

## Booker T. Washington meets the Mormons

By Gary B. Hansen  
(July 5, 2012)

Recently, I read the <http://www.mormonnews.org> article entitled "Mormonism 101: FAQ." One of the questions is: "What is the position of the Church regarding race relations?" Answer: "The gospel of Jesus Christ is for everyone. The *Book of Mormon* states, 'Black and white, bond and free, male and female; ... all are alike unto God' (2 Nephi 26:33). This is the Church's official teaching. ... The Church unequivocally condemns racism, including any and all past racism by individuals both inside and outside the Church. ... Let us all recognize that each of us is a son or daughter of our Father in Heaven, who loves all of His children."

Not long afterwards, our home teacher, Gerald E. Jones, a retired LDS Church Educational System Institute Director at Stanford, UC Berkeley and Yale, visited us and brought his newly acquired copy of *The Booker T. Washington papers, Volume 12:1912-14*, eds. Louis R. Harland and Raymond W. Smock (University of Illinois Press, 1982) and read us the account Booker T. Washington (BTW) wrote about his visit to Salt Lake City in March 1913, nearly a century ago. While reading Vol. 12, Gerald E. Jones was surprised to find upon reading pages 149 – 153 that Booker T. Washington had made a two-day visit to Salt Lake City in March 1913 and had sent his written account to the Editor of the *New York Age* for publication. Gerald E. Jones told us he had never before seen or heard anything about Booker T. Washington's visit to Salt Lake City and his interaction with the Mormons, and felt that Washington's account should be made available to all who might be interested in reading it. He also noted that a recently published book about Mormons and African-Americans that had also been published by the University of Illinois Press, made no reference to this 1913 visit of BTW to Salt Lake City either.

Booker T. Washington, according to his biography on the web site [biography.com](http://biography.com), the Internet edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, was born on April 5, 1856, in Franklin County, Virginia, and died in Tuskegee, Alabama on November 14, 1915. He was "an American educator, author, orator, and political leader. He was the dominant figure in the African-American community in the United States from 1890 to 1915. Representative of the last generation of black leaders born in slavery, he spoke on behalf of blacks living in the south." The biography provides the following summary of his early life, education, and career:

He was born in a slave hut but, after emancipation, moved with his family to Malden, W.Va. Dire poverty ruled out regular schooling; at age nine he began working, first in a salt furnace and later in a coal mine. Determined to get an education, he enrolled at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in

Virginia (1872), working as a janitor to help pay expenses. He graduated in 1875 and returned to Malden, where for two years he taught children in a day school and adults at night. Following studies at Wayland Seminary, Washington, D.C. (1878–79), he joined the staff of Hampton.

In 1881 Washington was selected to head a newly established normal school for blacks at Tuskegee, an institution with two small converted buildings, no equipment, and very little money. Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute became a monument to his life's work. At his death 34 years later, it had more than 100 well-equipped buildings, some 1,500 students, a faculty of nearly 200 teaching 38 trades and professions, and an endowment of approximately \$2 million. (Biography.com accessed on March 17, 2012)

(<http://www.biography.com/people/booker-t-washington-9524663> )

A copy of Booker T. Washington's account of his visit to Salt Lake City and the Mormons, as found in Volume 12, pp. 149 – 153, follows:

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To the Editor of the *New York Age*

[Salt Lake City, Utah, ca. Mar. 28, 1913]<sup>1</sup>

For a long while I have been anxious to get right into the midst of the Mormons to see what kind of people they are, what they look like, what they are doing, and in what respect they are succeeding. I have been spending two of the busiest days that I have ever spent in my life in the very midst of these people. They have been mighty interesting days, and I have seen some mighty interesting people. The leaders of the Mormon church from President Smith down have gone out of their way to show me kindnesses and to make my trip here successful.

I am not going to discuss the Mormon religion as I am not a theologian; I shall have to leave that to others. I am always interested in studying and observing people regardless of their religion. One of the Mormon bishops called to see me and from him I got some mighty interesting information that ought to prove of value to our race.

In speaking of the Mormons, my readers must remember that it was only sixty-six years ago that, led by Brigham Young, 150 people came into this country when it was a wilderness. They traveled in ox carts over a thousand miles from the Missouri River. The Mormon church itself was organized in New York State only eighty-four years ago. From 150 people, hardy pioneers who entered Utah sixty-six years ago, the number has grown year by year until in Utah there are now over three hundred thousand Mormons, and they have certainly made the desert blossom as a rose. I have never been among a more intelligent, healthy, clean, progressive, moral set of people than these people are. All through Utah they have turned the desert into gardens and orchards. Wherever one finds a Mormon colony there he finds evidence of hard work and wealth.

