

Primary Source

Booker T. Washington, Atlanta Exposition Address, 1895



To what extent did Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice become a reality for African Americans from Reconstruction to the end of the nineteenth century?

- ☐ I can interpret primary sources related to Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice from the colonial era to the outbreak of the Civil War.
- ☐ I can explain how laws and policy, courts, and individuals and groups contributed to or pushed back against the quest to end slavery.
- ☐ I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- ☐ I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

Essential Vocabulary

Folly	Mistake
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Building Context

Booker T. Washington was born enslaved in Virginia. He learned to read and write at a Freedmen's Bureau school and attended Hampton Institute. A noted leader of the African American community, he was invited to speak at the opening ceremonies of the Atlanta Cotton States and the International Exposition, which was held to demonstrate and encourage economic growth in the South. He spoke before a racially mixed audience and highlighted his view of achieving racial progress through vocational education and constant work to improve each person's own condition. While many Black leaders initially praised Washington's speech, it became controversial in the ensuing decades. Critics of Washington argued that he did not do enough to directly challenge white supremacy and was too deferential to whites.

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Source: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/washington/washing.html>

To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next door neighbor, I would say: "Cast down your bucket where you are" — cast it down in making friends in every manly way of the people of all races by whom we are surrounded. Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions. . . Our greatest danger is, that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labor and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life . . . No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist **folly** [mistake], and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing. . . . It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercises of these privileges. . . .

Notes

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. What does Washington mean by the phrase “Cast down your bucket where you are”?

2. What industries does Washington suggest Black Americans should pursue?

3. Re-read the final italicized paragraph of this excerpt. Summarize Washington’s argument in your own words. How do you think this argument aligns with statements made by other leaders whose ideas you have read? Consider James T. Rapier speech in Document 12 and Frederick Douglass’s comments on race and equality in Document 20.