

In a very real way, the Du Bois Center at Great Barrington was years in the making. Its genesis is rooted in local school committee and selectmen meetings, school names, road signage, a bookstore, community forums and scholar retreats, churches and schools, historical societies, and a cemetery....

The Du Bois Center opened in February 2006. Located just south of Main Street, Great Barrington, it abuts the Mahaiwe Cemetery, where Du Bois buried his son Burghardt (1899), first wife Nina (1950), and daughter Yolande (1961). A marker at the Du Bois family gravesites, erected by the Great Barrington Historical Society, bears the W.E.B. Du Bois quotation, "In 1950 the month of February had for me special meaning. I was a widower. The wife of 53 years lay buried in the New England hills beside her first-born boy." The Mahaiwe Cemetery is an essential point of entry into understanding Du Bois's life. Visitors from as far away as Africa, where Du Bois was buried, come to pay their respects.

Although philanthropic groups from Berkshire County had honored Du Bois in meaningful ways for decades, many residents remained unaware of his local roots and historical importance. By 2004, however, two events received such widespread media coverage that "Du Bois" became a local household name. They affected the community in profound, unsettling, embittered, and, eventually, quite inspiring ways. The first event centered on naming Great Barrington's newly constructed elementary or middle schools after Du Bois, "a man whose life is a testament to the life-transforming potential of public education." The second event centered on honoring Du Bois through road signage. They also helped to propel the Du Bois Center into being.

During a regional school committee meeting in June 2004, a Great Barrington resident first proposed the idea of naming a public school after Du Bois. That August a school committee member declared, "if we could come up with someone who... was a very important part of the school district... that's someone I would be inclined to support." Shortly, however, he insisted that the schools "should not be named after any one person, living or dead." He further added that proposed names should "reflect the region as a whole, [with] no reference to racial or ethnic groups." A Great Barrington school administrator said in confidence that the "committee's flip-flop assures that our schools will never be named after Du Bois. He's a 'political hot potato' and we must watch it."

The school committee directive drew angry responses from the community. One local historian deplored the reference to an ethnic group as "an ethnic slur and many would consider it downright bigoted in attitude and implication." Under mounting pressure, the committee acquiesced and decided to accept suggestions for names, with established guidelines for submissions.

Articles, editorials, and letters to editors began to appear in Berkshire County papers.

Because of the steady media coverage, issues around race and politics combined to arouse the ire of many area residents. Two pieces, in particular, well represented arguments pro and con. One woman from Lenox wrote:

I am sickened by the suggestion that the new school complex be named after Du Bois [who]... turned against this country, loudly and publicly denouncing it.... He became the very thing this nation has risen above, fought against, and triumphed over since its inception – a communist.... Those who would even consider naming a school after a communist expatriate would never consider naming the complex after Mussolini, Stalin, or Hussein – figures who, like Du Bois, hated America and that for which it stands.

A local historian disagreed:

Du Bois certainly flirted with radical ideas for years. His ideas were and are radical.... Congressional hearings in the heat of the Cold War era couldn't convict Du Bois of wrongdoing.... There are at least five public schools named for Du Bois [in California, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, and Ohio].... He has twice appeared on United States postage stamps – and this country is not known for honoring criminals or traitors. The nation has forgiven him any transgressions. It's time the South Berkshire community does the same. Name a school for him. And teach the children why a school is named for him.

One journalist found it “curious” that a proposal to name something after someone local, who became an articulate advocate of civil rights in an era when American society had institutionalized intolerance, “can arouse such consternation” in the reputedly liberal Berkshires. More than four decades after his death, Du Bois “is still uncovering truths about social attitudes in his native region. The mere mention of his name has prompted furious debate... providing a lesson that will surely be passed on to generations of schoolchildren: There is a proponent of equality for all whose name and life we cannot – we dare not – honor.”

The real issue confronting Du Bois's legacy in Berkshire County was “racism,” concluded one Sandisfield resident, “hence we see the convenient resurrection of Cold War area anti-Communism, out of fashion for several decades, and the charges of anti-patriotism that have become fashionable these days.” An editorial writer suggested that Great Barrington's hesitance to embrace Du Bois's legacy stemmed from its native son's communist affiliation in later life, “or perhaps because of the color of his skin. Mr. Du Bois said that [while] growing up in Great Barrington he had ‘almost no experience of segregation or color discrimination’” and that its schools “‘were simple but good, well-taught.’ A man who insisted that every child, no matter how low or despised his origins, could rise above his circumstances by improving his mind, ought to have a school named after him in his home town.” A Berkshire County native, attending the University of London, concluded:

The issue of race became a polarizing force, placing local government officials on the defensive in the face of allegations of racism by members of the public.... [T]he historic exclusion of blacks in the physical and symbolic New England landscape... will affect the future of the town – as the children who participated in the debate eventually reflect, debate and decide on their own version of the past and vision of the future.

