

## Reflections on a legacy: W.E.B. Du Bois celebrated in Great Barrington

Shaw Israel Izikson :: 26/02/2024



**Great Barrington** — Back on February 23, 2021, the town declared the birthday of William Edward Burghardt “W.E.B.” Du Bois as a municipal holiday. Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868 in Great Barrington and was a civil rights activist, historian, and sociologist whose accomplishments and work still influence others 60 years after his death.

Among his many accomplishments, Du Bois was a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, and he was also the editor of the NAACP’s journal, *The Crisis*.

As an author, he wrote “Black Reconstruction in America” in 1935 and his autobiography “Dusk of Dawn” in 1940, along with many other works. In his work, Du Bois targeted racism and promoted racial equality and justice.

Du Bois’s legacy and work were celebrated through a series of events organized by the town’s W.E.B. Du Bois Legacy Committee. The events comprised a festival held at several locations throughout town from Wednesday, February 21 to Saturday, February 24.

At the seventh annual W.E.B. Du Bois Legacy Celebration at the First Congregational Church on Friday, February 23, Du Bois Legacy Committee Chair Randy Weinstein reflected on the town declaring Du Bois’ birthday as a municipal holiday back in 2021. Weinstein is the former operator of the W.E.B. Du Bois Center, which [he operated for 26 years until 2023](#).

“As the safe houses of commemoration stepped up, they could only step up so far,” Weinstein said. “It was necessary for the local government to defy historical precedent and begin reckoning with the past stated by deep-seated prejudices. The measure passed on February 23, 2021 was even more remarkable knowing that, after decades, Great Barrington has struggled to embrace Dr. Du Bois. There were times that our community tripped up, times that

separated us, infuriated us, and compromised our better angels. Dr. Du Bois was largely a whitewash for the local community and classrooms. A victim of the systematic racism that he spent his life battling. Three years ago, the Great Barrington Selectboard showed that the town's destructive cycle could be broken.”



Randy Weinstein, chair of the W.E.B Du Bois Legacy Committee, speaking at the seventh annual Du Bois Legacy Celebration on Feb. 23 at the First Congregational Church. Photo by Shaw Israel Izikson.

Suraj Yengde, a Hutchins Center W.E.B. Du Bois Scholar at Harvard University, gave the keynote address for the festival on Wednesday, February 21, at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center.

Before Yengde gave his keynote address, Gwendolyn VanSant, CEO and founder of local organization [Multicultural BRIDGE](#) and vice chair of the town's W.E.B. Du Bois Legacy Committee, read a quote from Du Bois:

*We are all striving for dignity. The Black person fighting here is fighting for dignity. Dignity is very central to our political process. Whatever we do, we want dignity. We want respect as human beings. We don't want more respect. We don't want less respect. We want equal respect.*



Suraj Yengde gave the keynote address for the W.E.B. Du Bois Legacy Festival at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center on Wednesday, Feb. 21. Photo by Shaw Israel Izikson.

In his address, Yengde reflected on Du Bois' thoughts on the origins of American democracy and how it is practiced. "Today, we attribute democracy with what we see in electoral campaigns," Yengde said. "We see a democracy where there is one person, one vote. Along with a democracy that trickles down to what we see in the local governments. For Du Bois, when he deliberated about democracy in his famous essay ['The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America,' published in 1924], Du Bois came up with the idea that the actual democracy that was practiced in America was given by the slaves. He exemplifies this by saying that when we live in a so-called democratic setup and you have so many people owning so many people, the very rationale to seek freedom and liberty was rooted strongly in the people who wanted to participate in democracy. In the essay, he argues strongly about American democracy having its original roots in the democracy of the slaves and the people who are, after emancipation, striving to participate in the new experiment of American democracy."

On Thursday, February 22, the [Du Bois Freedom Center](#) held a reception with its Executive Director Ny Whitaker at St. James Church. Whitaker was [named the executive director](#) of the center back in January. The center itself is located at the former Clinton A.M.E. Zion Church at 9 Elm Court in Great Barrington, and the organization has continued with its renovation project to make the church into an education center.

"I come from a family that went out of its way to make sure that we were educated in the rich history of African Americans and their contributions to America, our great democracy, and to the arts and culture," Whitaker said in an interview with The Berkshire Edge before the event. "At this point in my life, I really wanted to make sure that the next position that I took was one where I could build a legacy. To restore this church that was built in 1887 for a place to tell the stories about African American contributions to the region just seemed like the perfect match for me."

On February 23 the Legacy Celebration was held at the First Congregational Church. Various speakers included State Sen. Paul Mark, Selectboard Vice Chair Leigh Davis, Governor's Council member Tara Jacobs, and Jesse Lederman from U.S. Senator Ed Markey's office.



Great Barrington Selectboard Vice Chair Leigh Davis speaking at the W.E.B. Du Bois Legacy Celebration at the First Congregational Church on Friday, Feb. 23. Photo by Shaw Israel Izikson.

“Our town proclaimed [W.E.B. Du Bois’ birthday] as a holiday to elevate his legacy for generations to come,” Davis said at the February 23 event. “[The town did this] in order for students, residents, and visitors to know about the town’s appreciation and reverence for Du Bois’ legacy of scholarly work that has shaped our lives and our democracy here and across the globe. He was a seminal activist for freedom, and I’m very grateful for the tireless efforts of this community to pay tribute to our native brother and son.”



From left: State Sen. Paul Mark, Governor's Council member Tara Jacobs, and Jesse Lederman from the U.S. Senator Ed Markey's office. Photo by Shaw Israel Izikson.

Jacobs, a North Adams native, said that, as part of serving on the council, her role is to give advice to Gov. Maura Healey about nominees of judges and magistrates. “I was motivated to serve on the council by the racial disparities in

our justice system, and I wanted to be part of actively changing it for the better,” Jacobs said. “I read W.E.B. Du Bois’ writings when I was about 17, and his writings set me on a path that got me here today.”



From left: BerkShares Director Leah Barber; Berkshire Taconic Foundation Community Engagement Officer of Equity and Inclusion Alÿcia Bacon; and BART Charter School Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion André Lynch, who took part in a panel discussion at the Feb. 23 event. Photo by Shaw Israel Izikson.

As part of the February 23 event, a panel discussion about “practicing Du Bois’s Habits of democracy” was held with BerkShares Director Leah Barber; Berkshire Taconic Foundation Community Engagement Officer of Equity and Inclusion Alÿcia Bacon; and BART Charter School Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion André Lynch.

“The first time I learned about Du Bois was in college in an African American history class when we talked about his philosophy as comparative to Booker T. Washington,” Bacon said. “I think that an impact that Du Bois’ legacy can have in our communities is to not only remember to voice his values, but also to remember the people in the system. What I have learned from my studies is that I’m here today because I’m standing on the shoulders of the people that were here during Du Bois’ time. My journey grew stronger with that foundation, and that foundation will be there for the next generation to come.”