

by William C. Kashatus

What, after all, am I?" asked W.E.B. DuBois when he arrived in Philadelphia in 1897 to study the city's black community. "Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American?" Not only did this tension characterize DuBois' classic work, *The Philadelphia Negro*, published two years later, in 1899, but it informed his lifelong quest "to be both a Negro and an American."

Widely considered the foremost black intellectual of the twentieth century, W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963) was the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University. Excluded from teaching in white American colleges, however, the young, introverted scholar found himself an outsider looking in. When the University of Pennsylvania offered him an appointment in sociology in 1896, he seized the opportunity. Penn officials had no intention of allowing DuBois in the classroom, however. They hired him to conduct an empirical investigation to prove the deeply ingrained notion among Philadelphia's white middle-class that their "great, rich and famous city was going to the dogs because of the crime and venality of its Negro citizens."

"TO BE BOTH A NEGRO AND AN AMERICAN" W.E.B. DuBOIS AND HIS SEARCH FOR



With little opportunity for job training, most African Americans a century ago could only find work as unskilled laborers, such as those photographed laying pipe in Philadelphia.

For eighteen months, DuBois lived in and studied Philadelphia's Seventh Ward, where the black population was concentrated. The product of his research was *The Philadelphia Negro*, one of the very first studies to integrate urban ethnography, social history, and descriptive statistics. DuBois concluded that the poverty and crime of the Seventh Ward was not the result of race and biological distinctions that separated whites and blacks, but of environment and the social conditions that confronted blacks, including the legacy of slavery, race prejudice, and competition with white immigrants for jobs. Together with the economic depression and heated labor agitation of the 1890s, his findings made it difficult for the city's white middle-class to accept the genteel cultural standards and arrogant, self-satisfied belief in progress that characterized the Victorian period. At the same time, though, DuBois became deeply disillusioned by his research. Considering himself a citizen of the United States, he could

Civil rights states-
man and author
William Edward
Burghardt DuBois
(1868-1963) in 1907.
A neighborhood in
Philadelphia's
Seventh Ward in
the early twentieth
century (below).

not reconcile his belief in the American Dream with the second-class treatment he received as a member of the black race. It was a struggle that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, William Edward Burghardt DuBois was raised by his mother, who worked as a domestic for the community's affluent residents. Circulating among the children of these proper New Englanders, he encountered relatively little discrimination as a youngster. What little prejudice existed was quickly dissipated by DuBois' superior intellectual abilities, which earned him the admiration of his teachers at the local high school. Although he graduated at the head of his class in 1885, DuBois was refused admission to Harvard University. Instead, school principal Frank Hosmer arranged a scholarship at Fisk University, an all-black institution in Nashville,

Tennessee, affiliated with the Congregational Church. In Nashville, for the first time, he discovered the rich diversity of his race.

DuBois, of mulatto, French Huguenot, Dutch, and African

AND AN AMERICAN" AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY



ancestry, was fascinated by the different hues of skin of southern blacks. He was also exposed to blacks of wider economic and educational backgrounds than in his native New England. And he was so moved by the poverty and illiteracy of local blacks that he spent his summers in the countryside, trying to at least teach them to read and write.

DuBois rarely ventured into white society, rejecting the racism and segregation that characterized white rule in the South. He had considered himself a member of the elite, having been educated and socialized into the upper echelons of New England society. However, the Jim Crow regulations that severely restricted his access to restaurants, streetcars, and theaters fully awoke him to the realities of race in America. Not surprisingly, he completed his bachelor's degree in three years and returned to Massachusetts, where he gained admission to Harvard.

