Fifty Sites in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, Associated With the Civil Rights Activist

W.E.B. Du Bois

"In general thought and conduct I became quite thoroughly New England..."

— Dusk of Dawn (1940)

A BERKSHIRE TOWN IN 1885

"Great Barrington was a town of middle-class people, mostly native white Americans of English and Dutch descent. There were differences of property and income and yet all the men worked and seemed at least to be earning their living..." sociologist, historian and civil rights activist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) recalled in his Autobiography.

"Du Bois was fond of Great Barrington; he believed his experiences here helping shape his later ideas. Those ideas were often strongly worded and radical. They were also prophetic. In almost every political event around the world today, you see how essential Dr. Du Bois's themes are — peace, justice, equity and the centrality of the color line," commented David Graham Du Bois, president and CEO of the W.E.B. Du Bois Foundation.

What was Du Bois's Great Barrington like? It boasted a population of 4,471 in 1885, when William was 16. Of these citizens, 107 were classed "native blacks" in that year's state census. The Great Barrington of his youth included blacks free since the American Revolution; ex-slaves who had fled the South; and a growing number in domestic service who came to the town with their well-to-do employers.

Though its population had diminished slightly since the Civil War, the town by 1885 had evolved from a rural agricultural to an industrial economy. Besides the textile mill in Great Barrington, Owen Paper and Monument Mills tapped the waterpower in the northern village of Housatonic. There was an iron furnace in Van Deusenville. Longtime farmers and laborers, members of Du Bois's own maternal Burghardt family gravitated into the village to find work or left to pursue employment elsewhere.

Great Barrington was and is a thriving commercial and cultural center. While many sites associated with Du Bois's youth are gone — victims of progress — there are sufficient remnants to give a sense of the town in the 1880s. In this publication we visit the town's people and places as Du Bois recalled them, illustrating his remarks with maps and photos from the Mason Library and other collections.

This paper only skims the surface of Du Bois's childhood; yet except for a few more details and anecdotes, questions of his formative years can only be answered speculatively from his writings. Obviously as a teen he was developing a keen awareness of race. He was uncomfortable at the social ranking of people with his skin color, though he realized there was happiness in their lives here.

As Du Bois said himself of interviews, "The attempt of a stranger to sum up in a half hour the experience which another has spent 80 years in accumulating is invariably a mess which neither likes" (Du Bois Papers, 1949). We won't even try. This admittedly brief survey is a very localized introduction to a very complex and globally fascinating individual.

— Bernard A. Drew, Past President, Great Barrington Historical Society
BIRTH SITE

1. "I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills..." W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of his arrival in this world on February 23, 1868. "The house was quiet, with shutters running up and down, nearly trimmed; there were five rooms, a tiny porch, a rose front yard, and unbelievably delicious strawberries in the rear."

The daughter of a rural farming family, her mother Mary Silvia Burghardt (1831-1885) had met and fallen in love with a new arrival from the Albany area, Alfred Du Bois. ("...I really know very little of my father. He had been brought from Haiti by his father...""). They were married 5 February 1867 in Housatonic village. Du Bois worked as a barber and waiter. ("In nature he was a dreamer, -- romantic, indolent, kind, uneducable.").

The Du Boises rented one of two dwellings at the base of Church Street owned by Thomas Nelson "Old left" McKinley (ca. 1874-1896). An escaped slave ("tall, thin, and black, with golden earrings, and given to religious trance") who followed Union troops home to Great Barrington, McKinley was a coachman for the Edwin Humphrey family and a vegetable gardener.

Burr and Bois family carried on a non-stop open meal, until my birth..." Consequently, the Alfred left town for New Milford, Conn. Mary never followed him ("Mother no longer trusting his demeanor as an escaped slave and out of our lives into silence"). She moved to her parents' farm.

McKinley's home was rented about 1879 to make way for construction of an old South Carolina manufacturing plant. The cottage to the rear may have been demolished then or earlier — it doesn't show up on the 1876 Bois map or Du Bois 1894 perspective view. [See Maps B1, C1, D1].

