Du Bois Boyhood Homesite: a National Historic Landmark

“In general thought and conduct I became quite thoroughly New England.”
— W.E.B. Du Bois, Autobiography

**W.E.B. Du Bois correctly stated that the problem of the 20th century would be the problem of the color line.** … The roots of the crisis are as old as the world itself.
— James Weldon Johnson, Chairman, April 26, 1934

Great Barrington in the 1870s and 1880s was evolving from a rural agricultural to an industrial and commercial economy, with a textile mill, pig iron furnace and other factories. Clothing, furniture, and food stores lined Main Street. Longtime farmers and millhands, including members of the Du Bois extended Burghardt family, gravitated to the village to find work.

Great Barrington boasted a population of 4,471 in 1885, when young William was 16. Of these citizens, 107 were classed as African American. Du Bois held degrees from Fisk University and Harvard (Ph.D.). He studied as well at the University of Berlin, teaching at Wilberforce University in Ohio, and for two years at the University of Pennsylvania, then served on the Atlanta University faculty until 1910.

For the next twenty years he worked with the NAACP, an organization he helped to found. During racially stressful times in Atlanta, Du Bois sent his wife to stay with his chief James in Great Barrington, where Burghardt Gomer Du Bois was born in 1897. He left his wife there to care for his children.

Du Bois’s conception of Great Barrington profoundly influenced the formation of his ideas, life, and career. He visited frequently and attempted to refurbish his grandfather’s old house. Many building sites associated with Du Bois are now gone, but friends in the NAACP purchased the homestead and presented it to Du Bois as a 60th birthday gift in 1928. He dedicated the versatile stone flagstone that served as the fireplace when he was a child.

Long years I have carried them tenderly over all the world.”

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“On this wide and lovely plain, beneath the benediction of grey-blue mountain and the low music of rivers, lived for a hundred years the black Burghardt clan.”
— W.E.B. Du Bois, Autobiography

Friends of the Du Bois Homesite, with the Du Bois Center of UMass Amherst Libraries, work to restore the W.E.B. Du Bois Boyhood Homesite as a public memorial to the Great Barrington native who became a leading scholar and activist in the civil rights movement in the United States and around the world.

P.O. Box 5690
Great Barrington, MA 01230
info@DuBoisHomesite.org
www.DuBoisHomesite.org

**The African American Heritage Trail** encompasses 28 Massachusetts and Connecticut sites in the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area. These sites celebrate African American contributions in the history of the region, urban and rural, through the stories of the people who lived, worked, and struggled here, including the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman, James Weldon Johnson, Rev. Samuel Harrison, James VanDerZee, and others.

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info@AfricanAmericanheritage.org
www.AfricanAmericanheritage.org