



# Henry Tanner and Booker T. Washington

## *The Iowa Story Behind the Portrait*

by Jack Lufkin

A SMALL but active group of black women in Iowa brought about the creation of a portrait of a preeminent black leader by a preeminent black painter of the same generation. The painting, owned by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is a portrait of Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856–1915) by noted black artist Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937).

Washington is perhaps best known for his success in developing Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in Alabama into a flourishing and nationally prominent educational institution for blacks. There, the artist's sister, Hallie Tanner Dillon, was the campus physician. Washington visited Tanner in Paris in 1899 while vacationing in Europe and admired the painter's success. "My acquaintance with Mr. Tanner," he wrote in his popular autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, "reenforced in my mind the truth which I am constantly trying

to impress upon our students at Tuskegee — and on our people throughout the country . . . any man, regardless of colour, will be recognized and rewarded just in proportion as he learns to do something well — learns to do it better than someone else."

This message was one that Washington espoused on his national speaking tours. Addressing various public groups and chautauquas, he championed self-help and accommodation, emphasizing economic opportunity and education for blacks over civil rights advocacy. Washington brought this message to Iowa as well. In 1904 he visited Buxton, Iowa, where many black miners lived and worked. In early March 1911, Washington again came to Iowa. Sponsored by the Northwest Teachers Association in Sioux City, he addressed a crowd of twenty-five hundred on the value of black economic efforts and self-help. The *Sioux City Journal* thought his two-hour speech was impressive and called him "a prophet out of the wilderness." The *Iowa Bystander*, a Des Moines newspaper owned and operated by blacks, covered Washington's stay in Des Moines. Its editors said he infused spirit and optimism in a black community divided by strife and beleaguered by white indifference

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Left: *Portrait of Booker T. Washington*, by Henry Ossawa Tanner. Painted in 1917 for the Iowa Federation of Colored Women's Club, the portrait measures 31 $\frac{3}{4}$ "  $\times$  25 $\frac{5}{8}$ ". The oil painting is now on loan from the Museum Bureau, State Historical Society of Iowa to the Philadelphia Museum of Art for an exhibit on Tanner.

and hostility: "It was a pleasure to see us together for once."

Washington's wife, Margaret, also carried this message to Iowa. In 1914, as president of the National Association of Colored Women, she spoke at St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Des Moines. There she stressed the importance of charitable activities by women's clubs and the need for racial cooperation. She also edited the "National Notes" newsletter for the National Association of Colored Women and through this group worked closely with another black leader — Iowan Sue Brown.

Born in Virginia in 1877, Brown attended high school in Ottumwa and later moved to Des Moines with her husband, attorney S. Joe

Brown. There she became involved with the Colored Women's Clubs, founded a welfare agency called the Richard Allen Aid Society, and served as a district superintendent of the AME Sunday School and later as president of the Des Moines chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She also served as business manager for the National Association of Colored Women.

Shortly after Booker T. Washington's death in 1915, Brown wrote to Henry Tanner asking if he would paint a posthumous portrait of Washington for the Iowa Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, over which she presided. Tanner was happy to oblige. "I usually ask one thousand to twelve hundred," he replied, "but would make it for you for \$500 if



Sue Brown (middle row, far left) at 1936 convention of the Iowa Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. On behalf of this group, Brown had asked Henry Tanner if he would paint a portrait of black leader Booker T. Washington. When he agreed, Brown set about to raise the artist's fee. Brown was assisted by Historical Department curator Edgar Harlan. The federation's records are kept in the Archives of the State Historical Society of Iowa (Des Moines).

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HENRY OSSAWA TANNER PAPERS, ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Artist Henry Ossawa Tanner, well known for his religious art and paintings such as *The Banjo Lesson*, painted Booker T. Washington's posthumous portrait in 1917. Tanner lived much of his life in Paris.

you wished me." Brown now faced the task of raising the money. Assisted by Curator Edgar Harlan of the Historical Department in Des Moines, she set up the Booker T. Washington Memorial Fund. Federation members solicited donations, starting at five dollars each.

In 1917 the portrait was unveiled at a federation meeting in Ottumwa and then transferred by Harlan to the Iowa Hall of History in Des Moines. The painting was a respected addition to the portrait gallery. Tanner was a recognized and successful artist, whose paintings won international prizes and hung in the Louvre, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Although Tanner's painting of Washington is not considered among his best, it is a work of considerable historical significance given the eminence of both painter and subject.

The portrait of Washington is now on loan from the State Historical Society of Iowa to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which has mounted an exhibit of Tanner's work. The Tanner exhibit will later travel to the Detroit Institute of Arts, the High Museum of Atlanta, and the Fine Arts Museum in San Francisco.

Meanwhile, a museum exhibit about the struggle by black Americans for greater freedom and economic opportunity will open in April in the State Historical Building in Des Moines. "Field to Factory" is a traveling Smithsonian Institution exhibit that chronicles the Great Migration of blacks from the South to the East and Midwest. □