

W.E.B. Du Bois: Advocate for Rivers Here at Home

I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills, five years after the Emancipation Proclamation. — W.E.B. DU BOIS



W.E.B. Du Bois in 1907



GOLDEN RIVER

Great Barrington native W.E. B. Du Bois was an early founder of the Civil Rights movement here in the United States and father of Pan Africanism abroad. He was born on Church Street, just a few hundred feet from this spot.

The red circle indicates Du Bois's birthsite, McKinley Cottage, behind the McKinley House on Church Street. PHOTO BY JULIUS HALL, BEFORE 1882

Du Bois wrote fondly of his idyllic childhood surroundings, even as he took industrial polluters to task.

That river of my birth was golden because of the woolen and paper waste that soiled it.

The gold was theirs, not ours; but the gleam and the glint was for all.

— W.E.B. DU BOIS, *DARKWATER*

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

— W.E.B. DU BOIS, “THE HOUSATONIC RIVER” 21 JULY 1930

THE HOUSATONIC RIVER

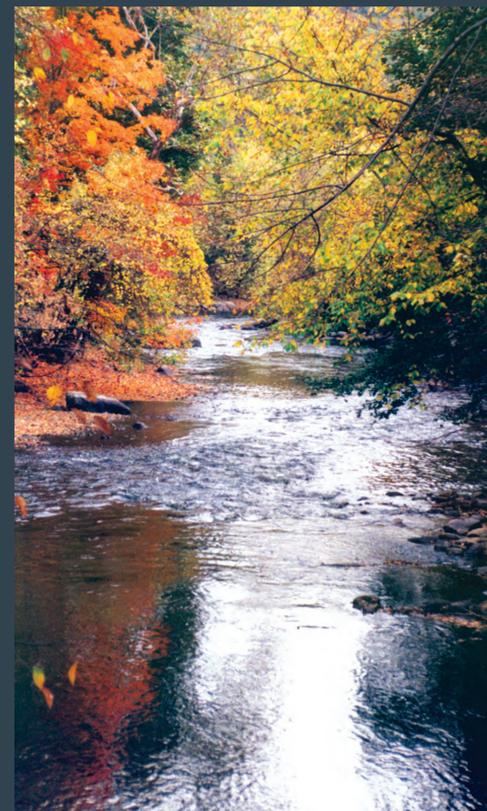
Speech of W. E. DuBois, '84, at the Annual Meeting of the Alumni of Searles High School, July 21, 1930.

On hearing the subject of my speech, some of you may have thought of it as a joke; and others may have expected an historical dissertation on the history of this valley; but my speech is neither of these. On the contrary it is a bit of philosophy, a little inquiry into the meaning of life in this valley, brought to my mind because of the condition of the Housatonic river. I am not going to try to answer all the questions which I raise, but I do want to bring them to your minds. In earlier days, even before this anniversary we are celebrating in Massachusetts now, this valley must have been a magnificent sight. The beautiful mountains on either side, thickly covered with massive trees, and in the midst of it all, the Housatonic river rolling in great flood, winding here and there, stretching now and then into lakes which are our present meadows and so hurrying always on toward the sea. And I think everyone would realize then and now that the river was the center of the picture. In a sense the mountains exist for the river; and no matter how much one might climb their sides, they look back upon the river as the central beauty of the panorama.

Berkshire Courier, 31 July 1930

been made to slave for men and carry their burdens. Cities have learned that these hives of industry can be made also things of beauty. St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans are discovering this with the Mississippi, and I have stood on the park above Nijni-Novgorod and seen the panorama of the Volga. The city was torn and maimed by war and famine and civil strife, but the park and river were still beautiful. What now is the meaning of all this for Great Barrington, and the valley of the Housatonic? I conceive it a much more important matter than it may seem at first. I left New York this morning and rode up into this valley with the same feeling that I always bring—that here is a more ordered and satisfying solution to the problem of living than in the hot and crowded and dirty city. Cities are artificial; they are nerve-racking with noise, they manufacture by their very organization more social problems than their ingenuity is able to solve. Here is a great country; over nine-tenths of its area is empty and the rest dotted by these notoriously congested centers called cities that civilization has conceived and carried on. But is this necessary? Why can't

Dr. Du Bois returned to the Berkshires in 1930 to deliver the keynote address at a reunion of alumni of Great Barrington High School. His lecture was titled “The Housatonic River.”



The Housatonic River from River Walk upstream

Dr. Du Bois traveled the world, but always took the time to remember the Housatonic River.

The Housatonic River is the natural Main Street of the Town of Great Barrington. It should be a clear and limpid stream, flowing gently through grass, trees and flowers; flanked by broad roadways and parks as the lifestream of a town.

— W.E.B. DU BOIS, AGE 93

LETTER TO SEARLES HIGH SCHOOL ALUMNI PRESIDENT
GEORGE P. FITZPATRICK, 13 JUNE 1961



W.E.B. DU BOIS RIVER PARK

This park was dedicated in September 2002 to honor Du Bois's love of the Housatonic River

and his lifelong campaign for environmental justice and the restoration of rivers everywhere. It is a site on the African American Heritage Trail of the Upper Housatonic Valley.

For this valley, the river must be the center.

Certainly it is the physical center; perhaps, in a sense, the spiritual center. Perhaps from that very freeing of spirit will come other freedoms and inspirations and aspirations which may be steps toward the diffusion and diversification and enriching of culture throughout this land.

