

The Struggle for an Education Up From Slavery: An Autobiography

Booker T. Washington

Answer the following questions in about 200 words each:

1. What does Booker T. Washington say about Mrs. Ruffener? Why does he say that the lessons he learnt in her home were as valuable to him as any education he has ever obtained anywhere since?

Ans. The lesson 'The Struggle for an Education Up from Slavery: An autobiography is an excerpt from his autobiography. The lesson throws light on the author's intense desire and the struggle he had to undergo to get educated.

Booker T. Washington with a desire to get educated left the job in coal-mine and took job at General Ruffener's house, who was the owner of the salt-furnace and coal-mine. His wife Mrs. Viola Ruffener was a 'Yankee' woman from Vermont. She had a reputation in her neighbourhood as a very strict lady to her servants, especially with the boys who tried to serve her. Few of them had remained with her not more than two or three weeks. They all left with the same excuse: she was too strict. Booker T. Washington has heard so much about Mrs. Ruffener's severity that he was almost afraid to see her, and trembled when he went into her presence. He had not lived with her many weeks, however, before he began to understand her. He soon began to learn that, first of all, she wanted everything kept clean about her, that she wanted things done promptly and systematically. Not only that she also wanted absolute honesty and frankness. Nothing must be careless; every door, every fence, must be kept in repair. He couldn't remember how long he had lived with Mrs. Ruffener before going to Hampton. He thought that he might have lived for about a year and a half.

He thought that the lessons he learned in the home of Mrs. Ruffener were as valuable to him as any education he had ever gotten anywhere since. He learnt absolute cleanliness, tidiness and honesty from Mrs. Ruffener that helped him in getting admission in

Hampton Institute.

2. ‘One experience I shall long remember’. Describe this experience of Booker T. Washington which enabled him find out ‘what the colour of skin meant.’

Ans. Booker T. Washington’s lesson ‘The Struggle for an Education Up From Slaver: An Autobiography’ is an excerpt from his autobiography. The lesson throws light on his struggle to get educated.

Booker T. Washington decided to go to Hampton even though he had no idea about the route that leads to Hampton. He also had no idea about the expenses of the journey from his home to Hampton. Finally the great day came, and he started for Hampton. He had only a small, cheap satchel that contained what few articles of clothing he could get. At that time there were no through trains connecting that part of West Virginia with Eastern Virginia. Trains ran only a portion of the way, and the remainder of the distance was travelled by stage-coaches.

The distance from Malden to Hampton is about five hundred miles. He had not been away from home many hours before it began to grow painfully evident that he did not have enough money to pay his fare to Hampton. One experience he shall long remember. He had been travelling over the mountains most of the afternoon in an old-fashioned stage-coach, when, late in the evening, the coach stopped for the night at a common, unpainted house called a hotel. All the other passengers except him were whites. In his ignorance he supposed that the little hotel existed for the purpose of accommodating the passengers who travelled on the stage-coach. The difference that the colour of one’s skin would make he had not thought, anything about. After all the passengers had been shown rooms and were getting ready for supper, he shyly presented him before the man at the desk. It is true he had practically no money in his pocket with which to pay for bed or food. Still, he had hoped in some way to beg his way into the good graces of the landlord, for at that season in the mountains of Virginia the weather was cold, and he wanted to get indoors for the night. Without asking as to whether he had any money, the man at the desk

firmly refused to even consider the matter for providing him with food or lodging. This was his first experience in finding out what the colour of his skin meant. That was his first experience of racial discrimination.