The neighborhood where Du Bois was born changed dramatically as the result of a successful electrical experiment the spring after William went to college. William Stanley (1858-
1916) perfected his alternating current transformer in the old nabberware factory on the Housatonic River reach of Cottage Street in 1886. Stanley soon established a manufacturing plant in Pittsfield. Ironically, it was Stanley's factory in Pittsfield's first successor General Electric, which was responsible for significant chemical contamination of the river. The inventor returned to Great Barrington and in 1896 purchased land on a new River Street — including the old McKinley place — to construct his Stanley instrument plant to make wat-hear meters and, later, insulated vacuum bottles.

The original enameling facility still stands and is owned by Berkshire Corp. M.F. Cavanaugh plumbing replaced the main Stanley shop; the rear yard is approximately where Du Bois was born. The Great Barrington Historical Stock got a bronze marker near the site in 1994.

HOUSE OF THE BLACK BURGHARTHS

2, 3 & 4 «...My family was among the oldest inhabitants of the Housatonic valley. Mary Du Bois took her infant son to her parents’ home on Egremont Plain in about 1870. [42] "It was the first house..." On a hill of rocks was Uncle Isa [1801-71] [A3], down and to the south was Uncle Harlow (1800-72) [A4] in a low, long, red house beside a [Rood] pond... And here right in the center of the world was Uncle Tallow, "as Grandfather Ohsa was known."

Du Bois wrote in The Crisis (April 1928).

Grandfather Othello Burghardt (1789-1872) "good-natured but not energetic" and his wife Susa (1795-1879) "thin, tall, yellow and hawk-faced" helped raise young William and his older half-brother Eldred (born in 1860) [A3] and their cousin Izzie (daughter of Mary’s widowed brother James) on a small farm.

The house was a delightful place — simple, square and low, with the great room of the fireplace, the flagged kitchen, half a step below, and the lower woodshed beyond. Sleep, stairs less lit up to Sleep, while without was a brook, a well and a mighty clem...") Du Bois wrote in The Crisis. "Then this house passed to other branches of the clan and we moved to rented quarters in town..."

That was after Othello’s death 19 September 1872, when his wife, "Sally,” had to give up the farm.

Years later, "I desperately wanted to own that house for no earthly reason that sounded a bit like sense... It was decent almost beyond repair..."

When former slaves came north, timbers the black Burghards had built so much of their own dumb luck..." he said in Crisis. Du Bois’ friends purchased the old homestead and presented it to him as a birthday gift in 1928. While he or his benefactors may have done minor repairs — Great Barrington boasted the first black-owned store in Massachusetts — the town’s central chimney fireplace was replaced with a brick one on the east end during this time — he appears not to have been able to restore it to its degree shown in blueprint drawings of the University of Massachusetts archive. When he brought his second wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois (1903-79) to the house during the early 1950s, it had begun to fall in.

The University of Massachusetts at Amherst’s John W. Klumpp Elementary School conducted summer field schools at the farmstead in 1983 and ’84, mapping features and extracting artifacts from middens, Robert Payzner, who guided the effort, said even civil engineers associated with some Du Bois’ stature, the degree of archaeological preservation, the success at black ownership and the fact that it stayed in one family for so long make it a fascinating site.

"It was a joy to speak about the Afro-American presence in New England. Payzner said. "It's easy to forget the long history. They were brought to New England in the early 1600s, as slaves and as free people. But we know this from documents, not from historic sites..." With the rich material which emerged from the Burghardt site, archaeologists were able to broaden their understanding of black culture and assimilation in the North.

Of his research team, Nancy Lada Muller, continued the research by investigating property ownership records and reconstructing a Burghardt family tree. She makes a convincing argument that Du Bois’ first and last name originated on the land was great-grandfather Jackson Burghardt (ca.1766-1832), who had secured his freedom at the age of 1780 with passage of the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights. Great Barrington historian Charles J. Taylor and Du Bois himself beseeched a Tom Burghardt, perhaps Jackson’s father, after the Revolutionary War military service with Captain John Spoon’s company in 1780 during the Revolutionary War secured his freedom and was awarded a land grant.

\[MAP A\]

BASED ON GREAT BARRINGTON ASSESSORS MAP, 2002

The dwelling is already in disrepair when W.E.B. Du Bois and his second wife, Shirley Graham Du Bois, examine the old Burghardt farmstead in the early 1990s. (Special Collections and Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst)

My name is pronounced in the clear English fashion: Du, with a as in Sue: Bois, as in voice. The accent is on the second syllable.

— Correspondence (1939)
Bois was depicted on commemorative postage stamps in 1992 and 1993.

