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Viola Knapp Ruffner¹
to Margaret James Murray Washington

Baltimore Jan 21st/96

Dear Mrs Washington Your two letters in. I send the "widows mite" & hope it will be fruitful. Tell your pupils Be sure you are right, then go ahead, with the motto upward & onward. I have lost the use of one eye, & am rapidly losing the other. Hope you will never be thus afflicted. Tell Booker I have been looking for his letter, telling of the places & speeches & receipts of his trip, & when he reached home. Shall continue to look. Cannot write more. May you all be blessed.
Your friend

V. Ruffner

ALS Con. 116 BTW Papers DLC.

¹Viola Knapp Ruffner (1815-1904) was the second wife of General Lewis Ruffner, who owned the mines in Malden, W.Va., where BTW worked as a child. Born in Arlington, Vt., Viola Knapp attended an academy in Bennington. After graduation, she taught at the academy for two years and then at schools in North Carolina and New Jersey. At the latter school she headed the English department until she founded her own school, which she later gave up on account of poor health. While recuperating at home, Viola Knapp learned that the widowed General Ruffner was seeking a governess for his children, and she applied for the position, expecting to remain only until she was well enough to resume her profession. Her marriage to the general so disappointed several of his older children that they never entered his home again. Shy and sensitive but strong-willed, Mrs. Ruffner quickly gained a reputation for strictness partly because of the rapid turnover of her servants.

"I had heard so much about Mrs. Ruffner's severity that I was almost afraid to see her, and trembled when I went into her presence," BTW recalled years later. (See above, 1:237.) He was so anxious to leave the dirt and dark of the mines, however, that he urged his mother to apply in his name for the job of Mrs. Ruffner's houseboy. Thus, just at the beginning of his impressionable adolescent years, BTW entered an upper-class white household whose mistress was the prototypical New England Yankee schoolmarm, devoted to the Puritan precepts of thrift, work, truth, and cleanliness. Though the youth left Mrs. Ruffner's employ occasionally during the years he worked for her, he always returned; and a strong and lasting bond of affection and respect grew between them. Mrs. Ruffner wrote years later: "He never needed correction or the word 'Hurry!' or 'Come!' for he was always ready for his book. There was nothing peculiar in his habits except that he was always in his place and never known to do anything out of the way, which I think has been his course all thru life." (Willets, "Slave Boy and Leader of His Race," 3.) BTW's passion for education and self-improvement probably appealed to the lonely woman, whose son Ernest and daughter Stella were away at school. She allowed her servant to attend school, gave him books and