2. Summarise Booker T. Washington's journey and experience from home to Hampton.

Ans. After hearing about the Hampton Institute from two miners Booker T. Washington had decided to go there and get admitted. Even though he was living with Mrs. Ruffener he did not give the idea of going to the Hampton Institute. In the fall of 1872, he determined to make an effort to get there, although he had no idea of the direction in which Hampton was, or of what it would cost to go there. Except his mother nobody sympathized with him in his ambition to go to Hampton. His mother called the attempt as a 'wild-goose chase'. He got only a half-hearted consent from her. The small amount of money that he had earned had been spent by his stepfather and the remainder of the family, with the exception of a very few dollars. So, he had very little money with which he could buy clothes and pay his travelling expenses. His brother also couldn't help him much as most of the money he had earned were spent in paying household expenses. The touching and pleasing thing for him was that many of the older coloured people took interest in the matter of his education.

Finally the great day came, and he started for Hampton. He had only a small, cheap satchel that contained what few articles of clothing he could get. His mother at the time was rather weak and broken in health. He hardly expected to see her again, and thus their parting was all the more sad. She, however was very brave though it all. At that time there were no through trains connecting that part of West Virginia with eastern Virginia. Trains ran only a portion of the way, and the remainder of the distance was travelled by stage-coaches.

In his journey he had an experienced of racial discrimination. The owner of the hotel in the mountains of Virginia refused him an entry and even supper without

. asking for the money for the same. He had to walk throughout night to keep him warm' in that cold weather. By walking, begging rides both in wagons and in the cars, in some way, after a number of days, he reached the city of Richmond, Virginia, about eighty-two miles from Hampton. When he reached there, tired, hugar, and dirty, it was late in the night. He spent the whole night under the side walk. The next day he got the work of unloading a cargo of pig iron from the ship with the grace of the captain of the ship. He could buy the food from the earnings he got by working on the ship. He continued working on the ship for a number of days. After buying food with the small wages he received there was not much left to add to the amount he must get to pay his way to Hampton. In order to economize in every way possible, so as to be sure to reach Hampton in a reasonable time, he continued to sleep under the side walk. When he had saved enough money with which to reach Hampton, he thanked the captain of the ship for his kindness, and started again. He reached Hampton, with a surplus of exactly fifty cents with which to begin his education. The very sight of the big building of Hampton Institute pleased him immensely. For him, it was the most beautiful building he had ever seen.

After reaching the grounds of the Hampton Institute he presented himself before the head teacher for assignment. Initially the teacher ignored him by looking at his shabby appearance. She thought him to be a loafer and worthless fellow to be admitted to the institute. At last the teacher gave him an assignment to sweep and clean the recitation-room. He swept the room three times and dusted it four times. The head teacher was satisfied with his work and got him admitted in the Institute. Washington thought that it was the best examination he had ever passed.

4. Give a detailed account of the best examination Booker T. Washington ever passed.

Ans. As soon as possible after reaching the grounds of the Hampton Institute, he presented himself before the head teacher for assignment to a class. Having been so long without proper food, a bath, and change of clothing, he did not, of course, make a very

favourable impression upon her, and he could see at once that there were doubts in her mind about the wisdom of admitting him as a student. He felt that he could hardly blame her if she got the idea that he was a worthless loafer or tramp. For some time she did not refuse to admit him, neither did she decide in his favour and he continued to linger about her, and to impress her in all ways he could with his worthiness. In the meantime he saw her admitting other students, and that added greatly to his discomfort, for he felt, deep down in his heart, that he could do as well as they, if he could only get a chance to show what was in him.

After some hours he got the assignment to sweep the recitation-room. He seized that opportunity. Here it came to his help the training in cleanliness he had got from Mrs. Ruffener. He swept the recitation-room three times and dusted it four times. The head teacher inspected the room and she was very pleased with the work of Booker T. Washington. She admitted Washington in the Hampton Institute. At that time he felt that he was one of the happiest souls on the earth. He also thought that that was the best examination he had ever passed.

B. Answer the following questions in about 75 words each:

1. What did Booker T. Washington learn from the talk between the two men about the school established for the members of his race?