"He felt he was so fortunate to have been born in this valley, the valley that represented the revolution of people who fought against tyranny," Shirley Graham Du Bois is quoted by the Berkshire Eagle, 19 October 1970, when she visited the memorial.

The Black Bourgeois property was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts assumed ownership of the five-acre, U-shaped property in 1987.

LATER HOMES

5. "...this nearness to school induced mother to choose this home... There was a nice wide yard and a running brook which afforded me infinite pleasure." 
Mary Du Bois ("She gave one the impression of infinite patience, but a serious determination was concealed in her softness") and her household lived over the stables at the Summer estate [B5, C6 & D5] for several years after moving into Great Barrington center from Egremont Plain. She likely did housework for the Summer.

6. Freeman Cemetery (1801-1871) was the first justice of the southern Berkshire District Court when it was established in 1870. The property was two miles south of St. James' church, opposite the lane which went to the grammar school. The property was cleared in 1899 to make way for what is today Taconic Avenue.

5. Mary Du Bois suffered a stroke and was incapacitated. "My mother worried and sank into depression. The family closed about her as a protecting guardian. The town folk who knew the Burgaughters took her and me into a sort of overemerging custody. We lived in simple comfort...."
After Sally Burgaughter’s death 19 January 1879, Mary moved her family to an apartment hard by the tracks on upper Railroad Street (right next to the station) and over a store by the railroad tracks for her (with) infinite interests and astonishing playmates") [B6, C6 & D6] shared with the Millers, a white family. Jeter had gone to Albany (Du Bois once visited his halfbrother there, but in news sent to the Globe for 26 January 1884 he noted Jeter had moved. "My 1st. Burghardt, of Meriden, Conn., was in town a short time ago.")

Years later, in October 1896, flames swept both sides of Railroad Street, destroying several business blocks. The house the Du Boises lived in, just north of the present Martin’s Restaurant block, was either destroyed then or in 1901, when Railroad Street was extended to Elm Street.

7. "Our landlord, Mrs. Cass, received no rent. I am sure, for long intervals. I think the rent was four

MAP B

MAP KEY
1. Jefferson McKinley cottage site
2. Increase Sumner carriage house
3. Railroad Street apartment
4. Railroad Street apartment
5. Jonathan Cass cottage
6. Minerva Cottage
7. First Congregational Church
8. William Cass cottage
9. Bishop Cass Cottage
10. Russell Hall
11. A.M.E. Zion Church
12. George Russell
13. Kellogg Terrace
14. Center School
15. Great Barrington High School
16. Great Barrington's Main Street, 1885 (below). The Miller House is on the right, Morgan's neastand in one of the buildings on the left.

The Railroad House is at the top of Railroad Street (far left in photo), next to the train station. The Du Boises lived in the two-story building just north (right), now a parking lot. (Photos by Elizabeth Sensenig, 1989)

Great Barrington's Main Street, 1885 (below). The Miller House is on the right, Morgan's neastand in one of the buildings on the left.

(Ground level)
The photograph — the original three-inch-square stereo view image has been tripled in size here — remarkably shows four dwellings where Du Bois lived in Great Barrington. It was taken by professional photographer Julius Hall some time before 1882, the year the wooden second Congregational Church building on Main Street burned. Bridge Street is on the left, crossing the Hoosac River. The Du Bois birthplace on Church Street is a light-colored structure, at the rear of the McKinley house and woodshed, and with a large garden plot behind it. The two-story dwelling on upper Railroad Street faces the depot. The stable at the Summer estate is close to the Episcopal church. And the cottage behind the Gess house on Church Street is right beside the Congregational church horse sheds. Also visible in the photo are the Summer and City Blocks on Main Street and the old Railroad Hotel near the train station. (Julius Hall photo; Mass MOCA library collection)

PHOTO KEY
1. McKinley cottage
2. A. Jefferson McKinley home
3. Summer carriage house
4. Railroad Street apartment
5. Cass cottage
6. Congregational Church
7. Congregational Church horse sheds

Du Bois swam in the Green River Mill pond (north of the present Route 23 bridge) as a boy. (Mass MOCA library collection)

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in the 1920s. The area was designated Sunley Park in 1947, in honor of the electrical inventor. "Leaving Great Barrington to attend Fisk University had an enormous impact on the 17-year-old Du Bois," David Graham Du Bois said recently. "Slavery was not long been ended. During the summers Du Bois searched rural Tennessee on foot for black schools in need of a teacher and the rural families of his students. The sharp contrast between their lives and his own childhood must have been central to the choice of his life’s work.”