Rejected in white social circles, DuBois, who suffered from a self-confessed "inferiority complex," sought and found companionship among the members of his own race. His keen intellect allowed him to overcome his shy disposition, and win over his professors, among them intellectual giants William James, Josiah Royce, and George Santayana. They encouraged DuBois to pursue a doctorate and provided the counsel, as well as intellectual stimulation, for him to succeed. While working on his doctoral

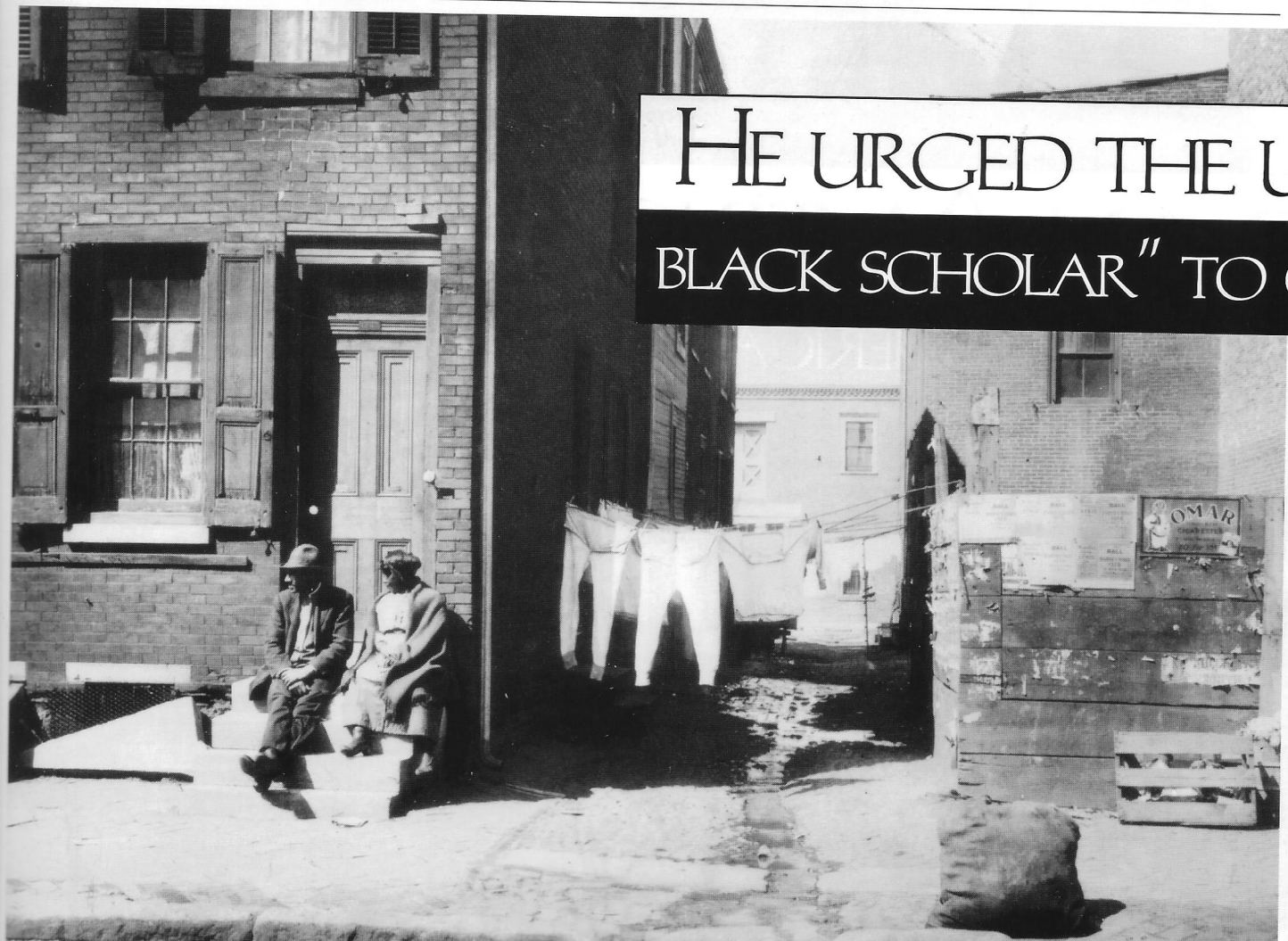
degree, DuBois spent two years at the University of Berlin studying with prominent sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920). Weber profoundly influenced the course of his life's work, which was distinguished by an eclectic mix of scientific social analysis.

