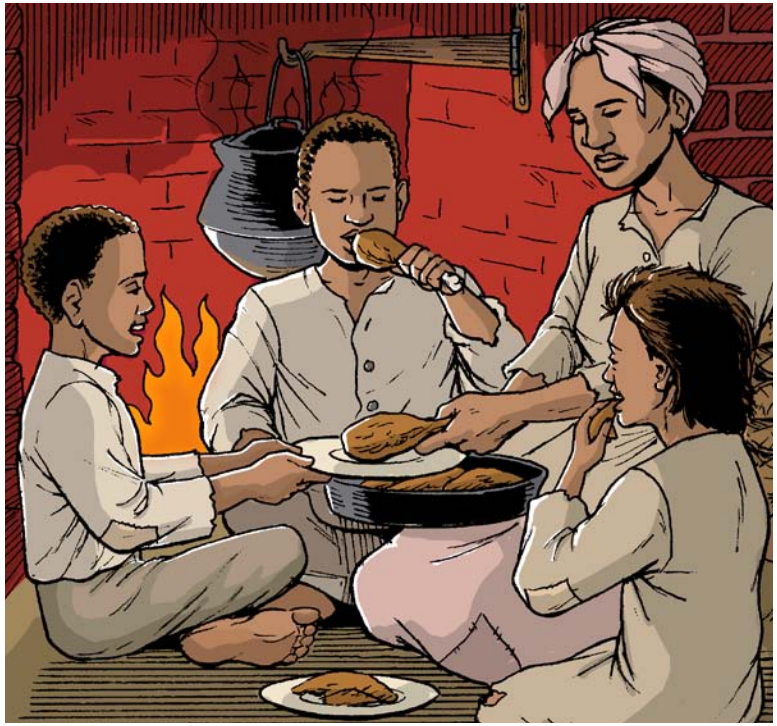
My owners were not cruel compared with many other owners. I lived in a typical log cabin, about fourteen by sixteen feet (4.2 m by 4.9 m). Our cabin was also the kitchen for the plantation, and my mother did all the cooking for the whites and the slaves. There was no stove, so she used an open fireplace. The cabin was cold in the winter, but the heat from the fireplace in the summer was just as bad.

I cannot remember a single time during my childhood when our entire family sat down for a meal together. The children were fed like animals—it was a piece of bread here and a scrap of meat there. Sometimes, someone would eat right out of the skillet or pot while someone else ate from a plate balanced on his or her knees. We had no knives or forks, so we used our hands.

The cabin didn't have glass windows; it only had openings in the walls. The openings let in light, but they also let in the cold air of winter. There was a door to the cabin, but it was too small for the doorway, and there were large cracks in it. The cabin also had a "cat hole," which was a square opening where the cat could pass in and out. I never understood why we needed a cat hole. There were at least a half a dozen other holes in the cabin where the cat could crawl in and out.

I cannot remember sleeping in a bed before our family was freed. The three children—me, my brother John, and my sister Amanda—slept on a bundle of filthy rags on the dirt floor.

The worst thing I had to wear as a slave was a **flax** shirt. Our clothing was made from the leftover flax, which was the cheapest and roughest part of the cloth. I can't imagine any worse torture than putting on a new flax shirt for the first time. It feels like a hundred small pinpoints in your flesh. But I had no choice—I had to wear a flax shirt or none. If it had been up to me, I would have chosen to wear no shirt. My older brother John was so kind to me. Several times, when I was forced to wear a new flax shirt, he wore it for several days until it was broken in.



My mother had little time to care for her children. She took a few moments to care for us in the early morning before her work began and at night after the day's work was done. One of my earliest memories is my mother waking us up late at night to feed us a chicken. I don't know how or where she got the chicken—I think she took it from the owner. Some people would call this a theft, but because of how and why she took it, no one could make me believe that my mother was guilty of theft. She was simply a victim of the system of slavery.

The Work of a Slave Boy

Not long ago, someone asked me about the games I played when I was young. Until that moment, it had never occurred to me that there was no time in my life when I could play. Almost every day of my life was devoted to work. As a slave, I was cleaning yards, carrying water to the men in the fields, or going to the mill.

I used to take corn to the mill to be ground into flour once a week. The mill was about three miles (4.8 km) from the plantation. I always dreaded this work. They would throw the heavy bag of corn across the back of a horse. The corn hung about evenly on each side, and then they would sit me on top of the corn. Somehow, almost every time, the corn would shift and become uneven. It would fall off the horse, and often I would fall off with it. I was not strong enough to lift the corn back onto the horse, so I would have to wait, sometimes for hours, until someone came by who could help. This made me late getting to the mill, and by the time the corn was ground and I went home, it would be dark. The road was lonely and it went through dense forests. People had said that the woods were full of soldiers who would cut off the ears of any slave boy. I was always frightened, and when I was late getting home, I would get a severe **scolding** or a beating.

