

Civil Rights Legend W.E.B Du Bois' Long Road Back to Great Barrington, MA

Bard College at Simon's Rock

GREAT BARRINGTON, Mass. — W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the most important African-American activists and intellectuals in U.S. history, was born 150 years ago on Feb. 23, 1868 in a small Western Massachusetts town amid the rolling hills of the Berkshire Mountains.

One of the few African American families in the region, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was educated and worshiped in Great Barrington. As a teenager, he wrote newspaper articles about small-town life, and later, neighbors and the congregation of his childhood church raised funds to send him to college. He owned town property, paid town taxes, and buried his family in the local cemetery. He also wrote fondly about Great Barrington in his autobiographies and correspondence.

Du Bois earned a bachelor's degree from Fisk University and in 1895, became the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University. He co-founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A proponent of Pan-Africanism, Du Bois was a prolific writer and best known for his collection of essays, "The Souls of Black Folk." He was also a vocal supporter of women's rights and a pioneering urban sociologist.

Despite his connection to Great Barrington and a life of significant achievements, over the years the region has been divided on how to honor Du Bois' local legacy. Now, 150 years after his birth, the town of Great Barrington, along with a group of passionate individuals and organizations, have joined together to celebrate their native son with a festival focused on his core values: civil rights, racial equality, economic justice and progressive education.

Based on a shared vision of restoring his legacy, the Du Bois 150th Anniversary Festival Committee (co-chaired by Randy Weinstein, historian and founder of The Du Bois Center at Great Barrington, and Gwendolyn Hampton VanSant, executive director of Multicultural BRIDGE) has organized events and lectures that celebrate Du Bois, educate the public about his works, and create legacy

projects in partnership with Berkshire County organizations, institutions and community members.

"Du Bois was a fount of useable wisdom regarding hot-button issues like racial equality and justice, health care, employment and universal brotherhood. He was a speaker of uncomfortable truths and a public school laureate of progressive education. This is the Du Bois who cared about our town, the Du Bois our town cares to honor," said Weinstein.

"I first discovered Du Bois' work at 15 while ap-

plying to college at Bard College at Simon's Rock in Great Barrington," said Hampton VanSant, a Simon's Rock alumna who interned with Weinstein while she was a student. "Reading 'The Souls of Black Folk' and learning about the concepts of 'the veil' and 'double consciousness'—this was the first time I felt I had words for the split experience I was living as a black scholar in my first college English course."

An advocate for the liberal arts, Du Bois has long been a significant voice in the Simon's Rock curriculum and commu-

nity. Early on, a selection from his autobiography "Dusk of Dawn" was in-

cluded in the Writing and Thinking Anthology for first-year students and "The Souls of Black Folk" remains a seminal course requirement. The college hosts an annual

lecture featuring prominent Du Bois scholars and awards Du Bois

Scholarships to under-

represented students. "After many years of struggle in Great Barrington about how to honor Du Bois, I am honored to carry this torch

over the finish line with many others past and present, restoring a legacy rightfully earned," said Hampton VanSant.

As Pulitzer-Prize winning Du Bois biographer David Levering Lewis said in his speech "W.E.B. Du Bois's Long Road Back to Great Barrington" at the inauguration of the W.E.B. Du Bois Educational Series in 2016, "... I dare to believe that the time has finally arrived for Du Bois to be welcomed in his hometown, warts and all, as its most prized historic exemplar."

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