UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT

ADMINISTRATIVE AND HISTORICAL DATA, PART I

RECONSTRUCTION OF SLAVE CABIN

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON NATIONAL MONUMENT

J. J. Kirkwood, Historian
and
Chester L. Brooks, Superintendent
June, 1959
HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT

ADMINISTRATIVE AND HISTORICAL DATA, PART I

RECONSTRUCTION OF SLAVE CABIN

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON NATIONAL MONUMENT

RECOMMENDED

Chief, EODC

Date

Regional Director

Date

Director

Date

APPROVED

Superintendent

Date
HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT

ADMINISTRATIVE AND HISTORICAL DATA, PART I

RECONSTRUCTION OF SLAVE CABIN

BOCKER T. WASHINGTON NATIONAL MONUMENT

J. J. Kirkwood, Historian

and

Chester L. Brooks, Superintendent

June, 1959
TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. ADMINISTRATIVE DATA
   A. Slave cabin reconstruction
      1. Justification for reconstruction
      2. Proposed use of the reconstructed cabin
      3. Provisions for operating the cabin
      4. Cost for rehabilitating the structure and grounds
   Page 1

II. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SITE
   A. Geographic location of Booker T. Washington cabin
   B. Synopsis of general history of the site
   C. Detailed documentation of site
   D. Sequence of historical investigation
   E. Specific location and ground plan
   F. General data on type and period of construction
   G. Specific details
   H. Furnishings
   I. Personal effects
   J. Appurtenances
   Bibliography

Page 1
Page 6
Page 9
Page 9
Page 13
Page 13
Page 13
Page 16
Page 16
Page 16
Page 19
Page 25
Page 25
Page 25
Page 25
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>ILLUSTRATIONS</strong></th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 1</strong></td>
<td>West end of present replica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 2</strong></td>
<td>Cabin proposed to be reconstructed - The cabin in which Washington formerly thought he was born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 3</strong></td>
<td>The cabin in which Washington &quot;now thinks&quot; he was born</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 4</strong></td>
<td>Portion of front or east side of cabin proposed to be reconstructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 5</strong></td>
<td>Sketch showing relation of birthplace site and proposed reconstruction site in relation to Burroughs house site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 6</strong></td>
<td>Vegetational and Historic Base Map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 7</strong></td>
<td>Area Map of Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 8</strong></td>
<td>Site of birthplace cabin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 9</strong></td>
<td>Sketch showing relation of proposed reconstruction, Burroughs house and locust trees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 10</strong></td>
<td>Sketch showing interior of cabin proposed to be reconstructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 11</strong></td>
<td>Foundation of Burch Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 12</strong></td>
<td>Foundation of Burch Hall removed and area seeded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 13</strong></td>
<td>East side of cabin to be reconstructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 14</strong></td>
<td>North side of cabin to be reconstructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 15</strong></td>
<td>West side of cabin to be reconstructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Figure 16</strong></td>
<td>South side of cabin to be reconstructed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I. ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

A. Slave cabin reconstruction

This proposed reconstruction is to replace the "replica", Building No. 1, which is presently at the site.

1. Justification for reconstruction

A stanza from Paul Lawrence Dunbar's poem "Booker T. Washington" has been adopted for the concluding portion of our Statement of Significance.

A poor Virginia cabin gave the seed,
And from its dark and lowly door there came
A peer of princes in the world's acclaim,
A master spirit for the nation's need.  

In the approved Master Plan Development Outline and the MISSION 66 Prospectus, we state that the present replica of the birthplace cabin is inaccurate and that the cabin is to be reconstructed. The replica is not only historically inaccurate, but it has deteriorated so badly that it must be dismantled for visitor safety (Figure 1).