I had no schooling when I was a slave. I remember that on several occasions, I carried books for the white children and went as far as the schoolhouse door. Seeing all the boys and girls studying in the schoolroom made a deep impression on me. I thought that getting into the schoolhouse to study would be like getting into **paradise**.

Talk of Freedom

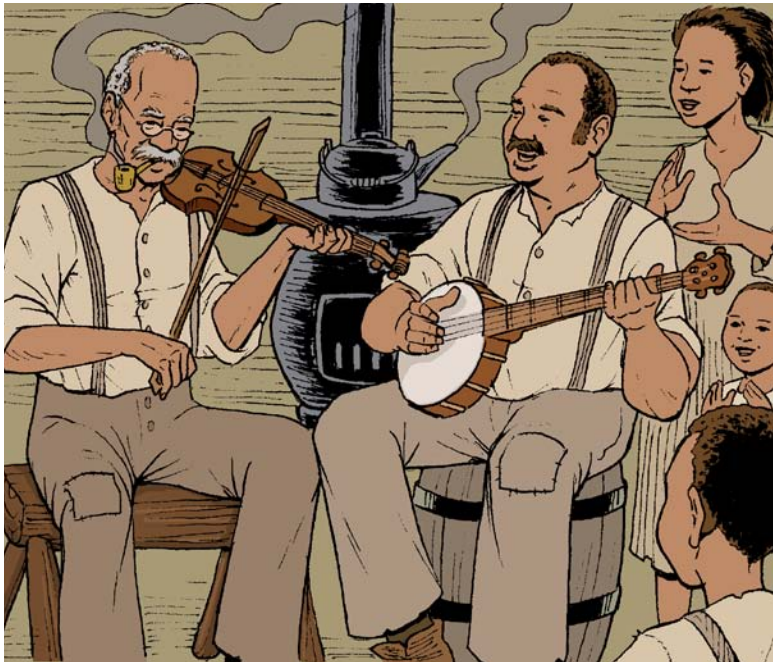
The first time that I knew we were slaves was when my mother woke us up early one morning. My mother was kneeling and praying that Abraham Lincoln and the armies of the North might be successful, and that one day, she and her children might be free.

I never have been able to understand how the slaves, who could not read, could keep themselves informed about what was happening. When Lincoln was running for president, the slaves on our plantation knew what the issues were, even though they were miles from any railroad or large city.

When war began between the North and South, every slave on the plantation knew that the main issue was slavery. Everyone felt in their hearts that freedom would come if the Northern armies won.

You may think that the slaves were bitter toward the white people. After all, the white people of the South were fighting a war to keep the black people as slaves. In the case of the slaves at our place, this was not true. During the Civil War, one of the young white owners was killed, and two were severely wounded. I recall the feeling of sorrow among the slaves when they heard of Master Billy's death. Some of the slaves had taken care of Master Billy when he was a baby. Others had played with him when he was a child. Master Billy had begged for mercy when an **overseer** or owner was whipping a slave.

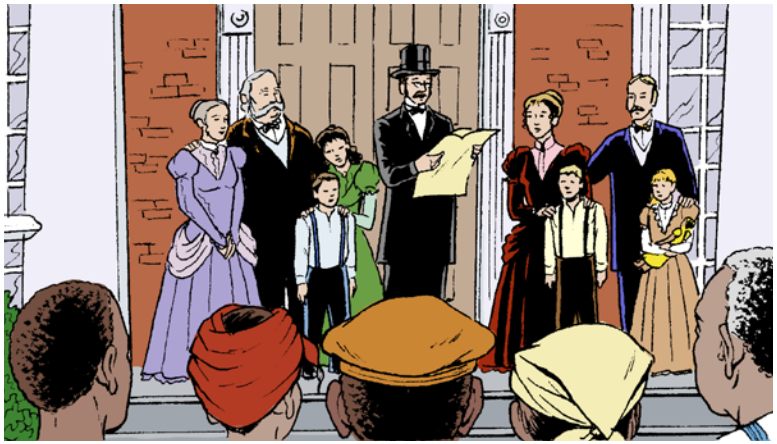
In fear of a Northern invasion, the white people took silverware and other valuables from the "**big house**" and buried them in the woods with a trusted slave standing guard. These slaves would give the Northern soldiers food, drink, clothing—anything except the valuables that they had in their care. **Woe** be to anyone who attempted to take the buried treasure.



