W.E.B. Du Bois

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born on February 23, 1868, in a small clapboard house on Church Street in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Surrounded by the Berkshire Mountains, Great Barrington was an idyllic middle-class community boasting tree-lined streets with white picket fences. The town experienced so little crime that it needed just one policeman.

Du Bois, seen here as an infant with his mother, Mary Sylvina, was born into a prosperous family in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Although he was one of few blacks in the town, he encountered little discrimination and excelled in school. Source: Special Collections and Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Of the rural community's 5,000 inhabitants, only about 50 were black. The rest of the population was composed of Irish and Dutch immigrants and the descendants of New England Puritans. "Standing did not depend on what the ancestor did, or who he was, but rather that he existed, lived decently and thus linked the individual to the community," Du Bois wrote of his birthplace in his autobiography.

His mother's family, the Burghardts, was one of the oldest clans in Great Barrington, black or white. William's great-great-grandfather Tom was born in West Africa about

1730 and seized as a child by a Dutch slave trader, Conraet Burghardt, who brought the boy to Berkshire County. By the time Tom died 50 years later, Massachusetts had adopted a Bill of Rights, which stated that all people in the commonwealth were free.

A prosperous farming family, Tom's descendants found themselves in an unusual position when compared with most blacks in America, who were poor and enslaved. Yet the black Burghardts were not completely integrated into white society. "The color line," Du Bois wrote in his autobiography, "was manifest and yet not absolutely drawn." Consequently, his ancestors developed a strong sense of racial pride and independence.

In 1831, one of Tom's grandsons, Othello, and his wife, Sarah, had the last of their dozen or so children, Mary Salvina Burghardt. Sheltered by her overly protective family, she led a quiet life and became a housemaid. Then, in 1867, a handsome, light-skinned man known as Alfred Du Bois arrived in Great Barrington.

Alfred was partly of French ancestry. His grandfather, Dr. James Du Bois, was a white plantation owner in the Bahamas who had sired two sons with one of his slaves. Both boys were pale skinned, and their father decided to treat them as his own and gave them a proper education. Alexander, the eldest, was sent to a private school in Connecticut, where he was treated as though he were white. When his father died, however, he became the responsibility of an indifferent cousin who decided that Alexander should be regarded as black. The youth was promptly removed from school and apprenticed to a shoemaker.

Alexander rebelled against this change in fortune and spent the balance of his life seeking to recover his former status as a white gentleman. A restless wanderer, he went from Connecticut to the black republic of Haiti and then back to Connecticut before settling in southwestern Massachusetts. During his many travels, he married three times and had four children. One of them, born in 1825, was a son named Alfred.

Alfred—small and handsome, with wavy hair—was cut from the same cloth as his father. Something of a vagabond poet, he loved literature deeply and possessed a desire to travel. In 1867, he arrived in Great Barrington with few prospects. Yet he quickly won Mary Burghardt's heart, despite her family's protests to her that he was not respectable.

As it turned out, the protests were well founded. Shortly after William was born in 1868, Alfred left for New Milford, Connecticut, a town 40 miles south of Great Barrington. There, in a place far removed from Mary's domineering family, he was supposed to establish a home for his wife and only son. He had promised to write for them once he was settled, but his letter failed to arrive, and Mary and William never saw or heard from him again.

A Life of Learning Begins

Apart from this separation, William's early childhood was surprisingly free of strife.

"The little family of my mother and myself must often have been near the edge of poverty," he wrote in his autobiography. "Yet I was not hungry or in lack of suitable clothing and shoes, or made to feel unfortunate." Growing up in what he called "a boy's paradise," he often played in the woods and caves of the Berkshire hills and along the banks of the "golden" Housatonic River, whose gorgeous color, he eventually discovered, was the result of pollution from the mills that it powered.

Mary and William lived with Grandfather Burghardt on the outskirts of Great Barrington for almost five years, until Othello died in 1873. Then mother and son moved to the center of town, where Mary once again took up work as a domestic. William enrolled in public school the following year.

Academic work clearly agreed with him. The work ethic that the Burghardts had passed on to William helped him become an excellent student. In the crowded wooden schoolhouse, he was promoted ahead of the other children his age.

The fact that William was black and virtually all of his classmates were white made little difference to his educators, who often embraced him as the "teacher's pet." The brown color of his skin also made little difference to William, at least for a while. "I was as a boy long unconscious of color discrimination in any obvious and specific way," he wrote in his autobiography. Yet the realities of racial prejudice slowly began to enter his life.

One day, William and some of his white friends were playing a game in which they exchanged calling cards, which was something their parents did when they made social calls. William offered his card to a white girl who had recently moved to town, but she refused to accept it. Shaken from his insulated world, he was aware from then on that his skin color marked him as an outcast. "I found it difficult and even unnecessary to approach other people," he said, "and by that same token my own inner life perhaps grew the richer."

The resultant sense of rejection also increased William's desire to succeed, and he proceeded to study harder than ever before. His mother, who had not received any formal schooling, wanted him to accomplish much more than she had and kept on reminding him, he said, that "there was no real discrimination on account of color—it was all a matter of ability and hard work." It was a philosophy with which William could find little fault. "I found it easy to excel most of my classmates in studies," he said. "The secret of life and loosing the color bar, then, lay in excellence, in accomplishment."