You will note that the title of this report is Reconstruction of Slave Cabin at Booker T. Washington National Monument and not Reconstruction of Booker T. Washington Birthplace Cabin. As you will see in Section II, Historical Data, of this report, there is what we believe to be sufficient historical evidence to indicate that Booker T. Washington's birthplace cabin was not at the site of the present replica. We are also reasonably certain from historical data that the cabin (Figure 2) which is inaccurately identified as Booker T. Washington's birthplace cabin in Washington's Story of My Life and Work, is actually the cabin that stood at the site of the present replica. Although justification for reconstruction would have been much stronger if this had been the birthplace cabin, nevertheless there are compelling reasons for reconstructing the cabin at this site and not attempting a reconstruction at the supposed birthplace site.

a. We have no accurate concept of the exterior of Booker T. Washington's birthplace cabin. It could conceivably have been one story, as in Figure 3, or one and a half stories as in Figure 2. We can make an authentic reconstruction of Figure 2, as we not only have the pictures (Figures 2 and 4) but also have two men, the Robertsons, who lived on the

1. The Complete Poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1915
West end of present replica
Cabin proposed to be reconstructed - the "cabin in which Washington formerly thought he was born" (Outlook Magazine)
The cabin in which Washington "now thinks" he was born (Outlook Magazine)
Portion of front or east side of cabin proposed to be reconstructed
place after the Burroughs left and dismantled the cabin shown in Figure 2. Fortunately both are carpenters and have expressed an interest in reconstructing the cabin as it was. With proper supervision we know this could be done.

b. At the Master Plan Conference held in the Park on August 19, 1958, some of the participants felt that all the plantation buildings should be reconstructed. There was not full agreement on this, but all agreed that the absence of any historical remains and the importance of the cabin to the birthplace story makes its reconstruction a necessity. \(^2\) It will be the only structure portraying the historical significance of the Monument, and it will offer the best opportunity to set forth the ennobling aspects of Washington's efforts to elevate himself and his people.

2. Proposed use of the reconstructed cabin

As outlined in the approved Museum Prospectus supplement, "Burroughs Plantation Report," the outdoor exhibits will carry the burden of presenting the story related to Booker T. Washington's life as a slave. The following, from page 13 of the Burroughs report, indicates the intended use of the cabin in our interpretive program:

Station 5: The Replica - Booker T. Washington's birthplace Cabin

Leaflet:

Three slave cabin sites are visible from here. According to the Robertsons, who purchased the plantation from the Burroughs, Booker was born in a cabin at Site 2, but since it was in such poor condition, Booker and his family moved into the cabin at the site of the present replica. Little is known of cabin No. 3 except that it too was slave quarters.

To heighten the dramatic effect of the cabin, we contemplate using a talking label inside the cabin. The major portion of the brief talk would be Booker's description of his birthplace, introduced by a sentence or two mentioning the significance of the log cabin in American history.

---

2. File D18 - Memorandum from Supt. to Regional Dir., 9-2-58 w/copy of Master Plan Conference Report
The log cabin is a symbol of American democracy. It illustrates our belief in the value of the individual and in the idea that each man should be free to develop his innate ability. Booker T. Washington's life began in a lowly cabin like this.

The remainder of the material to be presented in the talk could be the same as that in the quote found in this section (Station 5) of the leaflet.

**Leaflet**

**Interior of the Replica:**

Except for the cookery items in the fireplace, no attempt has been made to furnish the cabin's interior. Perhaps these sentences from *Up From Slavery* will help you imagine how it was furnished:

The cabin was not only our living place, but was also used as the kitchen for the plantation. My mother was the plantation cook.... There was no cooking stove on our plantation and all the cooking for whites and slaves by my mother had to do over an open fireplace, mostly in pots and skillets.... In the center of the earthen floor there was a large deep opening covered with boards which was used as a place in which to store sweet potatoes during the winter.... John, my older brother, Amanda, my sister, and myself, had a pallet on the dirt floor, or to be more exact, we slept in and on a bundle of filthy rags laid down upon the dirt floor.

... ... ...

After the visitor gained the inspirational value of standing within a replica of the cabin in which Booker T. Washington possibly lived, and probably not too dissimilar from the cabin in which he was born, and after he had received greater understanding through the live or taped talk, he then passes directly to the site of the birthplace cabin, the next stop about 50 ft. further along the trail (Figure 8).