9 • After graduating from Fisk, Du Bois became the first black to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard. He taught at Wellesley College in Ohio then while at the University of Pennsylvania, he met Nina Goner (1870-1956) and they were married 12 May 1896. Du Bois accepted a teaching position at Atlanta University (where he served from 1897 until 1910, when he began a twenty-four-year tenancy with the NAACP). He sent his wife ("...a slip of a girl, beautifully dark-eyed and thorough and good as a German house- wife") to stay with Uncle Jim in Great Barrington. The Du Boises’ son Burghart Gomer Du Bois was born in town 2 October 1897, although the child’s life was tragically brief.

Nina came back to Great Barrington for daughter Gomer’s 21st birthday on 21 October 1900. Mother and daughter returned in 1906, during the Atlanta race riots, and Yolande attended local school, probably William Cullen Bryant Elementary (across the street from Du Bois’ birthsite).

James T. Burghardt (“Uncle Jim, a reputation-breaking harper.”) and his wife Mary Louisa Freeman had two children. By now apparently a widower, Burghardt resided at what was then 32 East Street (E9); that’s his address in an 1894 municipal directory. Deeds and other records suggest he may have boarded with Elton Brown (1837-1906), an Irish woman who lived a couple houses south of the East and Quarry Streets intersection, on the east side of town. The 1880 Census listed diagonally across the street at 38 East. The Berkshire Courier in its obituary notice 27 March 1913 and Burghardt was “one of [Great Barrington]’s oldest and most respected colored residences.”

NEIGHBORS
10 • One of our citizens impressed me greatly, C.C. (sic) Taylor was a little white-haired man who was writing a history of the town: he was an official of the bank and, what was of closer interest to me, he lived on a beautiful hill or lower Main Street. He kept a herd of cattle. They gave so much milk that he told my mother that anytime she wanted slumck milk, to send me down and get all we wanted. I remember those morning walks up to the great elm on our corner; down the vast expanse of Main Street; past the Town Hall and the watering trough opposite; then by the Kellogg meadow and house. It was a straight street and up to the Taylor home and the delicious fresh milk.

Charles J. Taylor (1824-1904), merchant, industrialist and town historian, was an early advocate for young William and hired him for small tasks. Taylor’s home is Finnerly-Stevens Funeral Home today. [E10]

11 • He suggested quite a matter of fact, as I ought to take the college preparatory course... If Homer had been another sort of man with definite ideas as to a Negro’s ‘place,’ and had recommended agricultural ‘science’ or domestic economy, I would doubtless have followed his advice... I did not then realize that Homer was quietly opening college doors to me, for in those days they were barred with ancient tongs.”

Frank A. Homner (1853-1918), principal of Great Barrington High School, nurtured the bright young student. Homer saw a lot of years’ work outside of school as well, as he also lived on Church Street until April 1885 (D11), when he purchased a home on Elm Street. Homer attended the Massachusetts Junior College of Arts and Sciences and subsequently Harvard, and the couple moved to 186 East Street in 1886.

At a stint as editor of The Berkshire Courier from 1888-90, Homer and his wife Elizabeth were known to be devoted to hiking on the mountain, as evidenced by the map of the mountain in their possession. Homer served as president of Ossipee College for a decade. A stent as editor of The Berkshire Courier from 1888-90, Homer and his wife Elizabeth were known to be devoted to hiking on the mountain, as evidenced by the map of the mountain in their possession. Homer served as president of Ossipee College for a decade. Homer was a fervent supporter of the Civil Rights Movement and a strong advocate for African American education. His legacy lives on through the Homer Center for Advanced Studies, a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting social justice and educating future leaders.

12 • Once while I was in high school, a number of us students were invited home from a tempting arbor... Judge Dewey suggested that I and the others might be better off in Reform School. The court ordered me to turn in the 3 or 4 months I had refused to press any charge and nothing more was heard of Judge Dewey’s proposal. But I was considerably disturbed... James Dewey (1836-1900) died at the corner of Church and Main Streets. [D12] Dewey had studied law with Increase Summer and was appointed to the Massachusetts Supreme Court in 1886. Dewey was also active in Congregational Church affairs. His daughter Mary, whom Du Bois liked very much, “surprised me in arithmetic.” The grape incident was surely forgotten by the time Du Bois graduated from high school; “the diplomas were presented by Hon. Justin Dewey, Chairman of the School Committee,” according to the local newspaper July 1884. The Dewey home was razed in 1940 to allow construction of a Fire Department building. That building, twice enlarged over the years, houses several businesses today.