Free at Last

Finally, the day of freedom came. As the day drew near, there was more singing in the slave quarters than usual. Many of the plantation songs mentioned freedom, but before then, the slaves carefully explained that "freedom" referred to heaven after death. Now, they threw off the disguise and were not afraid to show that "freedom" meant freedom in this life. The night before the eventful day, word was sent to the slave quarters that something unusual was going to take place at the "big house" the next morning. I got little sleep that night.

Early the next morning, word was sent to all the slaves, young and old, to gather at the house. Everyone in our master's family was on the porch, where they could hear what was going on. There was a look of deep interest, or maybe sadness, on their faces. As I remember now, they did not seem to be sad because of the loss of property. Rather, they were sad because they were parting with people who were very close to them. Some man appeared, a stranger, and he made a little speech and then read a long paper—I think it was the **Emancipation Proclamation**. In the reading, we were told that we were all free, and we could now go where we pleased. My mother leaned over and kissed us while tears of joy ran down her cheeks. She explained what it all meant, and that this was the day that she had been praying for.



The Effects of Slavery

The hurtfulness of slavery did not just affect the black people. I pity any nation that becomes **entangled** in the net of slavery. Once slavery has its arms fastened on the economic and social life of a country, it is no easy matter to get rid of it.

The celebration and rejoicing of the black people only lasted for a brief period. By the time they returned to their cabins, there was a change in their feelings. They became aware of the great responsibility of being free. They had to provide themselves with a home, care for their children, schools, and churches. Some of the slaves were seventy or eighty years old, and they had no strength to earn a living in a strange place. They had spent fifty years with their owners, and it was hard to think of leaving.

On the other hand, the former slaves pitied our former owners. After years of slavery, the whites looked upon labor and work as bad and inferior. Slavery took the spirit of **self-reliance** out of the white people. My old owner had many sons and daughters, but not one knew a single **trade** or work skill. The girls had never been taught to cook or sew or take care of the house. The sons had the feeling that **manual labor** was not the proper thing for them. On the other hand, the slaves had learned valuable skills, and none of them were ashamed to work.

There are many instances of blacks caring for their former owners who became poor after the war. Not long ago, I met an ex-slave from Virginia. This man had made a deal with his master two or three years before the Emancipation Proclamation. The slave was permitted to buy freedom for himself by paying his master some money each year.

While he was paying for himself, he was allowed to work wherever he wanted, and he found a job in Ohio. When freedom came, he still owed his master three hundred dollars. Even though the Emancipation Proclamation said that no slave owed his master anything, this black man walked back to Virginia and placed every

dollar in his master's hand. He said that even though he knew he didn't have to pay, he had given his word. He felt that he could not enjoy his freedom unless he kept his word.

From some of the things I have said, you may get the idea that some of the slaves did not want freedom. This is not true. I have never seen a single one who did not want to be set free, or who would return to slavery.

You can read more of **Up From Slavery** *by finding the book in your library or bookstore.*

Explore More

At the Library

Ask your librarian to help you find the book *Up From Slavery.* Booker T. Washington writes much more about his life during and after slavery in his autobiography.

Ask your librarian to help you find other biographies and autobiographies of African Americans who lived as slaves. Many slaves wrote about their stories, including Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Henry "Box" Brown. Other freed slaves, such as Harriet Tubman, told other writers about their lives. You can often find these books in the "African-American History" section of your library.

On the Internet

A. In the address window, type *www.google.com.*

B. Type *Booker T. Washington* or *Up From Slavery* in the search window. Click on "Google Search."

C. Read the colored links and click on one that looks interesting. When you want to explore more links, click on the "back" arrow at the top left.

D. You can also try different searches, such as *Emancipation Proclamation, Tuskegee Institute,* or *African-American autobiography.*

Glossary

big house *(n.)*	the name many slaves used for their masters' houses (p. 11)
Emancipation Proclamation *(n.)*	a law passed by President Lincoln in 1862 that freed all the slaves under Confederate authority (p. 13)
entangled *(adj.)*	trapped in; tangled up in (p. 14)
flax *(n.)*	a plant with stringy stems that are made into fabric; also, the fabric from the flax plant (p. 6)
manual labor *(n.)*	work that is done with the body; physical work (p. 15)
overseer *(n.)*	a plantation worker who watched the slaves and made sure they worked (p. 11)
paradise *(n.)*	a perfect, beautiful place where you can be happy forever (p. 9)
plantation *(n.)*	a large farm, owned by a single person or family, where slaves or laborers do the work (p. 5)
quarters *(n.)*	a group of buildings where people, especially workers, live (p. 5)
scolding *(n.)*	getting yelled at as a punishment (p. 9)
self-reliance *(n.)*	the ability to take care of yourself (p. 15)
trade *(n.)*	job or skill (p. 15)
woe *(n.)*	bad luck; pain and sorrow (p. 11)