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Robeson, Du Bois and Africa

J. Peter Bergman, Special to The Eagle

Thursday, October 12 The Great Barrington center offers its first major exhibition

Just south of the main streets of Great Barrington sits the recently conceived and opened W.E.B. Du Bois Center. Created by **Randy Weinstein** within the expanded space of his shop, North Star Rare Books, the center is dedicated to the history of black Americans, particularly Du Bois, in the Berkshires. The Center officially opened on February 11, 2006, when, despite the threat of a major winter storm, almost 400 people assembled at St. James Episcopal Church for a symposium and discussion on "Du Bois and the Promise of America: the Color Line since 1865."

Located just south of the Mahaiwe Cemetery, the traditional burial ground for Du Bois' family along with other historic Berkshire figures such as William Stanley, the center's significance within the community is still being tested. Du Bois has historically been shunned by some in Great Barrington, in spite of the man's literary and social history, as his politics has played perhaps too great a role in the pigeon-holing that occurs in rural and urban America. Du Bois, who helped to create the NAACP and who championed civil rights here and abroad, was an avowed Communist and his affiliation with that political ideology is, in part, what the Center is showcasing in its first major exhibition, now accessible and free to the public.

"We're basically open seven days a week," Weinstein said, sitting behind his Northstar Books desk, surrounded by books of all sorts including some volumes of great value and a slew of fascinating African artworks. "Right now, and for the next few weeks actually, by appointment only." Weinstein, an author of some note, is completing the work on a manuscript for a new book to be published early in 2007.

Weinstein has been a resident of the Great Barrington area for 40 years. His parents founded the Colbourn School in Connecticut and he, himself, taught there and ran the school for a while. He is a graduate of Mt. Everett High School in Sheffield. His shop has been a successful enterprise in the gateway town for a decade.

"When I was searching for a location to open the Du Bois Center it occurred to me that here, abutting this sacred ground, was the ideal location," he said. "With the family graves here it was just an ideal place to continue opening up the history of this man."

Brian Burke, president of the Great Barrington Historical Society, agreed and he struck up an arrangement with Weinstein, a partnership whereby that organization's visitors center and exhibition space would be located at the Center.

"The Society would do well to study the impact of Great Barrington upon the youthful Du Bois," Burke said. In much of Du Bois' writings he reflects back to his time in Great Barrington, a place he returned to often, mostly to bury his dead, his son, his wife, his daughter. In 1963 he was honored with a state funeral in Ghana where a banner proclaimed the town of his birth. A memorial plaque reaches proudly in the Berkshire sky commemorating the man the town tried, in vain, to forget and this year new signs, bearing the town's seal, will be erected at all the major entryways into Great Barrington informing all arrivals of W.E.B. Du Bois's place in the Berkshire pantheon.

The major educational exhibition of the season at the Du Bois Center is "Robeson, Du Bois and the Spirit of African Culture," a celebration and examination of the life and work of American bass-baritone Paul Robeson. One of the early great American stage and film stars "of color" Robeson was acclaimed worldwide for his singing, his acting, his skills at the lecture podium and for his representation of a disenfranchised class of Americans. When he, like Du Bois, embraced communism in its idealistic sense, he found himself shunned by a public that had previously adored him. His relationship with Du Bois was both conservative and mixed. They belonged to the same organizations and occasionally had time together, but their lives took divergent courses. Pairing them for this exhibition opens up the unique history of a period in American history when paranoia ran rampant and fear of ideologies not "our own" caused Americans to shut down the traditional open doors of freedom. Everyone suffered, but not quite like these two amazing black Americans.

In 1941, after a string of American and British films through which Robeson sought to bring an understanding of African peoples and cultures to the American public, he returned to the stage (his earlier performances in plays such as "The Emperor Jones" which he also filmed, had riveted the public's awareness to the power of his talent) in "Pageant — The Negro in American Life" and in it performed the 12-minute song by Earl Robinson "Ballad For Americans" with which he is still identified today. A strong and patriotic musical mono-drama, it asserts the rights of all men to retain their human dignity over all odds.

Within the scope of this exhibition visitors can see amazing photographs, books and other memorabilia on loan to the Center from Paul Robeson, Jr. and others. One of Robeson's costumes from the 1943 Broadway production of "Othello" is on display and it helps to present the man in his actual size. As you progress through the room the line that is drawn between Robeson and Du Bois becomes more and more apparent.

"I have the Robeson films here," Weinstein said, "and after the success of our earlier film series this year I would like to show them. I think we'll wait until after the holidays, however. Between my book deadline and the end of the year we'll be pretty busy and so January may be the perfect time to heat things up with these fascinating movies."