— W.E.B. DU BOIS, “THE HOUSATONIC RIVER”



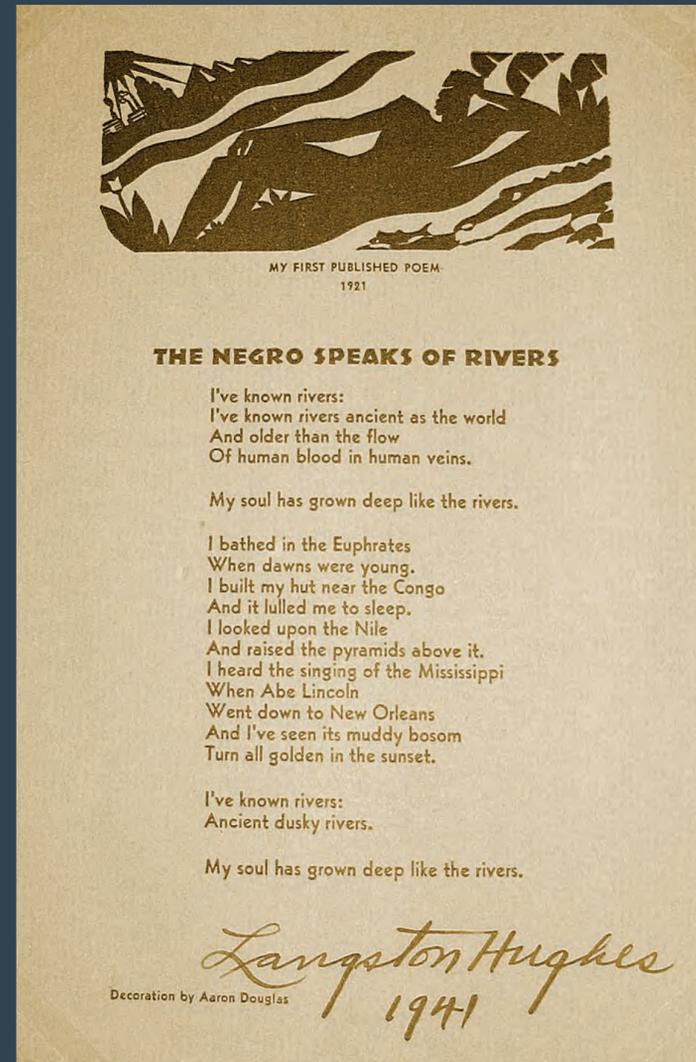
Rain Garden, W.E.B. Du Bois River Park

We created a rain garden between the street and the river to help restore the river's floodplain. Runoff velocity is slowed and dispersed.

Indigenous wetland plants filter and cleanse the water, which soaks slowly into the soil. The rain garden produces seeds to vegetate in other areas along the River Walk. We have planted more than 200 varieties of native plants, trees, and shrubs.

Just as biodiversity is essential for a healthy river system, cultural diversity is the foundation of a just and civilized society, according to Du Bois.

W.E.B. Du Bois: Champion of Rivers Around the World



Kindled by his love for the Housatonic River, W.E.B. Du Bois became a champion of rivers around the world.

Harlem Renaissance writer and poet Langston Hughes composed “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” when he was only eighteen years old. Du Bois published Hughes’s poem in the July 1921 issue of *The Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).



African American flood victims. Rolling Fork, Mississippi



1927 Mississippi flood refugee tents on levee. Greenville, Mississippi

THE GREAT MISSISSIPPI FLOOD OF 1927

The Great Mississippi River Flood was one of the epic natural disasters and racial tragedies of the twentieth century, displacing a million and a half people and leaving several hundred persons dead. Discrimination against Black refugees in the camps and in the distribution of relief supplies was rampant. Dr. Du Bois demanded an investigation into the “desperate and evil conditions of that section of our country.” If W.E.B. Du Bois were alive today, imagine his response to the 400,000 left behind in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

The Niagara Movement



Niagara Movement Medallion, 1905, depicting Saint-Gaudens's monument to Col. Robert Gould Shaw and the soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment

The Niagara Movement was Du Bois's first attempt to form a civil rights organization. This was the first substantial Black-organized protest movement of the twentieth century. It led to the founding of the NAACP in 1909.



The first meeting convened in 1905 on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls in Fort Erie, where the Four Great Lakes—Michigan, Huron, Superior, and Erie—empty into the Niagara River.

Du Bois and other founders of the Niagara Movement in 1905

Of the wondrous Niagara Falls, Du Bois wrote:

*Upon the awful mystery of that inner, deeper, wilder fall
no human eye may look. Its frightened bloodless face is veiled.
Vast sheets of mist roll up and with wild white hands
screen this sanctuary of Almighty God, while this,
the pale waters churning and foaming
shines His shadow below in silent rainbows.*

— W.E.B. DU BOIS, LETTER TO DAUGHTER, YOLANDE DU BOIS, 1911



Harper's Ferry, West Virginia



The second meeting of the Niagara Movement convened in 1906 at Harper's Ferry, at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers and the site of abolitionist John Brown's raid in 1859 to end slavery.

- *We would vote; with the right to vote goes everything.*
- *We want discrimination in public accommodation to cease.*
- *We claim the right of freemen to walk, talk, and be with them that wish to be with us.*
- *We want the law enforced against rich as well as poor; against capitalist as well as laborer; against white as well as black.*
- *We want our children educated. Either the United States will destroy ignorance or ignorance will destroy the United States.*

— W.E.B. DU BOIS, "ADDRESS TO THE NATION," 1906

For more information, visit
www.gbriverwalk.org