The struggle over Du Bois's legacy spread beyond the Berkshires. The *Boston Globe*, in an article, "Du Bois debate worthy of a manifesto: Communist ties hamper movement to pay tribute," reported that a school committee member as saying "that Du Bois's embrace of radical politics played a role in his thinking. Communism `does weigh a little.'" It was also noted that Los Angeles National Public Radio cited Great Barrington "as an example of the contemporary perpetration of racism."

In New York City, trombonist-composer Craig Harris, at work on a multi-media production inspired by Du Bois's landmark publication *The Souls of Black Folk*, called the school naming "fiasco" a "moral travesty." He visited Great Barrington several times to support the "most righteous of causes." Local students participated in a school-naming contest sponsored by North Star Rare Books. Harris honored the winners with a special performance at St. James Episcopal Church.

In January 2005, the "media circus" ended. The school committee chose the names "Muddy Brook" and "Monument Valley" (elementary and middle schools, respectively). Du Bois biographer David Levering Lewis found it "passing strange that Barringtonians chose to name their schools after geological formations rather than Du Bois, who was a `mountain of a man' in his own right." A Great Barrington parent lamented:

The decision to name the two new schools Monument Valley and Muddy Brook has been made. I take much pride in my community and my children have always trusted adults to do the right thing.

"Dad," asked my son, "why didn't we name a school after Norman Rockwell or W.E.B. Du Bois? We study them in school, tons of books have been written by or about them, they're famous for doing great things, and they come from around here."

"No," I explained, "some of the School Committee folks saw things differently. As one of them said, the naming of the schools became a `media circus,' and that was unacceptable. The adults felt the names should reflect `features' that are `familiar' like a valley or a muddy brook."

"Dad," asked my daughter, "are adults to be trusted? You always taught me to speak out for what I believe, no matter what."

"Yes," I explained, "you can trust some adults in this community to always play it safe. Names like Rockwell and Du Bois were not chosen because, as one of the

committee members said, the adults `didn't feel qualified to judge any one person over the other.'”

“Dad,” said my children, “we don't understand. Didn't the committee members go to the same schools that we go to, didn't they read the same books that we read, don't they admire the same local heroes that we admire, weren't they taught to speak out and do the right thing as we were taught?”

Not knowing how to answer their question, I played it safe and said that valleys and muddy brooks were important too.

Weeks after the school naming debacle, a local retired veteran first suggested that Great Barrington install road signs designating the town the “birthplace of W.E.B. Du Bois.” Town selectmen, by a majority vote, rejected the proposal. Significant Du Bois-related activities ensued. Local groups addressed National Public Radio listeners and audiences at senior centers, Rotary and Kiwanis Club meetings, and area schools, including Williams College, Simon's Rock College of Bard, and Berkshire Community College. The Great Barrington Historical Society, the Southern Berkshire Chamber of Commerce, Democratic and Republican town committees, and various religious groups endorsed the commemorative signs. The AME Zion Church, Great Barrington, hosted a Du Bois birthday celebration. Craig Harris performed his new Du Bois-inspired work, *Souls Within the Veil*, at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center.

The community seemed eager to learn more about Du Bois. In May, North Star Rare Books exhibited a comprehensive collection of Du Bois books, manuscripts, and memorabilia. That same month, the Great Barrington Historical Society and North Star Rare Books sponsored a public forum at the town's community center. One hundred people came to hear an informed panel explore Great Barrington's ongoing “love/hate relationship” with Du Bois. Many in attendance spoke about the need to disseminate “truthful” information, perhaps through the creation of a center dedicated to local history, replete with a Du Bois museum and an educational component for area children.

Extensive media coverage and various Du Bois-related activities proved effective. After voters approved a nonbonding referendum question favoring road signage at the annual town elections in May, selectmen, by a majority vote, reversed their initial decision and mandated that signs be placed at the various entrances to Great Barrington. “This issue [of signs] as a hobbyhorse the newspaper can now dismount,” declared an editorial writer. “The signs are a fitting testimonial to a great man who is too little appreciated and understood in a world he helped to shape.” A local businessperson trumpeted:

In a most profound way, town selectmen have made history. . . . Let there be no mistaking the fact that from the vantage point of the 21st century, Du Bois's politics, at times, appears naïve, even wrong-headed. Yet politics aside, his contribution to the 20th century's civil rights movement was righteous, global, and indelible. From Ghana,

where he spent his last days, to Great Barrington, where he spent his youth, and, now, officially acknowledged for the first time, Du Bois's life and legacy have come full circle. And for this, in great part, we must credit our present town fathers.

A less charitable resident of Great Barrington insisted that the selectmen had been "shamed into doing the right thing." A school psychologist, disagreeing, maintained that the once-polarized community had thirsted to learn, wrestled with its demons, changed, and voted (850-431) to embrace the legacy of its famous native son. Townspeople had spoken, town fathers had listened.