13 • “A matter of splitting up kindling for two maiden ladies... was one of the first of my economic enterprises in [1883].” The Misses Smith lived on South Main Street. [E13]

14 • “Will Buckwith lived on a farm near south of town, which sometimes my mother was to pay as a temporary ‘help.’ I always came out over weekend, played with Will, and ate with the family.” The Buckwith place was also at a great distance from the high school, so the students had to make their way through the woods and fields to get to it in time for classes.

George Bebee was “a handsome character in high school, two or three years older than I, and extraordinarily dressed. My own clothes were never niggardly, but seldom new and certainly not in current style. Yet George and I were close friends because we wore the same dirt clothes he was rather damn in class and knew it, while I was bright and just this side of slabby that balanced each other.” Bebee went on to become a doctor. (His home has not been identified.)

Du Bois recalled a string of school mates — too many to straddle. Among them were“Clarence (‘serious and studious’) and Ralph Sabin (‘a little devil’), Art Benham (who ‘could do anything’), Jim Parker (of a watchmaker), Boardman Tobey (‘son of a jeweler’), George Phelps (the ‘tinner’s son’), Elisha Peabody (‘Dirt Dog’, whom he did not know much), Sara Taylor and Minnie Crissey (‘sober country girls and good students whom I liked’), Agnes O’Neill (‘a newcomer to town who turned out to be quite an attractive girl’), and probably the girl who specialized in personal care during a social exercise at school and shocked him into giving college a try. There were also the Irish boys Mike Gibbons (‘marvelous facility at playing marbles’) and Ned Kelly (‘fair and jolly’).

Children found amusement in Fourth of July and cattle show festivities. They played baseball and football: “I was not particularly good at football but played it for fun.”

William refused to fish or hunt: “I have never killed a bird nor shot a rabbit.”

15 • “We had in the town several picturesque hermits, usually retrograde Americans of old families. There was Crosby, the gunslinger, who lived in an old gable side with all his guns and water wheel. He was a frightful appearance but we boys often ventured to visit him...”

George Dewey (1856-1927) was a Chicago newspaper editor who lived in the then-isolated “Brooklyn” section east of the river. [E14], had been upset when the town constructed the Bridge Street bridge over the Hoosac in 1870 as he no longer could ferry hunters across the river in his small boat. Alice, Griffin all to be children, he was ever committed to an asylum. His two-story house burned in 1885. Crosby Street bear his name today.

16 • “Outside the town, we approached a stream which broadened into a little pool,” wrote Shirley Graham Du Bois in His Day Is Marching On (1971). “That’s where I learned to swim…”

This was the mill pond to the old Kellings sawmill, which in 1880 was converted into a grist mill. The mill was razed in 1978. There is still a popular swimming hole south of the Great Barrington bridge on the present Route 23. [E16]

Du Bois recalled introducing his writer to water differently for the 1950 gathering of the Alumni of Seattle High School. “With a black boy of Great Barrington boy, I was initiated into the mystery of water by swimming across the Big Bend…”

This is the creek in the river south of where he was born, in the vicinity of the old rubber factory.

CHURCHES
17 • “As we turned into Main Street in Great Barrington, wrote Shirley Graham Du Bois in His Day Is Marching On, ‘he [Du Bois] pointed out the large Episcopal church. ‘That’s where my mother took me on a Sunday morning. I loved the singing…”
Mary Du Bois until 1878 attended services at St. James Episcopal Church. Constructed in 1887, the building is still standing. [B17 & B17] “The older families and the new well-to-do attended.”

18 **: “Because the minister, Scudder, was especially friendly, my mother early joined his church. I think we were the only colored communicants...I grew up in the church and its Sunday School...and it was there that one of the lady members, looking down on a chubby little brown child walking beside his mother, saw the rings on girls of five being revealed, and with considerable kindness she said sweetly: ‘Little girls keep their hats on in church.’ This of course precipitated at home a wild fight on my part to have my curls cut off, and of course in time, and to my mother’s delight to off they came.

