

# W.E.B. Du Bois Papers

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W.E.B. Du Bois, 1907

**Background:** W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt) Du Bois (1868-1963) was a scholar, writer, editor of *The Crisis* and other journals, co-founder of the Niagara Movement, the NAACP, and the Pan African Congresses, international spokesperson for peace and for the rights of the oppressed, he articulated the strivings of African Americans and developed a trenchant analysis of the problem of race in the twentieth century.

After receiving his bachelor's degree from Fisk in 1888, Du Bois continued his studies at Harvard, enrolling as a junior and receiving his second bachelor's degree in 1890, followed by his MA in 1891 and PhD in 1895. At the University of Berlin between 1892 and 1894, he was introduced to contemporary German social scientific theory.

In 1894, he accepted an appointment on faculty of Wilberforce University; in 1895, he completed his dissertation; and in 1896, he got married -- to Nina Gomer (d.1950), with whom he had two children, Burghardt (1898-1900) and Yolande (1901-1960) -- and published his first book, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States, 1638-1870*, the first volume published in the Harvard Historical Series (1896). In 1896, he moved to an appointment as assistant instructor in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, undertaking an intensive analysis of the African American population of Philadelphia. The resulting publication, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), is often considered his most original and compelling scholarly contribution, and it is a foundational work in the field of urban sociology.

Moving next to Atlanta University to teach history and economics, from 1897 to 1910, Du Bois built a Department of Sociology with a national reputation. Perhaps the key to this reputation was the series of annual conferences Du Bois established in 1896. Each year, he and his colleagues focused on a single issue confronting African Americans, publishing the results in the Atlanta University Publications series.

Not all of Du Bois' work was purely academic. He wrote numerous articles for the popular press and his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) brought him national attention, a book that spotlights the growing tensions in the African American community between the accommodationism of Booker T. Washington and Du Bois' more radical demand for full and immediate equal rights. Du Bois helped found the Niagara Movement in 1905 which paved the way for the establishment in 1909 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an interracial organization based upon similar, though somewhat less radical principles.

Du Bois left Atlanta University in 1910 to become director of research and publicity for the NAACP, and he was also appointed editor of the monthly journal of the NAACP, *The Crisis*. His numerous articles and editorials in *Crisis* solidified his position as a major spokesman for African American rights. Freed of his purely academic commitments, he also continued to write for the popular press, publishing a number of highly regarded books, including *The Negro* (1915), *Darkwater* (1920), *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924), and the novels *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) and *Dark Princess* (1928). Among his most ambitious projects was a pageant of Black history and Black consciousness, *The Star of Ethiopia*, written both to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and to provide a counterweight to the racist Hollywood cinematic epic, *Birth of a Nation*.

The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 and the intransigence of whites on racial matters gradually led him toward a Black nationalist solution of the race problem, stressing Black control of businesses, cooperatives, and other similar institutions as the key to Black survival. In this position, Du Bois began to depart from the mainstream of the leadership within the NAACP, resulting in Du Bois' resignation from the organization in 1934 and his departure from the editorship of *Crisis*.

Returning to Atlanta University, Du Bois resumed teaching duties and the scholarly life. His *Black Reconstruction* (1935) ran directly counter to the predominantly white historiography of the Reconstruction period by emphasizing the contributions of African Americans in the South during the years immediately after the Civil War. He also wrote *Black Folk, Then and Now* (1939) and *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), and in 1940, he founded *Phylon*, a quarterly social science journal. With support from the Phelps-Stokes Fund, he also became involved in the preparation of an *Encyclopedia of the Negro*, a work that saw only a preparatory volume published.

Still remarkably active and productive in his seventies, Du Bois retired from Atlanta University in 1944. He soon returned to the NAACP, where his duties revolved around special research projects, especially relating to the place of the African colonies in the postwar world, and where he served as consultant for the NAACP to the United States delegation at the founding meeting of the United Nations. The old rifts, however, were not so easily healed. In 1948 Du Bois was dismissed after continuing disagreements with other officials over NAACP policies.

