

The Berkshire Eagle

At riverside event, celebrating Du Bois' love for his hometown and the Housatonic

By Heather Bellow, The Berkshire Eagle
Jul 11, 2018



Saxophonist Antoine Roney and drummer Kwaku Kwaakye Obeng perform a "musical libation" at a ceremony honoring W.E.B. Du Bois' commitment and love for the Housatonic River at the W.E.B. Du Bois Park in Great Barrington.

STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN - THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

GREAT BARRINGTON — Next to the Housatonic River, and a few hundred feet from W.E.B. Du Bois' birthplace, is a garden park filled with native plants to honor a native son.

And on Wednesday the Church Street garden named for this early architect of the civil rights movement was aflutter with breezes and music, poetry and recitation, as well as a medley of "The Sorrow Songs" from Du Bois' seminal classic, "The Souls of Black Folk," sung by MaryNell Morgan-Brown, an international performer of spirituals.

Around 60 people attended "W.E.B. Du Bois: Born by a Golden River" for a celebration of Du Bois' love of the river and of his hometown, at the Housatonic River Walk, which is run by the Great Barrington Land Conservancy.

Rachel Fletcher, the River Walk's soon-to- retire founding director, said the gathering, to be followed by a walking tour of important Du Bois sites, marked an important moment of remembrance of Du Bois and his lesser-known "love of rivers and environmental justice."

"It's a testament for how much this region really does care about W.E.B. Du Bois, and the principles he stood for," Fletcher said.

Du Bois was born in a home off Church Street in 1868, "five years after the Emancipation Proclamation," as he writes in "Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil." The author, poet and NAACP founder's life spanned the years of post Civil War Reconstruction through the Civil Rights movement of the mid- 20th century and beyond. At the end of his life he had joined the American Communist Party and moved to Ghana, where he died. Both infused his legacy with controversy that has made Great Barrington slow to honor him.

But that's all changing fast. The River Walk event is one of many this year in town that now appears to receive belated nourishment from his life's work. Today the focus was on Du Bois and the "golden river" he loved. But the river was golden because of factory pollution. In a speech to Searles High School alumni in 1930, he spoke of the condition of the river, and why.

"We turn our backs upon the natural center of the river and try to make the center Main street," said the 1884 Searles graduate. "Mr. Sinclair Lewis has proven to us that Main street can not be the center of real civilization. And for this valley, the river must be the center."

A handful of dignitaries took turns reading the speech, including Dennis Powell, president of the NAACP's Berkshire branch, and two Du Bois scholars from UMass Amherst. A print of Du Bois' hand-typed copy of the speech, as of Wednesday afternoon, now hangs in Town Hall, a gift of the UMass Amherst Libraries.

Like Langston Hughes, Du Bois, who learned to swim in the Green River, knew rivers. So poet and playwright Ted Thomas recited Hughes' poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

Later, Carol Connare, UMass Libraries Communication Director, said Du Bois' environmental speech, made near this very spot, was prescient and modern.

"It was pre-GE," she said, referring to the current struggle to clean downriver pollution from Pittsfield's former General Electric plant.

Of the event, Fletcher later told The Eagle that she was moved by the event at the park, created in 2002 by the late Monica Fadding, and Heather Cupo, who continues to oversee it.

"To lay all that down in this space ... I couldn't have wished for more," Fletcher said, noting the 20 years of labor that went into this entire river walk, and includes a rain garden in the Du Bois park to control runoff.

"This was a trash dump. There were oil drums."

Now there are shade trees, and flourishing native species that were propagated and which had been gathered from around town.

"Yet in his speech, Du Bois talks about biodiversity," Fletcher said.

Heather Bellow can be reached at hbellow@berkshireeagle.com or on Twitter @BE_hbellow and 413-329-6871.

MORE INFORMATION



Ghana event commemorates death 61 years ago of Great Barrington native W.E.B. Du Bois