**Site 1.** When Booker T. Washington was at the plantation in 1903, "One of the settlers who was something of a wag, remarked that he had read in the newspapers that Mr. Washington was born in a house with a dirt floor. He said he didn't know if he could show him the house.

*Text has been submitted for this talk which conforms to the general ideas of this tentative text.*
Sketch showing relation of birthplace site and proposed reconstruction site in relation to Burroughs house site

GARDEN

PROPOSED RECONSTRUCTION

SITE 2

BURROUGHS HOUSE

SITE 1

- BIRTHPLACE CABIN

SPRING

FIG. 5
but the floor was still there."3 The dirt floor will be all we will have to interpret at this site, but the preparation the visitor has received in the reconstructed cabin will make the stop at the actual birthplace site more tangible and thus more inspiring to him.

3. Provisions for operating the cabin

No funds are programmed for refurbishing the cabin as the furnishings needed are so meagre (See page 25, Historical Data). It is hoped the cooking utensils can be obtained from the study collections of other National Park Service museums. Operation of the cabin will pose no special problem. It will be operated much in the manner of an interpretive shelter.

4. Cost for rehabilitating the structure and grounds

According to approved Project Construction Proposal B-1, Reconstruction of Slave Cabin, the cost would be $13,200. Since preparation of the PCD, we have obtained hewn oak logs from cabins of the same type and period as the proposed reconstruction. The availability of the Robertsons, who lived on the place and tore the cabin down, places a special urgency on getting this project underway so that greater accuracy can be achieved. Grover Robertson is 66 years of age and Peter is 72. Both are presently in good health and available upon sufficient notice for employment in the reconstruction. Both are carpenters.

In addition to the logs, we have what are probably the original stones for the chimney of the cabin to be reconstructed. Grover Robertson states that when he and his brother tore the cabin down they used the chimney stones to build a fireplace and chimney for his house on the hill above the present headquarters site, but within the Monument.4 When the present replica was built by the Booker T. Washington Birthplace Memorial they took the rocks from Grover’s chimney (the house was then abandoned) and used them for the chimney in the replica.5

An electric outlet and Mohawk massage repeater will have to be located in the loft of the cabin with provision for the sound to be heard in the cabin.

3. "Tuskegee's Principal at his old home," Tuskegee Student, October 3, 1908
4. Robertson, G., Interview March 5, 1958 (BTWWM files)
5. Interview with Rufus Holland (BTWWM files)
Site of birthplace cabin
II. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SITE

A. Geographic location of Booker T. Washington cabin

(See Figure 6, Vegetational and Historic Basis Map, and Figure 7, Map of general area of the State). The immediate site (Figure 1) is on a slightly sloping grassed area within about twelve feet of the Burroughs house site.

B. Synopsis of general history of the site

The plantation on which the cabin was located, now comprising the Booker T. Washington National Monument, was the property of Thomas Burroughs in 1833.6 He acquired it that year from Jesse Dillon. In 1850 James Burroughs, Booker's owner, bought the plantation.7

We do not know when the original cabin was constructed, but it is probable that either Thomas or James Burroughs built it.

The property remained in the Burroughs family till 1892 when John B. Robertson bought it. A son of John B., Grover Robertson, who is still living, dismantled the cabin about 1922 because its rotten condition made it a hazard.8

In 1936 Congressman Arthur W. Mitchell of Illinois, in company with a group interested in Washington, visited the birthplace and, according to reports, drove an iron stake at the site of the Washington cabin.9 We, however, have been unable as yet to locate anyone who remembers seeing the stake or knows where it was planted.

The birthplace plantation was put up for sale at public auction in 1945. Sidney J. Phillips was high bidder; through his efforts the area subsequently became a National Monument in June 1957.

