

Du Bois papers to go digital

Wire and Staff reports

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BOSTON — The University of Massachusetts in Amherst said Friday it would scan, catalog, digitize and put online papers of civil rights movement pioneer W.E.B. Du Bois.

The university's W.E.B. Du Bois Library has an estimated 100,000 diaries, letters, photographs and other items related to Du Bois, who helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"What we're looking to do is spark conversation about difficult issues in race, inequality, class and all these things are things that concerned Du Bois," said Robert Cox, director of the special collections at the library.

UMass received a \$200,000 grant from the Verizon Foundation to put the collection online during the two-year project, which begins in July.

Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, and local supporters said the new online catalogue will give a broader perspective of his life to people around the world.

"It's probably the single most important thing that has happened to Du Bois in decades," said Randy Weinstein, founder and director of the W.E.B Du Bois Center in Great Barrington. "For the first time, we don't have to interpret through historians and students. We can actually glean things through his own words and hopefully we can dispel some of the myths about him."

Weinstein said he plans to install a computer in the Du Bois Center, so students and other researchers can look at those materials at his facility as well.

The collection includes correspondence with other influential African-Americans, such as Booker T. Washington and Langston Hughes, as well as important public figures of his day, such as Albert Einstein and Mohandas Gandhi.

One of Cox's favorite pieces is a menu signed by those who attended the first meeting of the Niagara Movement, a precursor to the NAACP. The group was forced to meet in Ontario, Canada, because no restaurant in Buffalo, N.Y., would serve them.

Shirley Graham Du Bois donated her husband's papers to the Amherst campus in 1973. W.E.B. Du Bois was born in Great Barrington in 1868. He died in Ghana in 1963.

Wray Gunn, a member of the Friends of Du Bois, a local group that has worked with UMass, said there has been increased interest in Du Bois lately because are connecting with his message and his legacy.

"(Du Bois) was the type of guy who wanted freedom for all and wanted to see everyone was born equal," said Gunn. "People are now seeing that what he had been talking about does have a lot of fruition to it and these things that he had hope for can be accomplished."

Du Bois wrote more than 4,000 articles, essays and books, many of which are now out of print or difficult to find, Cox said. While dozens of universities have microfilm copies of Du Bois work, the new online archive will allow anyone to search his words from anywhere.

"Once we get the word out there, we're going to reach people who never knew about UMass, never knew about Du Bois," Cox said.

He said it's not just scholars and researchers who are interested in Du Bois' work, but also community and political activists.

"Du Bois fit that intersection between academia and public action, and the people who use the collection often do the same," Cox said.

Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., the director of Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research who edited a compilation of Du Bois' writings, said much of Du Bois' never published works and early drafts are hard to find.

"It's long been obvious to me that no printed editions of his work have even begun to touch the complexity and the vast extend of his writings," Gates said. "Digitizing these works will lead to a renaissance in scholarship about the greatest thinker of African descent in history."