INTERESTING TALKS WITH MORMON LEADERS

The Mormon leaders here told me in detail about the policy that they pursued when they first came here, and here is a great lesson for our people in the South and throughout this country. From the first the Mormons consistently and persistently pursued the policy of having their people get hold of land, to settle on the soil and become farmers. They knew that if they once got possession of the soil and taught their

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people how to become successful farmers that they would be laying the foundation so secure that they could not be disturbed. Several of the leaders told me that when they first came into this country that there was great temptation to exploit the gold, silver and copper mines, but they would not let their people do this, but held them to the soil. It is only within the last few years that the Mormons have begun to get wealth out of the mineral resources of the country, notwithstanding they have known all along that this wealth existed. Now that they are in possession of the soil and have taught their people how to become successful farmers they say they can afford to go into mining.

There are two parallels between the Negro and the Mormons. First, as my readers already know, the Mormons were most inhumanly persecuted almost from the first organization of their church. This was especially true in Missouri and Illinois. Hundreds of their followers were put to death. The courts gave them little protection. The mob that either killed or wounded the Mormons was seldom, if ever, punished. They were an easy mark for any inhuman brute who wanted to either kill or wound them. Joseph Smith himself, the founder of the church, was murdered in Illinois. But out of this inhuman and unjust treatment grew the strength of these people. The more they were punished the more determined they became to succeed. Without opposition and injustice, I question whether the Mormon church could now be in its present flourishing condition. They were deprived of their property as well as their lives in their early years, but the more they were persecuted the closer they banded themselves together and the more determined they were to succeed. Persecutions advertised this little sect to the world. The result was that through persecution their numbers increased instead of being diminished.

THE PROPER WAY TO STUDY GROUPS OF PEOPLE

The second parallel between the Mormon and the Negro is this. These people, I am sure, have been misrepresented before the world. I have learned by experience and observation that it is never safe to pass final judgment upon a people until one has had an opportunity to get into the real life of these people. The Negro is suffering to-day just as the Mormons are suffering and have suffered, because people from the outside have advertised the worst in connection with Mormon life and they have seldom called attention to the best in connection with the

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life of the Mormons. And then I have learned, too, that no person outside a race or outside a group of people can ever really know that race or that group of people until he gets into their homes and has a chance to observe their men and women and their children, has a chance to partake of their hospitality and get into their inner life. There are many people to-day who consider themselves wise on the condition of the Negro, who are really afraid to go into a Negro home, who never go into a Negro church or Sunday School, who have never met the colored people in any social circle; hence such people know little about the moral standards and activities of the colored people. The same, I am convinced, is true regarding the Mormons. The people who speak in the most disrespectful terms of these people are the ones who know least about them.

I am convinced that the Mormons are not an immoral people. No immoral people could have such strong, fine bodies as these people, nor such vigorous and alert minds as they. It has been my privilege to address schools and universities in nearly every part of America, and I say without hesitation that I have never addressed a college anywhere where the students were more alert, more responsive, more intelligent than is true of the students in these Mormon colleges. I was hardly prepared for the over-generous and rapturous reception that was given me at the State University, the students of which for the most part are Mormons, and I had the same experience in addressing the private schools and other institutions conducted by Mormons.

#### MEETS A DAUGHTER OF JOSEPH SMITH

I met, for example, one of the daughters of Joseph H. Smith, the successor to Brigham Young and now the head of the church. I was told that she was one of forty-nine children, but she was an intelligent, modest, fine young woman with a strong body and an alert mind. I was told that the other forty-eight children were just as healthy and strong and alert as she. Just how many wives President Joseph H. Smith has or had I do not know. I am not going into the subject of plural wives, but I am simply stating facts and giving my impressions.

These Mormons have first class schools of every character, and they are pushing the matter of technical and industrial education to a stronger degree than we are in the South among the colored people. In fact, time and time again I was told that they learned their methods

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for the most part from Hampton, Tuskegee and similar institutions. I was nearly taken off my feet when I went into a class in the university and the teacher showed me a large piece of pasteboard, with the pictures of our students at Tuskegee at work in the various industrial departments. They said they were taking this as their model.

The Mormons have recently begun a systematic effort to give their young people training in gymnastics with a view of strengthening their bodies. Here again the colored people, especially in the schools of the South, can learn a great lesson. Everywhere in our colored schools we ought to have systematic and constant training in gymnastics.

There are about a thousand colored people in Salt Lake City, and they are above the average in intelligence and in other respects. The colored women especially strike me as exceptionally intelligent, more so, I think, than the men. They have here an Art and Music Club which I had the privilege of addressing, composed of very intelligent women. They have two good churches with very intelligent ministers. The main weakness in the life of the colored people in this city, as in some others I have gone to, grows out of the fact that instead of having a commercial organization to promote business and industrial interests of the colored people they have a club house for which I am told they pay a rental of \$150 a month, where the men are encouraged to drink and gamble. It seems that they cannot throw away their money fast enough, but in order to help it along they rent a house for \$150 a month for the purpose of helping them to dispose with their money faster. I have spoken to them plainly about this mistake, and I believe that a change for the better will take place. I met several colored men who have accumulated a respectable fortune and who are in good business enterprises.