C. Detailed documentation of site

We know the approximate location of four slave cabins on the plantation. In seeking the birthplace cabin, it is practically certain that it was one of the two cabins nearest the "big house," since Booker's mother was the plantation cook and her cabin was the kitchen.10 These two cabins were both only a few feet from the rear of the "big house."

8. Interview with Grover Robertson, March 27, 1959 (BTWNM files).
9. Interview with Mrs. Essie Smith, Rocky Mount, Va., Jan. 16, 1956
10. Up From Slavery, p. 3
Concerning these two cabins there exists a problem. According to Grover and Peter Robertson, Thomas Burroughs, a son of Booker’s owner, told their father that Booker was born in the cabin to the left of the house (Site 1, Figure 5), but that it was in such poor condition that he and his family later moved into the one at the right of the house (Site 2, Figure 5), the site of the present replica. Our knowledge of the birthplace cabin (at Site 1) consists only of Booker’s description of it in *Up From Slavery*, pages 1-5. We do know its location, within a few feet, because the Robertsons remember the chimney’s being there, though all the building was gone. (We do not know when it was removed, but it was not standing in 1893 when the Robertsons moved to the plantation).\(^{12}\)

Other evidence for this being the birthplace site comes from Mrs. Helen Menefee, of Rocky Mount, Virginia, whose mother, Mrs. Garrett, was born and reared on land joining the Monument. Mrs. Menefee said she and her mother went to see the present replica which Sidney J. Phillips built; Mrs. Menefee’s mother said it was in the wrong place, that it should be to the left rear of the Burroughs house, just at the place the Robertsons pointed out as the birthplace site.\(^{13}\)

Furthermore, when Booker visited the plantation in 1908 he was able to locate the site of the kitchen where he was born.\(^{14}\) The kitchen must have been at Site 1 (Figure 5) because the cabin at Site 2 was still standing in 1908 and would have been no trouble to find.

We know of no picture that we can be sure is of the birthplace cabin. (For more on this see below).

The function of the other cabin (Site 2, Figure 5) is still somewhat in doubt. Washington and his family may have lived in it for a time and it also seems probable that it was at one time used as a dining room by the Burroughs family. (This possibility is strengthened by the fact that there were fourteen children in the Burroughs family and their house was small). The report of Washington’s 1908 visit states “The old dining room, built of squared logs .... still stands.”\(^{15}\) In reminiscing during the visit Booker said “The old dining room .... is not nearly as large .... as it seemed to be once.”\(^{16}\) A picture of this cabin (Figure 2) appeared in Washington’s *The Story of my Life and Work*, published in 1908, and was designated as the birthplace cabin.

---

11. They are sons of John R. Robertson and lived on the plantation till around 1920. Interview March 5, 1958 – Notes on file BTWNN
12. Interview with Grover and Peter Robertson, Feb. 13, 1958 (Notes in BTWNN files)
13. Interview with Mrs. Menefee, April 15, 1959, Notes on file BTWNN
14. According to the report of the visit in the Tuskegee Student, October 3, 1908
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
In November of 1900, however, Outlook magazine began publishing serially the story of Washington's Life which was later published in book form as Up From Slavery; in the November 10 issue, the picture from The Story of My Life and Work was printed with the caption "The cabin in Virginia in which Mr. Washington, until recently, thought he was born," and on the opposite page the picture of another cabin (Figure 3) with the caption "The log cabin in which Mr. Washington now thinks he was born." The probable reason for the change in Washington's thinking as to the two cabins was this: Max Bennett Thrasher, who helped Washington prepare the articles for Outlook, pointed out to him that his description of the cabin in the first draft of the articles, especially in regard to the number of windows, did not coincide with the photograph in The Story of My Life and Work. We, however, also doubt for the following reasons, that the other picture (Figure 3) is of the actual birthplace cabin:

1. In correspondence between Thrasher and Washington, the former expresses doubt that a picture of the actual birthplace cabin can be obtained in time and suggests using a picture he has of a typical slave cabin. We could find no statement to prove or disprove that such a picture was used, but the possibility exists that it was.

