In the fall of 1865, when he was nine years old, Booker met a stranger who arrived at the farm where he lived. An officer of some sort, the man gave a short speech and read a large paper. Booker later understood the paper to have been the Emancipation Proclamation. “For some minutes,” he recalled, “there was rejoicing, and thanksgiving.” Then, the atmosphere changed as the older slaves absorbed “the great responsibility of being free, of having charge of themselves.” Young Booker was perceptive and, throughout his life, his careful observations and resourcefulness fed his diligent pursuit of goals, the most significant of which was his powerful desire for an education.

Booker’s stepfather lived in West Virginia and rarely saw his family, but with freedom now declared, he sent for them. They had never before ventured far from the plantation, so this was an enormous undertaking. After several weeks of traveling, they arrived in the little town of Malden, West Virginia. Salt mining was a major industry there, and Booker and his brother John were put to work in a salt-furnace, where they often began their workday at 4 o’clock in the morning. In these dark and difficult conditions, Booker seized any opportunity to learn to read and write and began what he called his “book knowledge” right in that salt-furnace. Since each salt-packer had to mark his barrels with a certain number, Booker learned to recognize the number put on his barrels: “18.” He did not yet know other figures, but he had cleverly found a method for beginning to decipher them. It was a compulsion. “I had an intense longing to learn to read,” he wrote. “I determined, when quite a small child, that if I accomplished nothing else in life, I would in some way get enough education to enable me to read common books and newspapers.”
Once they had settled into their new home, Booker convinced his mother to get a book for him—a spelling book. He recalled that she had “good hard common sense which seemed to enable her to meet and master every situation” and he believed he acquired that disposition from her. She was as dedicated to his education as Booker was. Within a few weeks, with her encouragement, he had mastered much of the alphabet. Others in his community talked about opening a school “for Negro children,” affirming the young boy’s desire for more “book learning.” Washington later wrote:

The experience of a whole race beginning to go to school for the first time, presents one of the most interesting studies that has ever occurred in connection with the development of any race. Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for an education . . . it was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn . . . The great ambition of the older people was to try to learn to read the Bible before they died . . . Day-school, night-school, Sunday-school, were always crowded, and often many had to be turned away for want of room.

When a school did open, it brought not joy, but sharp disappointment. Due to his family’s financial situation, Booker was required to continue working in the salt-furnace rather than join the children he saw going to and from school each day. In spite of his distress, he resolved to somehow still learn and worked with his spelling book even more energetically, whenever he could. With his mother’s help, Washington kept tenaciously at his pursuit. He arranged for a teacher to give him lessons at night after he had completed his day’s work. His gratitude for those lessons was so great that he learned more in his night lessons than the other children did during the day. Still, he had his heart set on attending day school. He continued to push his case and finally was allowed, for a few months, to attend school during the day. He would wake early in the morning to work in the furnace until 9 o’clock, and then—after school closed in the afternoon—return immediately to work for two more hours.

However, Washington’s days at school, so long desired, were short-lived. He soon had to stop attending day-school in order to devote all of his daytime hours to work. Undaunted, he walked several miles after work to attend night school. He never gave up. “There was never a time in my youth,” he wrote, “no matter how dark and discouraging the days might be, when one resolve did not continually remain with me, and that was a determination to secure an education at any cost.”

The need to earn money for his family continued. Eventually, he left the salt-furnace for a job in a coal mine, a difficult and dangerous job. He still imagined what life might be if no limits were placed on his hopes for an education. One day, he overheard two miners discussing a school for members of his race, located somewhere in Virginia, that would allow students who were poor but hardworking to work for part of the cost. The school was the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. He had no idea how far he must travel to get there, but he set his sights on it. He was “on fire constantly with one ambition, and that was to go to Hampton.”

After a few months, Washington left the coal mine to work in the home of the owner of the mine and the salt-furnace, General Lewis Ruffner. He had heard that Mrs. Viola Ruffner was a
strict employer, but accepted the position in spite of his fears. Taking the time to understand Mrs. Ruffner, he found himself acquiring her exacting standards. The lessons Washington learned by working in her home became an invaluable part of his education, and he carried those high standards throughout his life. He also came to see Mrs. Ruffner as a dear friend. She encouraged his education, providing him with time to go to school. During this time, he also began assembling his first library. He knocked one side out of a wooden box, added some shelves and, as he later wrote, “began putting into it every kind of book that I could get my hands upon, and called it my ‘library.’”

All this took place by the time Washington was 16 years old. Then, in 1872, he finally set off for Hampton, still unsure of its exact location and without money for clothes or travel. Eventually, via stage-coach, walking, and begging rides in wagons, he reached Richmond, Virginia. Out of money, he slept underneath the sidewalk and got himself a job on a large ship during the day. The ship’s captain, pleased with his work, kept Washington on. This earned him enough money to eat and a bit of savings. When he thought he had enough money to finish the journey, Booker thanked the captain for having hired him and left, reaching Hampton with, as he described it, “a surplus of exactly fifty cents with which to begin my education.”

Upon arrival, he presented himself to the head teacher for enrollment. He had not had a proper bath or a change of clothes in days, but she gave him an opportunity, asking him to sweep a room. It was a test. The fastidiousness he had learned from Mrs. Ruffner that had impressed the ship captain in Richmond, also impressed her. She offered him a spot at the school as well as a position as a janitor, which enabled him to pay for his education. While at Hampton, he worked hard at both schoolwork and janitorial duties. He had no books, so he borrowed from others. He had only one change of clothes, yet applied himself to his work so earnestly that the faculty found him secondhand clothing. He had never slept in a bed with two sheets, so he watched others to learn how to lie on top of one and beneath the other. He enjoyed being surrounded by hundreds of others who shared his eagerness to learn. “Every hour,” he wrote, “was occupied in study or work. Nearly all had had enough contact with the world to teach them the need of education.”

Booker T. Washington’s initial goal was to get to Hampton, but his achievements extended well beyond. Grateful for his own education, he helped establish a number of schools for African-American students throughout the South and worked tirelessly for others. “I resolved,” he wrote, “to let no obstacle prevent me from putting forth the highest effort to fit myself to accomplish the most good in the world.”