After completing his doctorate in history in 1895, DuBois, ranked in the middle of his class at Harvard, pursued a professorship at several prestigious white colleges. None showed interest in hiring him. Disillusioned by the rebuffs, he accepted an academic appointment at Wilberforce College, a small, all-black school near Dayton, Ohio. He taught Latin, Greek, German, and English, but grew increasingly uncomfortable with the college's strong evangelical leanings. Two years later, he eagerly agreed to undertake a social study of Philadelphia's black community, which was concentrated in the Seventh Ward and included some of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

The study was the idea of Susan P. Wharton, a feminist leader of the patrician College Settlement movement and a descendant of one of Philadelphia's oldest and most influential families. Like many Progressives, Wharton was genuinely concerned about the moral and social uplift of the poor, but she also feared that growing poverty would lead to an increase in crime and moral decay of the city. Samuel M. Lindsay, professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, echoed the same fears. Consid-

Poor jobs translated to meager livelihoods and, thus, little disposable income for recreation for residents of Bainbridge Street in 1914.

HE URGED THE UN BLACK SCHOLAR" TO CO



...faced fierce competition and many blacks were pushed out of the job market. Some did find work as bricklayers in the Octavia Hill section of Philadelphia in 1924.

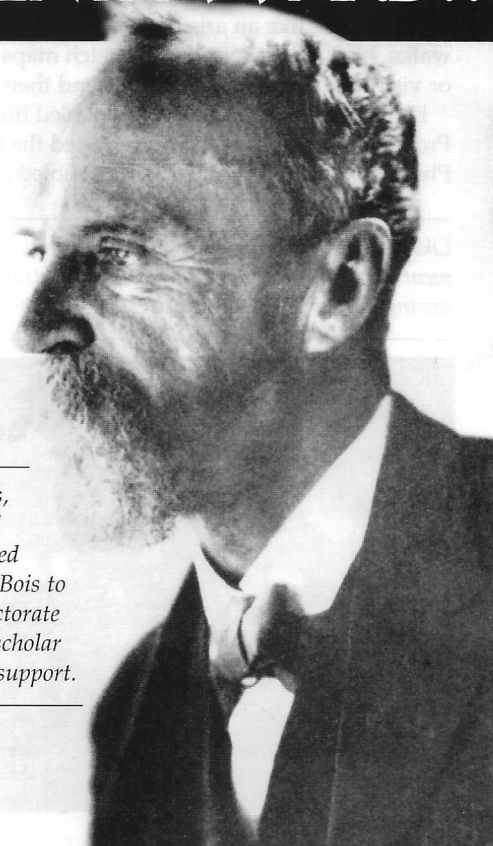


UNIVERSITY TO HIRE "A DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT THE STUDY OF THE SEVENTH WARD...

ering poverty inevitable, "a hopeless element in the social wreckage," Lindsay likened it to a virus and insisted that Progressives could at best prevent it from overwhelming the social organizations that helped to relieve its victims. Poverty, he warned, "should be prevented, if possible, from accumulating too rapidly or contaminating the closely allied product just outside the almshouse door." He urged the university to hire "a distinguished black scholar" to conduct the study of the Seventh Ward, believing that its "deplorable findings" would be given "greater validity if they came from someone of the same race." W.E.B. DuBois was the man.

Hired as an assistant in sociology at nine hundred dollars a year, the university directed DuBois to examine "how this [Negro] class of people live; what occupations they follow; from what occupations they are excluded; how many of their children go to school; and to ascertain every fact which will throw light upon this social problem." He understood the politics behind his appointment, realizing that the white, middle-class reformers who hired him believed that Philadelphia's condition was firmly tied to its black residents. "Something is wrong with a race that is responsible for so much crime," they contended, adding, "strong remedies are called for."

Given the opportunity to impress the scholars of a prestigious, Ivy League university, an aspiring academic hoping to secure a fulltime teaching position might have validated the so-called "Negro Problem." DuBois, however, realized the study afforded him a unique opportunity to disprove such a theory. "The world was thinking wrong about race," he



*William James,
an intellectual
who encouraged
the young DuBois to
pursue his doctorate
and gave the scholar
much needed support.*