Yet there was an occasional setback. While William was growing up, his mother suffered a paralytic stroke that left her lame in one leg and with a crippled left hand. She was not able to work as often after the onset of the illness. Accordingly, the Burghardts and their neighbors attempted to help out Mary and her son whenever they could. Aunts and uncles joined forces with local white families to provide William and his mother with money to buy shoes and books.

William pitched in as well, delivering groceries, shoveling coal, chopping wood, mowing lawns, hawking newspapers. He was as deeply attached to his mother as she was to him, and he took great pride in trying to make her life as comfortable as possible. On those occasions when she was able to work, he met her at the end of the day and walked her home, arm in arm.

By the time William entered Great Barrington High School in 1881, he had become, as he later put it, "thrown in upon myself." A dutiful churchgoer, he had managed to adopt the reserved Calvinist air that was characteristic of many New Englanders and had learned to avoid any situation where there was even the slightest hint of racial discrimination. Moreover, his school offered few opportunities for social activity. This was partly because his high school had an enrollment of just 25 students. Most of the rural community's teenagers had to discontinue their formal education at an early age so they could help out on the family farm.

One of William's favorite ways of spending his free time was browsing at a local bookstore owned by Johnny Morgan. The bookseller took an interest in the promising young student, and when William was in his second year of high school, Morgan allowed the 14-year-old to buy a set of history books on credit. These volumes proved to be so valuable to William that he kept them for the rest of his life.

Du Bois was one of only a dozen students, and the only black student, to graduate from Great Barrington High School in 1884. He was considered by many to be the town's top student, and several townspeople even set up a scholarship fund to help him continue his education. Source: Special Collections and Archives, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Morgan also helped William land a part-time job selling subscriptions for a black newspaper, the *New York Globe*. Shortly thereafter, William, who coedited his school newspaper, the *Howler*, also became, at age 15, the *Globe*'s Great Barrington correspondent and a reporter for the *Springfield Republican*. He suggested in his

articles that the public contact him to find out what were the best books to read. He also urged the local black community to attend town meetings and take an active part in local politics. William had begun to go to these meetings, which were characterized by lengthy orations and debates, when he was around 13 years old.
A trip in 1883 to Rocky Point, Rhode Island, for an annual picnic attended by thousands of black families from New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts piqued William's interest in black affairs. There he observed "Negroes of every hue and bearing, saw in opened-mouth astonishment the whole gorgeous gamut of the American Negro; the swaggering men, the beautiful girls, the laughter and gaiety, the unhampered selfexpression. I was astonished and inspired." It was a striking introduction to a world beyond his own, a world to which he belonged more firmly than to the community of Great Barrington—the world of color.

Before long, William formed the Sons of Freedom, a small club dedicated to the "advancement of the colored race" in Great Barrington. Members of the club were expected to attend lectures, study American history, and take part in debates. Like his news articles, the activities of the Sons of Freedom affirmed his growing belief that blacks needed to organize if they wanted to win their civil rights.

William and a dozen other students graduated from Great Barrington High School in 1884. The lone black in his class—and the first black ever to graduate from the school—he gave a commencement address on the abolitionist Wendell Phillips, who had died earlier in the year. The rousing applause that William's speech received went a long way in encouraging him to speak out on injustice and ignorance in the coming years.

William's immediate goal, though, was to go to college—a substantial ambition for any poor youth in late nineteenth-century America, black or white. Moreover, he wanted to attend Harvard College, which was located directly across the state in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was widely regarded as one of the best schools in the country. As one of the few students in his graduating class who planned to continue his formal education, William became something of a prize pupil to all of Great Barrington.

As a result, four townspeople—Frank Hosmer, the high school principal; Edward Van Lennep, principal of the local private school; and the Reverends C.C. Painter and Evarts Scudder—labored to set up a scholarship for Du Bois. They urged him to spend a year working and brushing up on his studies while they raised the money for his college tuition, and William agreed. He spent the year after high school as a timekeeper on a construction project, where he learned a bit about workers' rights.

In the summer of 1885, Du Bois was told that enough money had been raised for him to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Established in 1866 as a school for blacks, it aimed at becoming one of the best educational institutions in the South. Fisk was not Harvard, though, and William's mother and his relatives, who were all extremely proud of his academic accomplishments, grew angry that he was not

remaining in the North and was being sent to a part of the country where slavery had been a way of life.

Du Bois, too, was disappointed that he was not going to Harvard, yet the South held a

special appeal for him. "I was going to meet colored people of my own age and education, of my own ambitions," he said. Blacks in the South lived in a segregated society. They were denied the right to vote, were prevented from holding public office, and found it difficult to escape from dire poverty. If he wanted to be a leader of his people, the South, he knew, was the place to begin. "Black folk," he said, "were bound in time to play a large role in the South."

Half a year before the 17-year-old Du Bois set out for Fisk, his mother died. Her love and encouragement had nourished his ambition and early success, and she had relied on him a great deal. Her death, as great a blow as it was to William, made the thought of leaving Great Barrington easier for him to bear.

In September 1885, Du Bois embarked on the first long journey of his life. He boarded a train to New York, and at Manhattan's bustling Grand Central Station switched to a train that was waiting to take him, as he later put it, into "the land of slaves." He was unsure what the days ahead would bring, but it was clear that he would never again live where the world intruded as gently as it did between the "quiet hills and golden river" of Great Barrington.

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