

An 18th century philosophy endures

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Loud & clear

East Bay Business Times - by [Sarah Washington O'Neal Rush](#)

Within the past 10 years there have been a number of occasions when I was reading a book or magazine and was honored by the fact that my great-grandfather, Booker T. Washington - former slave turned famous educator and founder of Tuskegee University - is noted for inspiring successful business people across social and ethnic backgrounds. These occurrences are particularly significant for me because for most of my life, I did not realize the importance of my great-grandfather's work, or how he impacted the economic fabric of this nation. It was not until I first stepped foot on the campus of Tuskegee University in 1996 for a family reunion that I began to take notice.

When we first arrived on campus I was amazed by the original buildings - built by hand, brick by brick, by Washington and his students, all former slaves, using bricks that they made. These bricks were of such high quality that people came from miles around to purchase them. This was one of the initial lessons that Washington taught his students and staff in economic development.

The very first lesson he taught in economic development occurred when students first arrived at the school in 1881, 16 years after the end of slavery. There was one old dilapidated church for their use, amidst a forest of trees and brush. He told his students and staff that they were going to cut down the trees to make room for farmland and buildings so they could grow their own food and have a place large enough to live and learn. At first they protested loudly. They believed that an education was their ticket away from the many years they spent in toil during slavery. But when Washington picked up the first axe and led the way through the forest of trees, they followed. This is the same land that Tuskegee University resides on today.

Along with my first cousin and coauthor, Gloria Yvonne Jackson, in June of 2006, I returned to Tuskegee to dedicate our book, "Timeless Treasures-- Reflections of God's Word in the Wisdom of Booker T. Washington," at the gravesite of our great-grandfather. We created this book to celebrate 150 years since his birth, and to shed light on his work. In the chapter on economic development Gloria writes: "The concept of an ownership society is not a new one in the black community. Long before the establishment of the National Urban

League, black economic-development corporations, black chambers of commerce, and the various black business associations that today are in operation around the nation, Booker T. Washington spearheaded a group of black businessmen and formed the National Negro Business League. Shortly before he died, Booker T. Washington expressed that he was most proud of the fact that by 1910 roughly 2,500,000 black Americans were living in homes they owned, that black farmers owned and operated more than a billion dollars worth of cultivated farms, and that black businesses were thriving throughout the country. As cited in the publication, *Christian Business Legends*, by the year 1905, Tuskegee had produced more self-made millionaires than Yale, Harvard and Princeton combined." That to him was true freedom. As he once said, "The individual that can do something that the world wants done will make his way regardless of his race."

Sarah Washington O'Neal Rush is a fourth generation, direct descendant of Booker T. Washington. She is a San Leandro-based motivational speaker, life coach and writer. Contact her at 510-278-1634 for more information.