In his later years, Du Bois served as a co-chair of the Council on African Affairs and chair of the Peace Information Center and the American Peace Crusade. In 1950, he made his first and only foray into formal politics, running for the U.S. Senate from New York on the American Labor Party ticket. Ironically, perhaps, this brush with formal politics was paired with a less congenial one. During the anti-Communist hysteria of 1951, Du Bois's activities on behalf of the Peace Information Center led to an indictment against him and four associates as unregistered foreign agents. Although the charges were dismissed as groundless later that year, the attack by an arm of the government was a bitter experience. Du Bois nevertheless continued his work in peace and international affairs, visiting Russia and China.

Du Bois became a member of the Communist Party of the United States in 1961. That same year, at the age of ninety-three, he moved to Ghana at the invitation of President Kwame Nkrumah to serve as editor of an *Encyclopedia Africana*. Although poor health limited his work, he continued to study and write. He took Ghanaian citizenship and on August 27, 1963, died in Accra at the age of ninety-five. Du Bois was survived by his second wife, the writer Shirley Graham Du Bois, whom he had married in 1951.

Over his lifetime Du Bois wrote or edited more than three dozen books and hundreds of articles. His accomplishments were many. As an activist and organizer, he helped usher in the modern civil rights movement by founding and building the Niagara Movement and NAACP, and he helped create periodicals that became important voices for Black identity. As a scholar and founder of American sociology, he contributed early and important works in the literature of demography, race sociology and research methodology, he helped define the continuous social survey and the fields of social stratification and race relations.

As a writer, his work earned him election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Although Du Bois's reputation suffered among white Americans during the McCarthy era, and although he died in 1963 before the reputations of McCarthy victims were rehabilitated, his impact and influence were international in scope. A generation after his death, Du Bois remains a potent figure internationally, and a source of inspiration for million.

**Description:** Includes over 100,000 items of correspondence (more than three quarters of the papers), speeches, articles, newspaper columns, nonfiction books, research materials, book reviews, pamphlets and leaflets, petitions, novels, essays, forewords, student papers, manuscripts of pageants, plays, short stories and fables, poetry, photographs, newspaper clippings, memorabilia, videotapes, audiotapes, and miscellaneous materials. Size: 122.59 linear feet.

The W.E.B. Du Bois Papers (1803-1999), document virtually every stage in his long career and show his involvement in many areas of twentieth century racial, literary, and social reform movements. In particular, the correspondence files, including well over 100,000 items show Du Bois' interactions with others in these realms. The earliest letter in the collection, a note to his grandmother, dates from 1877 when Du Bois was just nine years old. Among the latest is the draft of a letter, written not long before his death in 1963, appealing to the leaders of the Soviet Union and China to heal the divisions that had arisen in the world communist movement. The files, containing only a few items from his early youth, become more plentiful for Du Bois' student days in the 1880s and 1890s, and the commencement of his career as scholar and educator in the 1890s and 1900s. They are at their fullest during his period with the NAACP as editor of *The Crisis*, 1910-1934, and they remain nearly as abundant for the last thirty years of his life, 1934-1963.

### **Organization of the Collection**

- Series 1. Correspondence, 1877-1965
- Series 2. Speeches, 1888-1962
- Series 3. Articles, 1887-1968
- Series 4. Newspaper Columns, 1927-1961, n.d.
- Series 5. Nonfiction Books, 1896-1962
- Series 6. Research Materials, 1896-1959, n.d.
- Series 7. Pamphlets and Leaflets, 1902-1962
- Series 8. Book Reviews, 1905-1961
- Series 9. Petitions, 1947-1961
- Series 10. Essays and Student Papers, 1888-1962
- Series 11. Novels, 1892-1961
- Series 12. Pageants, 1913-1941, n.d.
- Series 13. Plays, 1928-1940, n.d.

Series 14. Short Stories and Fables, 1895-1955  
Series 15. Poetry, 1907-1965, n.d.  
Series 16. Miscellaneous Material, 1803-1964  
Series 17. Photographs, 1864-1963  
Series 19. Motion Pictures and Tapes, 1958-1979  
Series 22. Accretions to the Du Bois Papers, 1890-1972

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