Ans. One day, while at work in the coal-mine, Booker T. Washington happened to overhear two miners talking about a great school for coloured people somewhere in Virginia. This was the first time that he had ever heard anything about any kind of school or college that was more pretentious than the little coloured school in their town. In the darkness of the mine he noiselessly crept as close as he could to the men who were talking. He heard one tell the other that not only was the school established for the members of his race, but that opportunities were provided by which poor but worthy students could work out all or part of the cost of board, and at the same time be

taught some trade or industry.

3. Why did Booker T. Washington get only a half-hearted support from his mother for, what she called, his wild-goose chase?

Ans. In the fall of 1872 Booker T. Washington determined to make an effort to get to Hampton Institute. He had no definite idea of the direction in which Hampton was, or of what it would cost to go there. Except his mother nobody was thoroughly sympathized with him in his ambition to go to Hampton. She was troubled with a grave fear that he was starting out on a 'wild-goose chase'. He got only a half-hearted consent from her that he might start the journey to Hampton. The small amount of money that he had earned had been consumed by his stepfather and the remainder of the family, with the exception of a very few dollars. He had very little money with which he could buy clothes and pay his travelling expenses. His brother John helped him all that he could, but of course that was not a great deal. Whatever he had earned while working in the coal-mine that amount was spent on the household expenses. In such circumstances Booker T. Washington's mother had a fear whether he could reach Hampton. At the time of his departure, his mother's health was deteriorated and in that condition she felt that they could meet ever again. Hence, she gave a half-hearted consent and called it a 'wild-goose chase'.

4. Which thing "touched and pleased" Booker T. Washington regarding his journey to Hampton?

Ans. The thing that touched and pleased Booker T. Washington regarding his journey to Hampton was the interest that many of the older coloured people took in the matter. They had spent the best days of their lives in slavery, and hardly expected to live to see the time when they would see a member of their race leave home to attend a boarding-school. Some of these older people would give him a nickel, others a quarter, or a handkerchief.

5. How did Booker T. Washington reach Richmond, Virginia? Write about his bitter experiences when he was tired, hungry and penniless.

Ans. By walking, begging rides both in wagons and in the cars, in some way, after a number of days, he reached, the city of Richmond, Virginia, about eighty-two miles from Hampton. When he reached there, tired, hungry, and dirty, it was late in the night. He had never been in a large city, and this rather added to his misery. When he reached Richmond, he was completely out of money. He had not a single acquaintance in the place, and, being unused to city ways, he did not know where to go. He applied at several places for lodging, but they all wanted money, and that was what he did not have. Knowing nothing else better to do, he walked the streets. In doing this he passed by many food-stands where fried chicken and half-moon apple pies were piled high and made to present a most tempting appearance. At that time it seemed to him that he would have promised all that he expected to possess in the future to have gotten hold of one of those chicken legs or one of those pies. But he could not get either of these, nor anything else to eat.

6. How did Booker T. Washington find shelter for the night in Richmond?

Ans. When he reached Richmond, he tried to get accommodation there. As he had no money he couldn't get any accommodation there. Therefore, he had to walk the streets till after midnight. At last he became so exhausted that he could walk no longer. He was tired, he was hungry, he was everything but discouraged. Just about the time when he reached extreme physical exhaustion, he came upon a portion of a street where the board sidewalk was considerably elevated. He waited for a few minutes, till he was sure that no passers-by could see him, and then crept under the sidewalk and lay for the night upon the ground, with his satchel of clothing for a pillow. Nearly all night he could hear the tramp of feet over his head. The next morning he felt somewhat refreshed.

7. Which, according to Washington, had been 'about the best breakfast?' How did he manage to get it?

Ans. After spending one night under the sidewalk, Booker T Washington felt somewhat refreshed in the morning. However, he was extremely hungry, because it had been

a long time since he had had sufficient food. As soon as it became light enough for him to see his surroundings he noticed that he was near a large ship, and that this ship seemed to be unloading a cargo of pig iron. He went at once to the vessel and asked the captain to permit him to help unload the vessel in order to get money for food. The captain, a white man, who seemed to be kind-hearted, consented. He worked long enough to earn money for his breakfast., and it seemed to him, as he remembered then, to have been about the best breakfast that he had ever eaten.

