

# Great Barrington • W.E.B. Du Bois • Massachusetts



**1 River Park**  
*I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS, *Autobiography*  
 [Walking tour begins at the entrance to River Walk, Church and River Streets]

William Edward Du Bois was born not far from where the Housatonic River flows past the W.E.B. Du Bois River Garden Park (dedicated in 2002). He once said he learned to swim just upstream, and throughout his life chided townspeople for allowing the river to become polluted.



**2 Birthplace**  
*The house was quaint, with clapboards running up and down, neatly trimmed; there were five rooms, a tiny porch, a rosey front yard, and unbelievably delicious strawberries in the rear.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS, *Darkeater*  
 [Walk 100 yards up Church Street to the birth site. Place marker on the right.]

Du Bois's mother, Mary Sylvia Burghardt, married Alfred Du Bois in February 1867. They rented a small rear dwelling owned by Thomas Jefferson "Old Jelf" McKinley, a former South Carolina slave. Harassed by Mary's cousins, Alfred left town on his own. Years later, in 1897, the small house was razed to make way for an electrical manufacturing plant. The Great Barrington Historical Society installed the bronze marker at the birth site in 1994.

Photo: Mary with infant son, ca. 1868-69.



**3 Great Barrington Schools**  
*The schools of Great Barrington taught a little but not much of economics. Their teaching of physiology, chemistry and physics was pretty good... History and English, ancient languages and mathematics were also well taught, although the history was conventional rather than critical.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS, "Winds of Time"  
 [Continue up Church Street to School Street.]

William Cullen Bryant Elementary School, which you'll pass on the left, was built after Du Bois left town to attend college. His daughter, Yolande, may have attended classes here in 1906, when she and her mother took refuge in Great Barrington during the Atlanta race riots.

[Turn left at School Street, then right on Bridge Street. Proceed to just beyond Berkshire Co-op Market.]

The wood-frame Center School and two-story brick Great Barrington High School once stood side by side in what is now the market's parking lot. Du Bois excelled at Great Barrington High School under the tutelage of Principal Frank Hosmer. He was only 15 when he graduated in 1884. He lingered a year in Great Barrington, working as a timekeeper at Searles Castle.



**4 St. James Church**  
*That's where my mother took me every Sunday morning. I loved the singing.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS TO SHIRLEY GIBBARD DU BOIS  
 [Cross Main Street. Head south to St. James Church at the northwest corner of Main Street and Taconic Avenue.]

Mary Du Bois brought her extended household to the Increase Sumner estate on Main Street in 1870. The apartment over the stables was directly south of the church. Doing housework for the Sumners gave Mary an income. She attended services at St. James Episcopal Church next door. In 1899 the Sumner property was cleared to make way for construction of Taconic Avenue.



**5 Town Hall**  
*I did not notice many colored men at the town meeting last month; it seems that they do not take as much interest in politics as is necessary for the protection of their rights.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS, *New York Globe*, 1883  
 [Turn around. Go back on the sidewalk to Great Barrington Town Hall.]

Du Bois attended meetings at the 1875 Great Barrington Town Hall, 334 Main Street, to collect news for the *Freeman* (later the *Globe*), a New York newspaper with wide African-American readership. He once chided in print his fellow Black residents for not turning out for a meeting at which a white man was given preference over a Black for a job as night watchman.



**6 Main and Railroad Streets, Mural**

[Continue north on Main Street.]  
 The 1860s Sumner Block, 306 Main Street, is a commercial building with mansard roof. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Society held meetings in an upstairs room a century and a half ago.

[Turn left at Railroad Street.]

Merchant Johnny Morgan had a news room at the foot of Railroad Street, and Du Bois often stopped in to read the latest publications. Morgan urged the youth to become an occasional newspaper correspondent. As a local correspondent for the *Springfield Republican*, Du Bois reported a fire at the Brookside barn south of town, 18 July 1885.  
 [Enter the alley beside 20 Railroad Street. Cross the Taconic Parking Lot.]