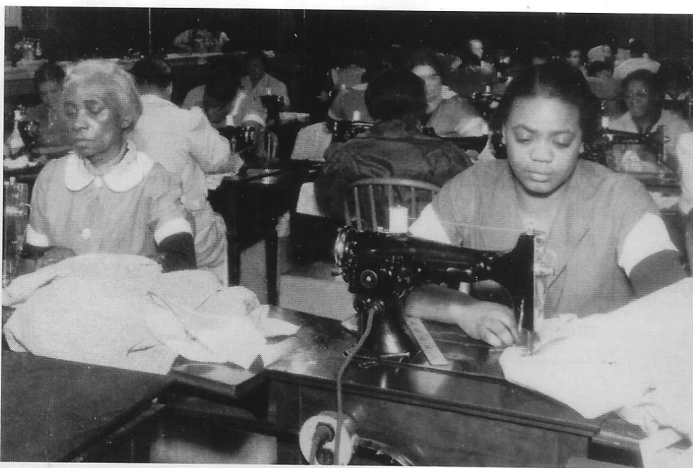
issued, simply because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation."

Upon arriving in Philadelphia, DuBois discovered that most blacks lived in center-city. Forty percent of the black population lived in the Seventh Ward, an area bounded by Spruce Street to the north, South Street to the south, Sixth Street to the east, and Twenty-Third Street to the west. Most of these blacks were domestic servants, but there were also wealthier, as well as poorer elements. About three thousand residents formed a black aristocracy, enjoying a degree of wealth and education that surpassed even the white residents of the ward. Philadelphia-born and bred, many descended from freedmen who owned their own businesses, taught school, or practiced law or medicine. Their circumstances, however, alienated them from their own people for whom they provided little leadership. At the other end of the spectrum were the poor. Concentrated in the city's first black ghetto in the southeastern part of the ward, these indigent blacks were forced to compete for cheap unskilled labor with the influx of white, eastern European immigrants that lived in the neighboring wards. Those who found employment were mostly stevedores, street and sewer cleaners, trash collectors, porters, and waiters.

Renting a room above a cafeteria with his new bride, Nina Gomer, whom he had met at Wilberforce College, DuBois quickly immersed himself in the daily activities of the Seventh Ward. Walking the streets in his Victorian-era style suit and starched collar while gathering census data and descriptive statistics, he seemed more like an aristocrat than a researcher. During his walks, he would often stop to sketch maps or diagrams, to listen or visit with the residents, and attend their meetings.

DuBois' year-and-a-half stint enabled him to trace the "Negro Problem" to four causes. He first cited the tremendous growth of Philadelphia itself, which nearly doubled since the Civil War, that

Like many workers during the Great Depression, blacks found employment through the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This WPA sewing project in 1938 was at Sixth and Noble Streets, Philadelphia.



Blacks dominated catering and the food service industry until the 1890s.

NEW METHOD AND INDUSTRY

resulted in fierce competition for employment, as well as in cultural tensions between native blacks and newcomers. He estimated that one hundred and twenty-five thousand foreigners lived in the city in 1860 and that that number had risen to two hundred and sixty thousand by 1896. Together with the influx of nearly fifteen thousand black migrants from the South, European immigrants intensified the job competition for the twenty-five thousand blacks born and bred in the city. White immigrants held the advantage in the job market. Most blacks—migrants as well as natives—were unskilled and poorly educated. Freedom had allowed white immigrants to acquire a certain degree of skill and education unknown to blacks. And prejudiced white employers preferred to hire workers of their own race.

Second, new methods of conducting business and industry undermined black entrepreneurship, essentially putting the small trader and household industry out of business. In their place sprang up department stores, hotels, and factories with large workforces, paying millions of dollars in annual wages to a largely white workforce. DuBois discovered the city's catering business, dominated by blacks since the 1860s, had been taken over by whites in the 1890s, as it was transformed from a home-based industry to a more lucrative hotel industry. Whatever opportunity blacks had for social and economic mobility was displaced by the changing nature of business, as well as by the racism of the whites who were responsible for the transformation. Whites had not only "monopolized the new industrial opportuni-

ties," DuBois contended, "but have taken from the Negro the opportunities he already enjoyed in certain lines of work by taking advantage of race prejudice, greater economic efficiency, and the endeavor to maintain and raise wages."

