

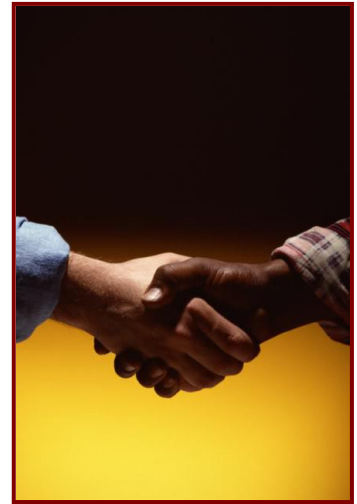
A Promise Kept

Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856 – 1915) was an American educator, author, orator, and political leader. Representative of the last generation of black leaders born in slavery, he spoke on behalf of the large majority of blacks who lived in the South but had lost the right to vote.

In his book, *Up from Slavery*, Washington describes meeting an ex-slave from Virginia:

I found that this man had made a contract with his master, two or three years previous to the Emancipation Proclamation, to the effect that the slave was to be permitted to buy himself, by paying so much per year for his body; and while he was paying for himself, he was to be permitted to labor where and for whom he pleased.

Finding that he could secure better wages in Ohio, he went there. When freedom came, he was still in debt to his master some \$300. Notwithstanding that the Emancipation Proclamation freed him from any obligation to his master, this black man walked the greater portion of the distance back to where his old master lived in Virginia, and placed the last dollar, with interest, in his hands.



In talking to me about this, the man told me that he knew that he did not have to pay his debt, but that he had given his word to his master, and his word he had never broken. He felt that he could not enjoy his freedom till he had fulfilled his promise.

What a beautiful story! It suggests a couple of conclusions:

1. The former slave's integrity. How many people today – under less dramatic circumstances, suddenly finding that legally they no longer owed a debt – would pay the money back anyway because they had promised to do so? It is to be hoped that all would, but, sadly, such is not the case. Honesty and credibility are twin pillars in character construction.
2. The respect that must have existed between the slave and his master, who allowed the man to purchase his freedom by working for someone else, and the former slave's commitment to honor the arrangement, regardless of the law. Trustworthiness is a virtue. A person can prove his or her trustworthiness by fulfilling an assigned responsibility.

So not only is the account given by Washington a beautiful example of the relationship of two men from differing economic and social strata, but it contains important reminders of qualities we should seek to emulate.

– Beecher Hunter