The time seemed ripe to establish the Du Bois Center at Great Barrington. Shortly after the town officials approved the Du Bois signage, efforts began in earnest to secure a suitable space adjacent to the Mahaiwe Cemetery, raise the necessary capital, file as a nonprofit organization, amass a comprehensive library and historical artifacts, plan innovative programs for the community, and create a board of directors and national advisory board.

Members of the advisory board garnered public support for the Center. "I feel the opening of the Center is an important step to better understanding this complex man who cared deeply for Great Barrington," declared David Levering Lewis, New York University. David W. Blight, Yale University, "applauded the Center's work to commemorate Du Bois. It is more than high time that Great Barrington recognize its foremost native son." John Y. Simon, Southern Illinois University, believed, "by its very existence, the Du Bois Center perpetuates W.E.B. Du Bois's legacy of social justice."

The Center officially opened on February 11, 2006. Despite the threat of a blizzard, some four hundred people gathered at St. James Episcopal Church, where Du Bois's family had worshipped, and afterward attended the reception at the Center. A panel discussion, "Du Bois and the Promise of America: the Color Line since 1865," featured board members Lewis, Blight, and Simon. Their conversation touched upon a variety of subjects, including the Center's significance within the context of Great Barrington's stormy relationship with Du Bois and Du Bois's place in the American memory.

"Barringtonians had been waiting for the opportunity to grow up and out of a shameful past," Lewis later declared, and "that event and the creation of the Center gave them that opportunity in a singular way." A Brown University professor, who attended the event, declared, "Imagine all those people coming to pay their respects publicly to a person, who, not long ago, many had been inclined to shun." According to a local historian, "it was one of those defining moments for Great Barrington, where past and present combined to underscore the legacy of Du Bois and the evolving character of the community where he spent his youth."

Perhaps Craig Harris spoke for the community at large, when, after hearing that

commemorative signs had been approved by town fathers, declared, “Yep, sounds like Dr. Du Bois is here to stay for good – Amen!”

Randy F. Weinstein
The Du Bois Center, founder

Footnotes

The Du Bois Center Great Barrington Historical Society, Mahaiwe Cemetery, marker, 1994; Shirley Graham Du Bois, *His Day Is Marching On* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1971), 317.

Several of Du Bois’s uncles, aunts, and, perhaps, his mother were also buried in the Mahaiwe Cemetery.

Although philanthropic *Berkshire Eagle* (June 9, 2005): editorial.

During a regional *Berkshire Eagle* (August 7 and 12, 2004): articles; conversation, GB school administrator and Randy F. Weinstein (November 19, 2004).

The school committee *Berkshire Eagle* (October 22, 2004): article.

Articles, editorials *Berkshire Eagle* (July 5, 2004): letter to editor.

A local historian *Berkshire Eagle* (July 17, 2004): article.

One journalist *Berkshire Eagle* (August 10, 2004): editorial.

The real issue *Berkshire Eagle* (June 27, 2004 and May 20, 2005): editorial and letter to editor; Bernard A. Drew, *Dr. Du Bois Rebuilds His Dream House* (Great Barrington: Attic Revivals Press, 2006), 115.

The struggle over *Boston Globe* (October 23, 2004): editorial; *Berkshire Eagle* (September 19, 2004): letter to editor.

In New York Conversation, Craig Harris and Randy F. Weinstein (December 19, 2004); *Berkshire Record* (November 5 and December 17, 2004): articles.

Weeks after *Berkshire Eagle* (January 19 and 27, 2005; February 13, 2006): editorial, article, and letter to editor.

In January *Berkshire Eagle* (January 24 and May 5, 2005): letters to editor; WAMC radio interview, Susan Arbetter and Randy F. Weinstein (February 10 2006); *Berkshire Record* (April 1 and 20, 2005): articles.

The community *Berkshire Eagle* (May 5, 2005): letter to editor; *Berkshire Record* (May 13, 2005): article; conversation, Edgar Jacobs and Randy F. Weinstein (May 17, 2005).

Extensive media *Berkshire Eagle* (June 9 and August 31, 2005; January 21, 2006): letter to editor, article, and letter to editor.

A less charitable Conversation, James Sitwell and Randy F. Weinstein (January 14, 2006); conversation, John Zola and Randy F. Weinstein (January 19, 2006).

The time seemed *Berkshire Record* (September 9, 2005; February 3, 2005): articles.

The Center officially *Berkshire Record* (February 3 and 17, 2006): articles; *Berkshire Eagle* (January 28, 2006; February 8 and 13, 2006): editorial and articles.

“Barringtonians” Email, David L. Lewis and Randy F. Weinstein (February 14, 2006); conversation, Carl Kaestle and Randy F. Weinstein (February 11, 2006); *Advocate Weekly* (February 16, 2006): article.

Perhaps Craig *Berkshire Eagle* (June 9, 2005): letter to editor.