

## INTRODUCTION

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON, 1856-1915

**H**ISTORIANS HAVE GENERALLY RECOGNIZED Booker Taliaferro Washington as the outstanding American black man of his day and the supreme black example of the success hero. Washington believed that his life, as related in his autobiography *Up from Slavery*, was a model, not an exception, and that his famous Atlanta Compromise address in 1895 was the charter for racial peace, not an acceptance of second-class status. As violence swirled around black southerners, Washington remained strangely optimistic about race relations. Whites could look to Washington for calming words, reassurance, accommodation; humble and oppressed blacks could vicariously share Washington's success and power. The founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama sought always to say what people wanted to hear, and except for a few black and white critics, Americans accepted him as the spokesman of his race, the Negro of the hour. His story, however, was a deeper and more complex one. At one level of reality, there was indeed a struggle to rise from slavery, to gain an education, to plant a school in the Alabama Black Belt, to win powerful allies and raise money. In his more ruthless struggle to fight off his critics and to retain his power, however, Washington showed a different personality. Behind his smiling eyes lurked a multifaceted essence with all the complications of the human condition and the additional complexity of being black in white America.

Washington began life about April 5, 1856, as a slave on the James Burroughs farm near Hale's Ford, Virginia, the son of a house servant and an unidentified white man. After emancipation in 1865, he went