The Railroad Street Youth Project mural on the south side of Carr Hardway (painted 2003, revised 2010) depicts Du Bois's life and times. Just out of sight, at the top of Railroad Street, Mary Du Bois in 1879 brought her family to live in a two-family house, which is now gone. Also gone is the 1872 Housatonic Railroad depot from which "Willie" Du Bois traveled to visit paternal grandfather Alexander Du Bois in Connecticut in 1883.



**7 Clinton Church**  
 [Continue north to Elm Street and cross onto Elm Court.]

The shingle-style Clinton African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, 9 Elm Court, was completed in 1887 and is still in use. The first Black institution in Great Barrington and the oldest Black church building in Berkshire County, the church was built by post-Civil War migrants from the South and native-born members. Du Bois, fresh home from Germany, gave a talk called "Some Impressions of Europe" for the congregation in July 1894. The church is on the National Register of Historic Places. A Du Bois birthday celebration is held each year.



**8 Rosseter Street**  
 [Follow the lane past the Granary building to Rosseter Street and turn right.]

Pass the site of Edgar Willoughby's Sunset Inn, a small bed-and-breakfast inn that catered to an African-American clientele in the 1920s and '30s. Du Bois booked a room when in town in the late 1920s to oversee work to restore his grandparents' homestead. A different house occupies the site today.

On the same side of the street is the former home of Warren H. Davis, 11 Rosseter Street, now WAMC radio's office (photo). Davis came to Great Barrington from South Carolina to handle horses for electrical inventor William Stanley, and later became a lumbering and real estate dealer. He was middleman when NAACP friends acquired the old Othello Burghardt property as a gift for Du Bois in 1928, and he secured tradesmen to work on the house.

*There is no one up there that knows as much about the situation as you and I am, therefore, depending upon you a great deal.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS TO WARREN H. DAVIS, 1928



**9 Congregational Church**  
 [Proceed to Main Street, cross to the east side, and walk south.]

Becoming increasingly disabled, Mary Du Bois rented quarters at the rear of the Dr. Jonathan Cass residence on Church Street, behind the horse sheds of First Congregational Church, 251 Main Street. Mary joined the church. The main Cass house burned in 1908; today the property is a parking lot.

In March 1885 Mary Du Bois died. William moved in with his Aunt Frances Minerva Burghardt Newport on upper Main Street a few months before he left to attend Fisk University. First Congregational Church, along with three other congregations, assisted with Du Bois's college tuition. In 1890 Du Bois returned the favor with a lecture in the sanctuary.

*I am very grateful to you and the Sunday School for what you have done.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS, TO THE REV. EVERTS SCUDDER, 1886

[Continue down Church Street to the starting point.]



## Downtown Great Barrington • Sites 1–11 • Walking Tour



## Great Barrington • Sites 11–17 • Motor Tour

*The town and its surroundings were a boy's paradise: there were mountains to climb and rivers to wade and swim; lakes to freeze and hills for coasting. There were orchards and caves and wide green fields; and all of it was the free property apparently of the children of the town.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS, A Pageant in Seven Decades



**10 River Walk**  
*That river of my birth was golden because of the woolen and paper waste that soiled it. The gold was theirs, not ours; but the gleam and glint was for all.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS, *Darkeater*  
 Continue your walk on Housatonic River Walk, which meanders in two sections behind River Street and, after an interlude, continues behind St. Peter's Church parking lot.

Walk around Great Barrington's downtown. Many of the buildings and all of the businesses have changed, but the feel remains very much as it was in Du Bois's day.



**11 Searles Castle**  
 [Continue your tour by car. Head south on Main Street.]  
 As you drive from town, glimpse Kellogg Terrace, today called Searles Castle, across from St. James Church, behind the tall stone wall. The grand chateau was constructed by Mary Sherwood Hopkins, widow of Pacific Railroad tycoon Mark Hopkins, in 1884-1886. Du Bois worked as a timekeeper in 1884-1885 and attended African Methodist Episcopal Society meetings in the carriage house. Today a private academy, the property is not open to the public.