I think it will interest my readers to know that there are colored Mormons in Utah. I met several of these. Many of them came here in the old days, in fact Brigham Young brought colored people with him to this country, and they or their descendants have remained. Of course in the old days plural wives were not prohibited by law, but I have made careful inquiry and could find no case where a colored man ever had more than one wife. It seems to have been the custom in the old days that a man could not take a second or third or fourth wife without the consent of his first wife, and I was told that no colored woman in Utah would ever give her consent for her husband to take a second wife.

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I met one colored man who came out here in the early days who is now 82 years of age. He is a staunch Mormon, and neither the Baptist church nor the Methodist church can get hold of him. He came here from Mississippi. He is a fine looking old fellow, a kind of colored Brigham Young. He has a farm worth \$25,000, and lives in the midst of a Mormon colored colony of which he is the leader. I am told that the Mormon church treats the colored people well. I will, in my next letter, discuss the Mormons further, and call attention to their creed, and so forth.<sup>2</sup>

New York *Age*, Apr. 17, 1913, 1, 2.

<sup>1</sup> The *Star of Zion*, Apr. 17, 1913, carried the same article with the dateline: "Salt Lake City, March 28."

<sup>2</sup> In another letter on his western trip, BTW included the Mormon creed, which he had received from Bishop John M. Whittaker. BTW stated that while he was not a Mormon and had "no immediate intention of becoming one," he did find much in the creed that appealed to him. He went on to say that he found no evidence that polygamy was being practiced. Aside from the matter of religion, BTW was impressed with the Mormon control of land, mines, banking, and all aspects of business. "They say," he wrote, "and I think wisely, that economic progress must go hand in hand with religious progress." (New York *Age*, Apr. 24, 1913, 2. A typed copy of the letter, dated Mar. 27, 1913, is in Con. 835, BTW Papers, DLC.)

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In the second footnote on page 153, at the end of this article, the editors indicated that BTW had written a second letter about his visit with the Mormons, in which he had mentioned the "Mormon creed" [the "Articles of Faith"?]. Apparently, this second letter was quoted from in the footnote, but the full contents of the letter were not included in Volume 12. It appears that BTW was "impressed with the Mormons," and thought that their "economic progress must go hand in hand with religious progress."

Booker T. Washington died on November 14, 1915, less than three years after his visit to Utah.

It appears that President Joseph F. Smith and the other church leaders who interacted with Booker T. Washington when he visited Utah in 1913 were adhering to the same principles stated by President Gordon B. Hinckley in 2006 and restated by the Church on its official website in 2012: <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/mormonism-101:FAQ>. Question: What is the position of the Church regarding race relations? Answer:

"The Church unequivocally condemns racism, including any and all past racism by individuals both inside and outside the Church. In 2006, then Church president Gordon B. Hinckley declared that 'no man who makes disparaging remarks concerning those of another race can consider himself a true disciple of Christ. Nor can he consider himself to be in harmony with the teachings of the Church.

Let us all recognize that each of us is a son or daughter of our Father in Heaven, who loves all of His children.”

After reading Booker T. Washington’s article about his visit to Salt Lake City, published in *The New York Age*, I decided that it would be interesting to read his autobiography in order to learn more about him. When I looked up BTW on Amazon.com, I found that his autobiography, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*, was available for free, and could be downloaded to my Kindle at no cost. I immediately downloaded it and am now in the process of reading more about him. This book is proving to be an enjoyable read, and helps me to better understand this important figure in American history.

While putting together this paper I came across an interesting article about Mormons written by Jennifer Schuessler and published in the *New York Times* on July 2, 2012. In her article, entitled: “The Mormon Lens on American History,” the author states that

For a century and one-half Mormonism has been something of a paradox in the History of the American West,” especially to professional scholars unsure of what to make of the religion Joseph Smith founded in 1830 or the communities created by what Mormon scripture itself described as a” peculiar people.”

But now, as Mitt Romney’s candidacy prompts talk of a “Mormon moment,” a growing cadre of young scholars of Mormonism are enjoying their own turn in the sun, and not just on the nation’s op-ed pages. Books relating to Mormon history are appearing in the catalogs of top academic presses, while secular universities are adding courses, graduate fellowships and endowed chairs.

“People are seeing right now that Mormonism is a great laboratory for studying all kinds of questions about religion and the modern world,” said Patrick Mason, the chairman of Mormon studies at Claremont Graduate University in California...

In light of this new environment and increased scholarly interest in Mormonism, I believe there is also a need for wider circulation of Booker T. Washington’s account of the economic and religious dimensions of Mormon culture that he wrote about after visiting Salt Lake City in March 1913, nearly a century ago.