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'Brilliant essayist' honored

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Monday, February 13 GREAT BARRINGTON — In the 1980s, Yale historian David W. Blight recalled that he began making trips to Great Barrington and asking local shopkeepers where the memorial to famed civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois was located. "And they'd all say, 'Sorry, don't know,'" Blight said.

One night, while driving around town in the mid-1990s, Blight finally found a small marker on Church Street placed there by the Great Barrington Historical Society in 1994. It commemorated the birth home of Du Bois and, in Du Bois' own words, noted that he "was born by a golden river," the Housatonic.

"And I thought, 'Well, at least people know he liked the Housatonic,'" Blight said a little ruefully.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in Great Barrington on Feb. 13, 1868, and became the father of the Civil Rights movement as well as an author, essayist and historian. But for many years, for many reasons, he has been underappreciated in his own town.

That is slowly being rectified, and on Saturday, Blight was one of the principal panelists at the grand opening of the Du Bois Center of American History, a facility made possible by the work of local historian **Randy Weinstein** and dedicated to providing educational programs and resources to foster a better understanding of racial issues.

The panel also featured Du Bois biographer David Levering Lewis and historian John Y. Simon. It was moderated by Gene Dattel, a member of the center's board. The panel discussion centered on various aspects of Du Bois' work and philosophy.

The event attracted 385 people to St. James' Episcopal Church at 352 Main St. A reception followed at the actual Du Bois Center itself, located at 684 Main St.

Lewis, who earned a Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Du Bois, commented on many aspects of Du Bois' childhood in Great Barrington, pointing out that there is no way to know why Du Bois' last name was pronounced "Du Boys" rather than the Gallic "Du Bwah." Du Bois' father, Alfred, reportedly preferred "Du Boys."

And, Lewis said, young William, or, as he was known in Great Barrington, "Willie" adamantly insisted that the pronunciation was "Du Boys" throughout his life, an acknowledgment to his father's decision.

In connection with that topic, Lewis conceded that he found it "passing strange" that "Barringtonians chose to name one of their schools after a geological formation rather than Du Bois, who was a 'mountain of a man' in his own right."

Lewis was referring to the recent mini-controversy of the naming of the middle and elementary schools, Monument Valley and Muddy Brook, respectively.

Blight, who has edited the most scholarly edition of Du Bois' groundbreaking "Souls of Black Folk," discussed the book Saturday and pronounced the tome as a work of "genius." The book is a series of 14 essays and one short story about growing up black in the late 19th and early-20th century.

"In America at the time, there was a widespread theory of racial inferiority," Blight said. "Jim Crow laws flourished, and many historians of the time were creating the concept that the 'Emancipation Proclamation' (which freed the slaves during the Civil War) was a mistake.

"Lynching was done on a scale that many Americans now could never conceive of."

'Brilliant essayist'

But "Souls of Black Folk" served as an "elegant refutation" of the inferiority of blacks, he said. "Du Bois was a brilliant essayist and a great storyteller," and his book amended many perceptions of American blacks.

Historian Simon discussed Du Bois' book, "Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880," which dealt with the socioeconomic development of the nation during and after the Civil War.

He noted that, by the end of the 19th century, there was much revisionist thinking that slavery had been on its way out before the Civil War, but that a "blundering" generation of politicians brought the war on anyway.

"This infuriated Du Bois and created an atmosphere where he had to say, 'This is not true,' " Simon said. He admitted that the book was "somewhat eccentric," but added that it is now "the template on which Reconstruction is now interpreted."

The center also named teacher and local activist Elaine S. Gunn and famed author and historian John Hope Franklin as the recipients of the center's inaugural Pioneer Awards.

Entertainment was provided by jazz great Charlie Tokarz and gospel giant Cornell McKnight of the Grammy-winning Dixie Hummingbirds.

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