**12 Mahaive Cemetery**  
*We bore him away to the northward, with his flowers and his little folded hands.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS, "Of the Passing of the First Born," *The Souls of Black Folk*  
 [Continue south on Main Street. Turn right on Silver Street, then left into Mahaive Cemetery. Go around the circle and to the bottom of the hill. Du Bois and Burghardt stones are on the left.]

Young Burghardt Du Bois died in Atlanta in May 1899 of diphtheria and was brought to Great Barrington to be buried (without stone) with his Burghardt ancestors. His mother, Nina Du Bois, who died in 1950, was interred in the same plot (with marker stone). The Du Boises' daughter, Nina Yolande Cullen Williams, died in 1961 and is also buried here (without stone). The Great Barrington Historical Society installed the bronze marker in the cemetery in 1994.

At the south end of Mahaive Cemetery, a large obelisk monument marks the graves of some Burghardt ancestors. The Du Bois Center of American History, 684 South Main Street, exhibits artifacts and biographic materials related to Du Bois and Black history and offers lectures and films.

Photo: Gravesites of Nina Gomer and Burghardt Du Bois.



**13 Boydhood Homesite**  
*It is the first home that I remember.*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS, *Autobiography*  
 [Proceed north on Main Street to Route 23. Turn left, then proceed 0.25 mile west of the junction with Route 71.]

A crimson sign marks the entrance to the parking lot at the W.E.B. Du Bois Boydhood Homesite. There he lived as a young child from age 2 to 6 with an extended family that included Grandfather Othello Burghardt and his wife, Sara, and Willie's older half-brother Idiebert and their cousin Lize.

Today the Du Bois Center of UMass Libraries, assisted by Friends of the Du Bois Homesite, manages the five-acre, U-shaped property. A short wooded path takes visitors to a commemorative boulder, installed in 1969 when the property was dedicated as a park. South of the boulder, the foundation of the ancestral Burghardt home is the subject of archaeological research.

**14 Riverbank**

Mary White Ovington (1865-1951), a staunch Du Bois ally at the NAACP, converted an old barn into a home in Alford in 1920 and called it Riverbank. She stayed there off and on for the next twenty years. The house is in private ownership on Route 71.



**15 Five Acres**  
 James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), a musician, lawyer, educator, and NAACP secretary, summered and wrote poetry at Riverbank. He also wrote at the Mason Library, 231 Main Street

in Great Barrington, and in a small writing cottage across the stream from the house he bought on Alford Road in the Seekonk section of Great Barrington. Called Five Acres, it was visited regularly by him until his untimely death in an automobile accident. Du Bois visited Johnson and Mary Ovington at these homes, both privately owned today (not open to the public).



**16 Simon's Rock**  
 When the Du Bois Memorial Park committee needed a meeting place, Ruth D. Jones, a library cataloger at Simon's Rock Early College, received permission from founder Elizabeth B. Hall to use the facility. Known today as Bard College at Simon's Rock, 84 Alford Road, the early college offers Black studies courses, has a special collection of Black history books, and holds an annual Du Bois seminar.

**17 Brightside**

*"We were welcomed in the house; we ate bread and milk together in the big kitchen, and the Irish servants were kind."*  
 — W.E.B. DU BOIS, *Autobiography*  
 Celeste Russell, wife of textile factory owner Parley A. Russell, provided young Willie—through the efforts of high school principal Frank Hosmer—with books of Greek. Du Bois was welcome at the Russell house, called Brightside, where he played with young Louis Russell and sometimes enjoyed a meal with Louis and the Irish serving girls. The house still stands, in private ownership, at the corner of West Avenue and Copper Beech Lane (not open to the public).