

1868-1963

W.E.B du Bois

W.E.B. Du Bois, or William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, was an African American writer, teacher, sociologist and activist whose work transformed the way that the lives of black citizens were seen in American society. Considered ahead of his time, Du Bois was an early champion of using data to solve social issues for the black community, and his writing—including his groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk*—became required reading in African American studies.



W.E.B. Du Bois' Childhood

Born in Great Barrington, [Massachusetts](#), on February 23, 1868, Du Bois' birth certificate has his name as "William E. Duboise." Two years after his birth his father, Alfred Du Bois, left his mother, Mary Silvina Burghardt.

Du Bois became the first person in his extended family to attend high school, and did so at his mother's insistence. In 1883, Du Bois began to write articles for papers like the *New York Globe* and the *Freeman*.

Education of W.E.B. Dubois

Du Bois initially attended [Fisk University](#) in Nashville, [Tennessee](#), a school for black students. His tuition was paid by several churches in Great Barrington. Du Bois became an editor for the *Herald*, the student magazine.

After graduation, Du Bois attended [Harvard University](#), starting in 1888 and eventually receiving advanced degrees in history. In 1892, Du Bois worked towards a Ph.D. at the University of Berlin until his funding ran out.

He returned to the United States without his doctorate but later received one from Harvard while teaching classics at [Wilberforce University](#) in [Ohio](#). There, he married Nina Gomer, one of his students, in 1896.

His doctoral thesis, "The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870," became his first book and a standard in American education covering slavery.

The Philadelphia Negro

Du Bois took a position at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) in 1896 conducting a study of the city's Seventh Ward, published in 1899 as *The Philadelphia Negro*. The work took up so much of his time that he missed the birth of his first son in Great Barrington.

The study is considered one of the earliest examples of statistical work being used for sociological purposes, with extensive fieldwork resulting in hundreds of interviews conducted door-to-door by Du Bois.

Mapping out the Seventh Ward and carefully documenting familial and work structures, Du Bois concluded that the black community's greatest challenges were poverty, crime, lack of education and distrust of those outside the community.

W.E.B. Du Bois' Sociological Studies

The U.S. [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) offered Du Bois a job in 1897, leading to several groundbreaking studies on black Southern households in Farmville, [Virginia](#), that uncovered how slavery still affected the personal lives of African Americans. Du Bois would do four more studies for the bureau, two in [Alabama](#) and two in [Georgia](#).

These studies were considered radical at the time when sociology existed in pure theoretical forms. Du Bois was pivotal in making investigation and data analysis crucial to sociological study.

During the same period, Du Bois wrote "The Strivings of the Negro People" for the *Atlantic Monthly*, a groundbreaking essay that explained to white readers how it feels to be a victim of racism. It is considered the general public's introduction to Du Bois.

'The Souls of Black Folk'

Du Bois and family moved to Atlanta University, where he taught sociology and worked on his additional Bureau of Labor Statistics studies.

Among the books written during this period was *The Souls of Black Folk*, a collection of sociological essays examining the black experience in America. Partially derived from his *Atlantic* article, it embraced Du Bois' personal history in his arguments.

The book also introduced the idea of "double consciousness," in which African Americans are required to consider not only their view of themselves but also the view that the world, particularly whites, has on them during all parts of life. It also expressly differentiated Du Bois from more conservative black voices like [Booker T. Washington](#).

In 1899, Du Bois' son Burghardt contracted diphtheria and died after Du Bois spent the night looking for one of three black doctors in Atlanta, since no white doctor would treat the child. A resulting essay, "The Passing of the First Born," appeared in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

The Niagara Movement and Booker T. Washington

In 1903, Du Bois taught summer school at Booker T. Washington's [Tuskegee University](#), but friction between the two men led to Du Bois joining Washington's rivals in the [Niagara Movement](#), charged with seeking justice and equality for African Americans.

That group failed, partly due to opposition from [Washington](#), but during its existence Du Bois published *The Moon Illustrated Weekly*, the first weekly magazine for African Americans,

producing a total of 34 issues before folding in 1906. He followed this up briefly with the journal *Horizon*.

NAACP

In 1910, Du Bois accepted the directorship of the recently-formed [NAACP](#). He moved to [New York](#) City and served as the editor of the organization's monthly magazine *The Crisis*.

The magazine was a huge success and became very influential, covering race relations and black culture with Du Bois' forthright style. The magazine stood out for its continual endorsement and coverage of women's suffrage. Du Bois worked for the NAACP for 24 years, during which time he published his first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*.

After a brief second stint at Atlanta University, Du Bois returned to the NAACP as director of special research in 1944 and represented the organization at the first meeting of the [United Nations](#).

Du Bois also became more interested in [communism](#) and international issues, and became an open supporter of progressive and left-wing groups, which created problems with NAACP leadership. He left the organization again in 1948.

W.E.B. Du Bois and Communism

Du Bois' radicalism continued in the public sphere, running as the Progressive Party's candidate for Senate in 1950 and losing. He and other members of the Peace Information Center were charged as agents of a foreign principal, inspired by the organization's Soviet leanings, but were acquitted in a trial in 1951.

Following the death of his wife in 1950, Du Bois married Shirley Graham the following year. Graham's interest led Du Bois further into exploring communism, delving into the American Communist community and becoming known for his apologetic view of [Joseph Stalin](#).

In 1961 Du Bois officially joined the American Communist Party before leaving the country to live in Ghana at the invitation of its president and becoming a citizen there.

Encyclopedia Africana

Du Bois first conceived of the *Encyclopedia Africana* in 1908 as a compendium of history and achievement of people of African descent designed to bring a sense of unity to the African diaspora. Unable to raise the needed funds, Du Bois wasn't able to revisit the project until 1935, but it was disrupted by professional battles.

Du Bois published some entries from the proposed encyclopedia and even editions of research material, but it wasn't until 1962 that a further promise was made to complete the encyclopedia.

After Du Bois was invited to move to Ghana, he pledged to finally publish the work, but it was never realized before his death. Du Bois died on August 27, 1963 in Ghana and was given a state funeral.

Sources

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Author

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