Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver were the only Americans to make the long journey from a slave cabin to the Hall of Fame.

It was Booker T. Washington who founded Tuskegee Institute which became the most famous school for Negroes in the world. Just 18 years after the Civil War, he went to the Deep South where his people needed him most. For the progress he made in advancing the cause of the Negro, he gained international stature and a prominent place in the life and legend of America.

He was born a slave on the James Burroughs Plantation, April 5, 1856, in Franklin County, Virginia. After freedom was declared for most slaves through the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, he and his family moved to Maiden, West Virginia.

Though he did manage to attend public school in Maiden for a few months, Booker T. Washington remained virtually a slave. He toiled in either the salt or coal mine until 1871. At public school, Booker met the necessity of a surname by choosing "Washington." It was Washington, he reasoned, who was the father of his country. Later, he learned that his mother had named him Booker Taliaferro, so he retained all three names.

Young Booker hungered for more formal schooling. He had only $1.50 in his pockets when he set out for Hampton Institute—500 miles from Maiden—in 1872. His entrance examination to Hampton was to clean a room. The teacher inspected his work with a spotless, white handkerchief to reveal dust or dirt. Booker was admitted.

In 1875, he was graduated as the leading scholar in his class, and returned to Maiden to teach. Later, he studied a year at Wayland Seminary in Washington, D.C., and subsequently taught for two years at Hampton where he was placed in charge of American Indians attending there.

In 1881, he left Hampton to become principal of a school in Tuskegee, Alabama. Upon arrival, the 25-year-old educator asked, "Where is the school?" "There isn't one yet," he was told. Undismayed, "Booker T. Washington went to work, and on July 4, 1881, the doors of a small shanty near a Tuskegee African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church were opened to 40 students, mostly adults. That humble setting was the beginning of Tuskegee Institute. He literally built the school from the ground up. Students were taught, in addition to their academic subjects, skills in building construction, brickmaking, cooking, handicraft, agriculture, and the blacksmith trade.

His influence was felt near and far. Through progress at Tuskegee, he showed that an oppressed people could advance. His concept of practical education was a contribution to the general field of education. His writings and speeches showed the influence of education. Through his policies and programs, Tuskegee Institute became an American university.

His work was a wonder. The handkerchief he refused to reveal was that of dirt. Booker was the recipient of many laurels, degrees from many institutions (including Harvard, Wilberforce and Howard Universities, and Dartmouth College), and awards from business and social organizations.

In the U.S. Post Office Department issued a 24-cent commemorative stamp in recognition of his work. His last public appearance was in New Haven, Connecticut, on October 25th, 1915, when he spoke on Negro Education at the National Council of Congregational Churches. The extreme labors that were a part of building and developing a school, his concern for advancing his race and country, and the devotion to service for all by the colored American, then and forever, combined to place him in the Pantheon of American Negro leaders. His last words are a fitting epitaph: "I was born in the South; I have lived and labored in the South; and I expect to be buried in the South."
BOOKER TALIAFERRO WASHINGTON
April 5, 1856 - November 14, 1915

Founder and First President
July 4, 1881 - November 14, 1915