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Recognizing W.E.B. Du Bois

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Saturday, January 28 The relationship between Great Barrington and one of its native sons, W.E.B. Du Bois, has not always been an easy one. Du Bois, of course, is one of the most important people in American history. Unfortunately, most of the members of the Great Barrington Board of Selectmen and their predecessors really don't know that. We've finally got some signs up on the way into town telling us that Du Bois was born here, so I guess we can give the Selectmen some credit for that. Du Bois was one of the founders of the American civil rights movement and instrumental in the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP.) He was born in Great Barrington on Church Street (down by the Housatonic River in the middle of town) and, if his name had been George Washington, would have had everything in sight named after him.

In fact, there are cities all over America that would love to be known as the home of Du Bois, a Harvard Ph.D. and the first black man to achieve that honor. Unfortunately, there was a missed opportunity to name one of our new schools in Great Barrington after him. What's more, his former home off Route 23 has long been in need of development. That's a real shame. The Friends of Du Bois, under Rachel Fletcher and Bernard Drew, have been working to restore the place.

Du Bois was appropriately frustrated by the blatant racism in the United States. Later in life, he announced that he was a communist and moved to Ghana, where he was buried. My wife, Roselle, has long been interested in the Du Bois-Great Barrington connection. She recently organized a trip to Ghana, where she met with people from the Du Bois Center for Pan-Africanism. She's very excited about the fledgling Du Bois Center being established by **Randy Weinstein** in Great Barrington. I've been there, and it looks great. Weinstein's work parallels the good works by local historian Drew (one of my real heroes) and Fletcher (another), the lady who brought us River Walk and so many other good things.

Weinstein's new center is attracting a lot of attention. Located on South Main Street, it undoubtedly will bring a lot of historians and visitors to Great Barrington to see the wealth of material he has assembled about the work of Du Bois. Included in the new book collections are volumes on African-American and American history. In fact, the formal name of the center is the W.E.B. Du Bois Center for American History and Culture. It also will be the new home of the Great Barrington Historical Society and will be a place to coordinate the work of all the individual groups that have been working on diverse Du Bois projects.

Weinstein has been tireless in promoting his plans for the center, and the Feb. 11 opening of the new project is garnering massive attention. We've learned that C-SPAN will be broadcasting the opening across America. Apparently, C-SPAN knows more about the importance of Du Bois than we do in Great Barrington. What's more, some major academic celebrities, including David Levering Lewis, Yale's David W. Blight and John Y. Simon, director of the Ulysses S. Grant Association, will be on hand to speak at the opening.

Weinstein has established a not-for-profit organization to raise money in support of the center. Our own Simon's Rock College is getting involved in the project and recently sent several of its students on the trip to Ghana. Williams College and Berkshire Community College also are on board. Considering the fact that Great Barrington is so important as a place on the Underground Railroad and in the development of American civil rights, it makes sense that this material is taught in our schools, and that we capitalize on the Great Barrington-Du Bois connection. I would certainly like to see Du Bois shirts with the Great Barrington logo on them.

The Mahaiwe Theatre has done its part from the early days of the project. Clearly, events that are too big for the new Du Bois Center should be showcased at the Mahaiwe or at St. James' Episcopal Church, where Du Bois actually worshipped. What's more, he was affiliated with AME Zion Church, now ministered by Esther Dozier. On Saturday, Feb. 25, at 2, Dozier will be having AME Zion Church's annual Du Bois celebration. This kind of vibrancy is one of the reasons why I love Great Barrington so much. I can only recommend that you join all these celebrations when they occur.

The people at the center are excited about a future filled with lectures, musical performances and activities for all. I can tell you this — if Du Bois had been born in Pittsfield, you had better believe that the wonderful Megan Whilden would be out promoting the fact as she helps bring that city back to life.

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