First Congregational Church built its third meeting house on Main Street in 1860. The church was destroyed by fire in March 1862 and rebuilt. [B18, CH & DB] The [1954-pipe Hillhouse L. Roosevelt] organ, which was given by Mr. Timothy Hopkins, of San Francisco, was presented to the church by a member who had done so much and promised so much more to the honor of this, his native town, has been engaged by the recently organized entertainment company to give a concert to my child. My native church is still a part of the Congregational church...” The Berkshire Courant reported 24 December (1800). In 1909, the Congregational Church School donated $30 to his work in the South — and received a letter of thanks which was read to the children, according to a recent newspaper article, 16 December 1909. The church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

19. 20 & 21: “Later, and while I was in high school, the colored folks of the town, mostly members of the A.M.E. Zion church...and now we used to attend the services...” The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Society began meeting in Great Barrington in 1861. William sometimes wrote reports of its activities for the New York Globe and Freeman. The church at first met quarterly and heard guest preachers such as the Rev. J. Anderson or the Rev. L. E. Llois. From his newspaper accounts, church members met in a variety of locations but often at W.M. Crotty’s home. [B19 & B20] or at Julia Sumner Hall on Main Street [B28 & B20] until they purchased land north of Railroad Street in 1881. [B21 & B21] They built a small structure, then replaced it with a larger one.

Mary Du Bois worked for her as a housekeeper. Remaining in the family until 1867, Brighilde was used as a private school for a time and, moved several hundred feet in 1960 to a new foundation, is again a private residence today.

Parley’s brother George Russell (1841-1900) and his family lived on Castle Street [B23], just west of the railroad tracks in a building now home to Children’s Health Program.

24 “There was no great exhibition of wealth. The homes of the Russell’s, the Churches and the Collins were comparatively large with perhaps eight or ten rooms and built of wood or, more rarely, of stone...In general living, the contrast between the well-to-do and the poor was not great. Living was cheap and there was little poverty...” Dr. Carlton T. Collins (1821-81), twice president of the Berkshire Medical Society, resided at the corner of Maple Avenue and Main Street in a home called Indianopolis. [E24] The mansion has since 1925 been home to the Christian Science Society.

25 “The Church family had considerable inherited wealth from their ancestors, the Collins...” George Church (1826-1903) was a bank officer and agent for the Van Deusenville iron furnace. He was a partner in the present Church family. [E23] The church stood an imposing in the village, isolated and surrounded with grass, flower, and fruit. There were stables in the rear, and outhouses for farming.

27 “It was no fault to be too young for college, being 16, and for so a year I became a time-keeper on the building of Mrs. Hopkins’ beautiful new home...” Du Bois wrote in a kitchen and the Irish servants were kind. Once or twice Mrs. Russell insisted on my taking home certain of Louis’ toys. The one which gave me most pleasure was an old wooden bicycle...It was Mrs. Russell to whom my high school principal turned when he wanted me to take up Greek, and my mother and I were met because of the cost of the books. She bought all my Greek books.

Du Bois’ reference is to Celeste S. Gilbert Russell (1845-1932), Parley’s second wife. Mary Du Bois worked for her a housekeeper.

Interior views of St. James Episcopal Church (above) and First Congregational Church (below), ca. 1913. [Photo: Mass. State Library collection]
Great Barrington Town Hall's second floor was a popular auditorium until the Mahaiwe Theater was built on Castle Street in 1906. (Hall photo, Mason Library collection)

School — the town's first public high school — was completed in 1870 and stood directly outside Center School. (B29 & D29)

Will was younger than most of his classmates and, thanks to his mother's quiet urging, excelled at his studies. "Many remember him as a bright-faced, articulate, mischievous fellow boy," said The Berkshire Courier 12 July 1884.

Newt Searles, who had inherited his wife's estate, in 1896 offered to build the town a new high school next to the Housatonic River in exchange for the old one and its land on — which abuts his Barrington House. (...) It may be that some thoughtful person saw far beyond the present and grasped the idea that they were putting this institution on what was the natural great highway of the valley," Du Bois commented in 1936. The new school was completed in 1897 and named for Searles. (Today it is a middle school.) The old high school building was removed and the site is vacant.