DuBois attributed the Negro's lowly position to the legacy of slavery affecting turn-of-the-century blacks. What was once a "stable, strictly guarded home life in Africa" became destroyed by the "slave ship and the promiscuous herding of the plantation." Sexual promiscuity and a lack of respect for the marriage bond followed. He argued that these "lax moral habits of the slave regime" were reflected in the "large amount of cohabitation" in the Seventh Ward. A poor work ethic also prevented blacks from realizing their full potential. "The Negro is, as a rule, willing, honest and good-natured," wrote DuBois. "But he is also, as a rule, careless, unreliable and unsteady. This is without doubt to be expected in a people who for generations have been trained to shirk work." The "Negro's training as a slave and freedman," he continued, "has not been such as make the average of the race as efficient and reliable workmen as the



W. E. B. DuBois as he appeared in 1948. By then he had been elected international president of the Pan-African Congress and referred to as the "Father of Pan-Africanism."

average native American or as many foreign immigrants." Such factors gave whites an even greater rationale for their prejudice against Philadelphia's blacks.

Finally—and inextricably related to these three factors—was color prejudice. *The Philadelphia Negro* regarded color prejudice as the primary reason a black could not secure decent employment, enjoy certain public conveniences, and be recognized by whites on the basis of human dignity. "The city's whites," believed DuBois, were "quite unconscious of any such powerful and vindictive feeling; they regard color prejudice as the easily explicable feeling that intimate social intercourse with a lower race is not only undesirable but impractical if our present standards of culture are to be maintained." For DuBois, however, color prejudice was "something between these two extremes." He did not see it as "responsible for all or perhaps [even] the greater part of the Negro's problems," but he did insist that it was "a far more powerful social force than most [white] Philadelphians realized."

The Philadelphia Negro was a seminal work which showed that the crime,

WAYS OF CONDUCTING BUSINESS

UNDERMINED BLACK ENTREPRENEURSHIP...



promiscuity, and poverty of the city's black community was the result of environment and the social and economic conditions that confronted blacks—not a matter of race. DuBois' study "revealed the Negro group as a symptom, not a cause; as a striving, palpitating group, and not an inert, sick body of crime; as a long, historic development and not a transient occurrence." While he asked whites for greater understanding and tolerance of the Negro's condition, DuBois faulted the city's more successful blacks for their lack of leadership. He called on this "talented tenth" to serve as leaders and role models for the larger black community before they became permanently separated from the mainstream of society.

DuBois' research left him deeply disillusioned with race relations throughout the United States. Over the next two decades, he would clash with black leaders over appropriate strategies for assimilating blacks into mainstream society.

Challenging the accommodationist philosophy of Booker T. Washington, the nation's foremost black leader at the time, DuBois rejected Washington's call for patience and his emphasis on industrial education at the expense of arts, science, and letters. Instead, he demanded for blacks the same educational opportunities available to whites and called on his people to actively resist all forms of discrimination. He continued to criticize his own race as being partly responsible for their own degradation, which earned him criticism from more militant spokesmen, including Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican-born black nationalist who advocated separatism.

Unable to achieve in the United States the African American identity he had so long sought, W.E.B. DuBois, at the age of ninety-three, settled in Ghana in 1961. Renouncing his American citizenship, he embraced his new country where he began work on an encyclopedia of African peoples throughout the world. He

HE CALLED ON THIS "TALENTED TENTH" TO SERVE AS LEADERS AND ROLE MODELS FOR THE LARGER



died in Ghana two years later, just as a new generation of American blacks had come to embrace the activism he so fiercely promoted. A century after the publication of *The Philadelphia Negro*, DuBois' remarkable insight about the problems of black integration into American society still echoes today in the work of his intellectual successors, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West. They continue to remind Americans that the so-called "Negro Problem" that confronted DuBois at the opening of the twentieth century is the most pressing social concern at the opening of the twenty-first. But now, more than ever before, it calls on both blacks and whites to find a common American identity by acting on the instincts of our better selves.

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The legacy of DuBois has been reflected in the work of a new generation, including (from left) Weaver C. Blondin, Ralph Abernathy, and Martin Luther King Jr.

FOR FURTHER READING

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ED TENTH" TO R BLACK COMMUNITY



W. E. B. DuBois in 1951.

