

W.E.B. Du Bois

Great Barrington, Massachusetts ' Nashville ' Cambridge ' Berlin ' Atlanta ' New York ' Accra

In Sixty Seconds

Origins. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, a small town in the Berkshires where his family had lived since the eighteenth century. His mother Mary Silvina Burghardt raised him alone after his father left. The town took up a subscription to send him to Fisk University in Nashville. He arrived there at seventeen and encountered the Jim Crow South for the first time.

Work. Fisk BA in 1888. Harvard BA in 1890, MA in 1891, PhD in 1895, the first Black American to earn one there. Two years of graduate study at the University of Berlin. The Philadelphia Negro in 1899, the first major empirical urban sociology study conducted in the United States. The Souls of Black Folk in 1903. Co-founder of the NAACP in 1909. Founder and editor of The Crisis from 1910 to 1934. Black Reconstruction in America in 1935.

Impact. He built the scholarly case for full civil and voting rights decades before the laws that recognized them. He organized five Pan-African Congresses between 1919 and 1945. He trained a generation of Black sociologists at Atlanta University. The Crisis magazine, which he edited for twenty-four years, reached a peak circulation of over 100,000 and was the most widely read Black publication in America.

Legacy. He died in Accra on August 27, 1963, one day before the March on Washington. Roy Wilkins announced his death from the Lincoln Memorial podium the next afternoon. His papers fill seventy-seven reels of microfilm at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where the library bears his name. The Crisis is still published by the NAACP. The field of sociology studies The Philadelphia Negro as a founding document.

The Network

Nina Gomer Du Bois

First wife (1896-1950). Wilberforce University student who married him during his first teaching post. Raised their daughter Yolande and bore a son Burghardt, who died of diphtheria at eighteen months in Atlanta after every white doctor in the neighborhood refused to treat him. Fifty-four years of marriage. She managed the Atlanta and Brooklyn households while he traveled and published.

Ida B. Wells

NAACP co-founder, later philosophical antagonist. Signed the 1909 founding call alongside him. They broke publicly over the direction of the Chicago branch and over what she considered his preference for university-trained male leadership. They continued to work in overlapping reform circles in Chicago through the 1920s.

Shirley Graham Du Bois

Second wife (1951-1963). Novelist, playwright, and biographer who had known him since the 1930s. Moved with him to Accra in 1961 and supervised the household at their state-provided residence there. Continued the Encyclopedia Africana project and remained active in Pan-African publishing until her own death in Beijing in 1977.

James Weldon Johnson

NAACP colleague. Poet, diplomat, and songwriter who served as NAACP field secretary and later general secretary while Du Bois edited The Crisis. Contributed essays and poems to The Crisis throughout the 1920s. The two men rebuilt the NAACP's Southern membership in the years after the First World War.

For Discussion

1. Du Bois introduced the phrases the color line, the veil, and double consciousness into American writing through The Souls of Black Folk in 1903. All three remain in use more than a century later. What qualities of analytical prose make a coined phrase durable beyond its decade, and which contemporary phrases show signs of that same durability?
2. The Philadelphia Negro in 1899 was the first major empirical urban sociology study conducted in the United States. Du Bois went door to door across the Seventh Ward. What does shoe-leather research make possible that aggregated data does not, and where does urban sociology still depend on that same direct field work?
3. Du Bois edited The Crisis for twenty-four years, reaching a peak circulation above one hundred thousand. What is the editorial practice that sustains a single magazine through two decades of coherent politics, and what happened to that practice in the generations after Du Bois stepped down in 1934?
4. Du Bois organized five Pan-African Congresses between 1919 and 1945. The 1945 Manchester Congress is now studied as the political origin point of African decolonization. What is the relationship between diasporic organizing in one century and the formation of new states in the next, and where in the twenty-first century is a comparable organizing infrastructure visible?
5. Du Bois became a Ghanaian citizen in February 1963 after the United States had withheld his passport for eight years. He died in Accra one day before the March on Washington. What does emigration in late life add to or subtract from a public intellectual's American record, and how has the framing of his final chapter shifted in the sixty years since?

Primary Sources

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