50. "From early years, I attended the town meeting every Spring, and in the upper room in that little red brick Town Hall, fronting on a Roman 'victory' commemorating the Civil War, I listened to the citizens discuss things about which I knew and had opinions — streets and bridges and schools, etc. Community social life centered in entertainments in Town Hall..." — Larned, and young. Frank Wright, who was reading law in Judge Dewey's office, put on a play at Town Hall. The school's annual play, "The Schoolmaster of the Ledges," and most high school students took some part. There was a folk play, Old John Brown Had a Little Indian, in which I was one of the participants...

Du Bois' keen interest in local laws and legal politics: "...I did not notice many colored men at the town meeting last month: it seems that they do not express much interest in politics as it is necessary for the protection of their rights," he wrote in the New York Globe for 14 April 1883. He was particularly dissatisfied when a black man who was candidate for District Justice (constable) lost out because clearly white citizens were on the deciding committee. The colored men of Great Barrington held the balance of power," he insisted in the 29 September 1883 Globe, "and have decided the election of many officers for a number of years. If they will only act in concert they may become a power not to be despised. It would be a good plan if they should meet and decide which way would be most advantageous for them to cast their votes."

Du Bois' and others formed a "club for literary and social improvement to be known as the Sons of Freedom," he reported 6 December 1884. They gathered at the William Crouse home or elsewhere. M.J. Mason was president, Crouse vice president. Du Bois became the group's secretary and treasurer. They put on a reception for the "ladies" in January 1885 and soon were in "their new club rooms," which was then presented them by their lady friends," he said in the Freeman of 16 May 1885.

Great Barrington's municipal building opened in January 1876. (B30 & D30) A large hall on the upper floor provided space for all kinds of entertainment, from music and drama to lectures and shows. Town offices and
the Southern Berkshire Registry of Deeds occupy the building today.

STORES & COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS
31. “I remember especially Johnny Morgan. He was a small man, I think of Welsh descent, and ran a bookstore in the front of the little shop where the village post office occupied the rear. I went to the post office daily, not because I was expecting mail or often got any, but because of the intriguing exhibition of periodicals and books in Johnny Morgan’s store…”

32. “My first regular wage began as I assured the high school; I went early of mornings and filled with coal one or two of the now so-called ‘base burning’ stoves in the millinery shop of Madame L’Hommedieu…”

33. “There were two hotels: the Berkshire catered to summer visitors, chiefly from New York, the Miller House depended on local trade.

34. The Berkshire House was at the corner of Main and Bridge Streets. [D33] Built of stone in 1839 by George E. Ives, it replaced a wooden tavern. It was destroyed by fire in 1895 and was rebuilt retaining some of the original lower level storeroom. Today it houses stores and offices.

35. The F.B. Miller Hotel on the west side of Main Street was built in 1833-34 and added onto in 1895, ’96 and 1902. Today, with its third facade, it is Barrington House. [D34]

36. “There were two or three liquor saloons, which the town did not like to recognize, but had to. George Briggs, a native American, used to run such a saloon, but got out of the business when I was quite small and went into the more respectable business of selling meat…”

37. “Ned Hollister’s father had his large grocery store near the water-trench for horses [in front of Town Hall]; his stock of tropical fruit introduced me to dozens of oranges which Ned forced on me when accidentally his stone hit me instead of the ‘duck on the rock’ at which he was aiming. He attained fame by bringing the first high-wheeled bicycle to town.”

38. “There was a bank, the Mahanville National Bank, incorporated in 1847. Its office was then at the corner of Main and Castle Streets for many years. Many years later, it is in Banknorth. [D42]

39. “...there was little crime or misdemeanor in our town. We had a single policeman, a little old man named Abe who wore a badge and carried a club. We boys used to make silly fun of him. But there was little one-roomed ‘lock-up’ and once in a while he had an occupant for a night.”

40. “I went down the Housatonic railroad to Bridgeport…to visit my paternal grandfather, Alexander Du Bois in 1883.

41. Chartered in 1836, the Houseutoon Railroad began service through the town of Great Barrington in 1842. The original 1844 depot was twice replaced, in 1872 [B44 & D44] and again, at a location slightly south, in 1900. Only the last survives.”

42. “While returning to Great Barrington—” wrote Shirley Graham Du Bois, “he knew that some day he would go out into the wider world.”