8. How did the captain of the ship, who was pleased with his work, help Booker T. Washington? How did he save money to reach Hampton?

Ans. Booker T. Washington's work pleased the captain so well that he told him if he desired he could continue working for a small amount per day. That he was very glad to do. He continued working on that vessel for a number of days. After buying food with the small wages he received there was not much left to add to the amount he must get to pay his way to Hampton. In order to economize in every way possible, so as to be sure to reach Hampton in a reasonable time, he continued to sleep under the same sidewalk that gave him shelter the first night he was in Richmond.

9. Describe the feelings of Booker T. Washington when "the coloured citizens of Richmond tendered him a reception."

Ans. Many years after Booker T. Washington earned name and fame the coloured citizens of Richmond very kindly tendered him a reception. Around two thousand people were gathered for that reception ceremony. The place where the reception was held was not far from the spot where he slept the first night he spent in that city. Booker T. Washington confessed that his mind was more upon the sidewalk that first gave him shelter than upon the reception, agreeable and cordial as it was.

10. Narrate Washington's impression about the school-building at Hampton.

Ans. Without any unusual occurrence he reached Hampton from Richmond, with a surplus of exactly fifty cents with which to begin his education. To him it had been a long,

eventful journey; but the first sight of the large, three-storey, brick school building seemed to have rewarded him for all that he had undergone in order to reach the place. If the people who gave the money to provide that building could appreciate the influence the sight of it had upon him, as well as upon thousands of other youths, they would feel all the more encouraged to make such gifts. It seemed to him to be the largest and most beautiful building he had ever seen. The sight of it seemed to give him a new life. He felt that a new kind of existence had now begun that life would now have a new meaning. He felt that he had reached the Promised Land, and he resolved to let no obstacle prevent him from putting forth the highest effort to fit himself to accomplish the most good in the world.

11. What happened when Washington presented himself before the head teacher for assignment to a class?

Ans. After reaching the grounds of the Hampton Institute, Booker T. Washington presented himself before the head teacher for assignment to a class. Having been so long without proper food, a bath, and change of clothing, he did not, of course make a favourable impression upon her. He could see at once that there were doubts in her mind about the wisdom of admitting him as a student. He felt that he could hardly blame her if she got the idea that he was a worthless loafer or tramp. For some time she did not refuse to admit him, neither did she decide in his favour and he continued to linger about her, and to impress her in all the ways he could with his worthiness. In the meantime he saw her admitting other students, and that added greatly to his discomfort. He felt deep down in his heart, that he could do as well as they, if he could only get a chance to show what was in him. After some hours had passed, the head teacher asked to sweep the adjoining recitation-room.

12. How did Washington complete the task assigned to him by the head teacher?

Ans. After waiting for hours, finally the head teacher assigned Booker T. Washington with the task of sweeping the recitation-room. He thought that there was his chance to prove

himself. He received an order with more delight. He knew that he could sweep, for Mrs. Ruffner had thoroughly taught him how to do that when he lived with her. He swept the Recitation-room three times. Then he got a dusting-cloth and he dusted it four times. All the woodwork around the walls, every bench, table, and desk, he went over four times with his dusting-cloth. Besides, every piece of furniture had been moved and every closet and corner in the room had been thoroughly cleaned. He had the feeling that in a large measure his future depended upon the impression he made upon the teacher in the cleaning of that room. When he was through, he reported to the head teacher. She was a 'Yankee' woman who knew just where to look for dirt. She went into the room and inspected the floor and closet; then she took her handkerchief and rubbed it on the woodwork about the walls, and over the table and benches. When she was unable to find one bit of dirt on the floor, or a particle of dust on any of the furniture, she was satisfied and admitted him in the institution.