2. It is very unlikely that a picture would have been taken of the cabin before 1893 (when we know it no longer existed) since Washington did not achieve wide enough fame till 1895 to make his birthplace of particular importance.

3. The cabin, with its round logs, is not in keeping with the hewn-log structure of other buildings on the Burroughs plantation.

As for the cabin to be reconstructed, we have two pictures of it (Figures 2 and 4) and the memory of the Robertsons to aid us with details. (They remember it well, since they lived on the plantation into the early 1920s.) One of the pictures (Figure 2) gives the west and north sides of the cabin while the other (Figure 4) shows a portion of the front or east side, including a part of the doorway.

We used several methods of authenticating the picture of the cabin. Booker and his family reportedly moved to (Figure 2). Before the Robertsons saw the photograph they gave us a description of the cabin which coincided in detail with the picture. And when we showed them the photograph they immediately said "That's it."

18. Henceforth "the cabin" will mean the one we propose to reconstruct.
19. Interview with Grover and Peter Robertson, March 5, 1958 - Notes on file at BTMM.
Furthermore, as tentative evidence that this picture is genuine, in correspondence between Emmett Scott, Washington's secretary, and Edgar Netter, who helped prepare The Story of My Life and Work, mention is made that John A. Washington, Booker's brother, had written to get a picture of the birthplace cabin.20 We do not know to whom John wrote, nor whether he received a picture, but it is possible that the one in The Story of My Life and Work was obtained this way. At any rate, the picture has to be of 1899 vintage or earlier - as mentioned previously, the book was published in 1900.

D. Sequence of historical investigation

The birthplace cabin, during the time Booker and his family lived there, served as the plantation kitchen, his mother was the cook.

We do not know what the cabin was used for between the time Booker and his family left (August 1865) and the time the Robertsons bought the plantation in 1892. While the Robertsons owned it, Grover and Peter's grandmother lived in it for about two years.21 The rest of the time it was used for storage till it was removed about 1922. The present replica was partially burned in 1950 when the Burroughs house burned.

E. Specific location and ground plan

Judging by the picture of the cabin (Figure 2) we estimate the dimensions to be 16 x 19 ft. See Figure 2 and sketch showing the relation of this cabin to the Burroughs house and locust trees. (Figure 9).

F. General data on type and period of construction

The cabin was of hewn oak logs and was probably constructed between the years 1833 and 1850. No known additions or alterations were made to the exterior of the cabin.

In 1893 it had a wooden floor and a storage room about 4 ft. wide running the width of the cabin was partitioned off. It was probably originally constructed this way. A door opened into this room just to the right of the front door as one entered; in the storage room in front of the door a ladder led up into the loft. (See diagram, Figure 10).

The present replica, built in 1948, was supposedly constructed on the original site of the cabin Booker moved into. The

21. Interview with Grover Robertson, April 17, 1959, Notes on file BTWM
Sketch showing relation of proposed reconstruction, Burroughs house and locust trees.

CABIN TO BE RECONSTRUCTED

BURROUGHS HOUSE

LOCUST TREES

FIGURE 9
Sketch showing interior of cabin to be reconstructed

FIG. 10
foundation, including a 20 inch concrete footing, was dug and poured by hand. A concrete slab, subsequently covered with a thin layer of dirt, made the floor; some leveling was probably necessary before the slab was poured. Not only was this site disturbed, but so was the birthplace site. In putting in a foundation for a building that was never completed (Figure 11) Phillips’ organization bulldozed over at least part of the birthplace site. We removed the abortive foundation and seeded the area (Figure 12).

0. Specific details

Dimensions: Judging by the picture of the cabin (Figure 2) we estimate the dimensions to be 16' x 18'. See Figure 2 and sketch showing the relation of this cabin to the Burroughs house and locust trees, (Figure 9).

Roof: Pole rafters were used; they were covered with rived shingles with 16 inches "showing," put on in what is called "board fashion." The pitch, according to Peter Robertson, was 5/12.