43. “When the Berkshire Courrier, our local weekly newspaper, made social announcements it was usually marriages, births, and deaths, visiting relatives from out of town, and trips to New York or the West by local residents.”

44. “[A]s soon as I was instrumental in moving the city over to the next door near the Marble Block Inn to accommodate a new, larger print press. Later used as a bakery and a bank, the Courrier building still stands with its 1916 facade and white pillars. The newspaper kept up with Du Bois’ activities over the years.”

45. “E. Hollister & Son, a former colored resident of this town, has an extremely interesting article on ‘The Training of the Black Man’ in the September Atlanta.” It reported that “at least a single Southern African American.” A news item "Alumni Hold Annual..."
[Text continued from previous page]

...we have never in all the years thought before of refining it, and seek to restore its ancient beauty; making it the center of a town, of a valley, and perhaps of who knows? —of a new measure of civilized life.

—Alumni Association speech, 1980

Alex Kaptyn excavates near the Burghardt farmstead house site in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, during a University of Massachusetts Summer Field School in Archaeology in August 2003. (Courtesy of Dr. Bernard A. Drew)

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Memorial stone after installation at the W.E.B. Du Bois River Garden in Great Barrington. (Rachel Fletcher photo)

du Bois & the Houseaton River Walk

Great Barrington is “turning its back to the river,” W.E.B. Du Bois warned in a talk about the Houseaton River from the summer meeting of the alumni of Great Barrington and Sautee high schools in July 1930. The speaker commended the town for having created what is now Stanley Park. “He said that upon returning he found that...” is the headliner for the front-page obituary 29 August 1963.

The Courier advised its readers of progress of the memorial committee (27 February and 16 October 1969), but also editorialized strongly against July 1969 to designate his childhood home on Egremont Plain as a landmark. Although a later edition, it printed a photo of the installation of the historic landmark plaque at the Route 23 property (17 July 1980).

OTHER SITES OF INTEREST

46 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 son. Du Bois remembered a bronze marker inscribed in Mahwah Cemetery ($46) by Great Barrington Historical Society in 1994.

Young Burghardt Du Bois died 24 May 1899 of dysentery and was buried (without stones) with his Burghardt ancestors. His mother Nina Gnome Du Bois, who died July 1, 1905 was interred next to the plan. The Du Bois’ daughter, Yalonda Calen Du Bois, who died in March 1921 is buried in Baltimore. Shirley Graham Du Bois in Du Bois: A Pictorial Biography (1978) recalled coming to Great Barrington for a funeral, but there is no stone or local record of her burial here.

Du Bois himself died 27 August 1943 in Ghana and was buried there, beside a stone which prominently proclaims the town of his birth: “Great Barrington, Massachusetts, U.S.A.”

47 & 48 Putley and George Russell’s father John C. Russell (1807-1873) and his uncle Asa C. Russell (1808-1876) established Berkshire Wooster mill on upper Main Street near the Great Bridge in 1836. This factory’s efficiency was possibly the source of Du Bois’s “golden river,” though he also wrote, “The Houseaton, yellowed by the paper mills, rolled slowly through [Great Barrington’s] center...” Thus Owen Paper just south of Houseaton village was the more likely polluter. Organized in 1862, the manufacturer of fine ledger paper was in Du Bois’s day operated by Henry D. Coombs (1866).

The old Russell mill was razed in 1968 and E. Calguni & Sons has a paint and home furnishings store on the site today. [47] Owen Paper was succeeded by present-day Rising Paper, a division of Fox River Paper. [Not on map]

49 & 50 Du Bois was active with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for many years, and his house has attracted two others affiliated with the NAACP and rights organizations.

Mary White Ovington (1865-1951), a staunch Du Bois ally on the NAACP, converted an old barn into a home in Alford in 1920 and called it Riverbank. She stayed there the rest of her life for the next forty years. [Not on map]

Weldon Johnson, a skilled African American from Great Barrington, purchased a home in the Snowdon section of Great Barrington, Five Acres, which he visited until his untimely death in an automobile accident. [Not on map]

Du Bois visited Ovington and Johnson at these homes, both privately owned today.

Dr. David Graham Du Bois, president and CEO of the W.E.B. Du Bois Foundation, speaks at the dedication of the W.E.B. Du Bois River Garden in Great Barrington as Evelyn Jeffers looks on. (LVN, Bawden Fitness photo)