Floor: The original cabin at this site had a wooden floor. But for interpretive purposes, the interior of the cabin will be made like the birthplace cabin according to Washington's description in Up From Slavery; therefore the floor will be dirt with the potato hole in the center. The dimensions of the hole are not known, but we believe the one in the present replica (about 2' x 3' and 2 feet deep) is correct. For sketch of the interior of the original cabin, see Figure 10.

Fireplace and chimney: Here again we do not know the exact size of these, but by relying on the memory of the Robertsons and the size of the fireplace and chimney in other slave cabins of the area, we can determine them fairly accurately. Since Booker's mother was the plantation cook and her cabin was the plantation kitchen, the fireplace must have been large enough to do the cooking. Regarding rocks for the chimney, see page 9, paragraph 3.

Windows: See Figures 14, 15 and 16.

Door: The door was planked up and down, with a 2-brace on the inside and hung on long "shop made" gate hinges. We have obtain-

22. According to Willie Edwards, Union Hall, Va., who supervised the construction. Interview April 1, 1959 - Notes on file BTWMN
23. Interview with Peter and Grover Robertson, March 12, 1959 - Notes on file BTWMN
24. Interview with Robertsons, March 5, 1958 - Notes on file BTWMN
25. Up From Slavery, op.cit. p.2
26. Interview with Grover Robertson, March 27, 1959 - Notes on file BTWMN
Foundation of Burch Hall

FIGURE 11

Foundation of Burch Hall removed and area needed.

FIGURE 12
FIG.: East side of cabin to be reconstructed.
FIG. North side of cabin to be reconstructed

SLAVE CABIN, NORTH END

10'
10'
7'
7'
6'
7'
7'
7'
9'
10'
11'
11'
SLAVE CABIN
SOUTH END

South side of cabin to be reconstructed
ed hinges from a cabin we dismantled in the vicinity; the Robertsons say they are similar to the ones in this cabin. The door was hinged to swing to the right as one entered.27

Left: The loft was very low (See Figures 2 and 4 for location of ceiling joists). These joists, according to the Robertsons, had a head on each of the bottom edges. We have joists of this kind and ceiling boards of the original kind obtained from cabins we have dismantled.

Chinking: The logs, according to the Robertsons, were chinked with flat rocks set in the cracks at an angle, or "plainchways;" the rocks were then pointed and/or covered with mortar made of lime and sand.

II. Furnishings

We plan to make the exterior of the reconstruction just as it was (as in Figure 2), but for interpretive purposes we will use Booker's description of the birthplace cabin for constructing the interior; that is, there will be a dirt floor, with the potato hole in the center.28 The furniture, other than the cooking utensils in the fireplace, were very meager. Booker says he slept on a pile of rags in one corner.29 There will be no furnishings except the fireplace items. These will include a bar set in the chimney from which a cooking-pot chain is suspended; a "two-eared" pot of 2 - 3 gallon size; and a skillet of the kind used to bake bread. This skillet had a heavy lid and sides about 2" above the lid so coals could be put on the top.

I. Personal effects

There were no known personal effects other than the flax skirt and the leather-topped wooden shoes Booker speaks of in *Up From Slavery.*

J. Appurtenances

The rear projection of the Burroughs house was only about twelve feet from the front or east side of the cabin we propose to reconstruct. The garden was about 6 or 8 feet behind the cabin (See Figure 9 for relation of Burroughs house, three slave cabins, garden and spring). Another slave cabin, in front of and to the right of the "big house" possibly served as the "weave" cabin.30

27. Interview with Peter Robertson, Feb. 13, 1958 - Notes at FMM
28. *Up From Slavery,* p.4
29. Ibid., p.6
30. During his 1908 visit to the plantation Booker spoke of the "weave cabin." Reported in *Tuskegee Student* Oct. 3, 1908
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Up From Slavery, New York, Doubleday, Page & Co., 1901

Papers, Library of Congress

Outlook Magazine, November, 1900

Courthouse Records, Rocky Mount, Virginia; Deed Book 13, Will Book 21.