

## The Paper Chase

### *How W. E. B. Du Bois's Archive Came to UMass*

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*“You read these papers at your own risk. There is no point [...] in talking about the Du Bois papers unless we are willing to do something within our own lives [...] Dr. Du Bois raised in his lifetime and he raises in his papers the fundamental question of the meaning of scholarship. What is scholarship for? Can scholarship serve the many instead of the few? Can it address itself to the problems of bread and peace and racism and militarism?”<sup>1</sup>*

“Listen to the Blood: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Dreams of the Dead”

Lerone Bennett, Jr.,

By the late 1940s, librarians and book collectors had started asking W. E. B. Du Bois about plans for depositing his mammoth manuscript collection into a university or library archive. In a 1952 letter to Jean Blackwell, curator at New York’s [Schomburg Center](#) the 83-year-old scholar referred the archivist to his second wife, writer and activist Shirley Graham Du Bois. “Please talk to Shirley Graham on matters concerning my books and papers,” he wrote. “She has complete charge of their eventual disposition.”<sup>2</sup>

While decades would pass before Du Bois’s papers found a permanent home, the exchange illustrates substantial interest in Du Bois’s archive and the role he asked Shirley to play in the making of his legacy. To many, the end of the story is well known: the largest portion of Du Bois’s archive came to UMass in 1973 and was opened for research in 1980. Less known is that its arrival 40 years ago was the culmination of a decades-long paper chase that circled the globe.

The history of how Du Bois’s papers came to UMass spotlights three individuals: Shirley Graham, Du Bois’s second wife; Randolph W. Bromery, geoscientist, World War II veteran, and the first Black leader of the University of Massachusetts Amherst; and Herbert Aptheker, radical white historian, Communist Party leader, and the scholar Du Bois selected in 1946 to edit and publish his immense archive.

The longer story of the making of Du Bois’s papers includes a larger cast of historical characters, the central player being Du Bois himself. As a teenager, he began collecting his life’s primary sources, the materials that now reside in the Du Bois Papers.<sup>3</sup> More than 100,000 items populate the vast collection of his intellectual productivity and political activism. Letters, speeches, novels, poems, newspaper articles, creative essays, and photographs document one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s foremost intellectuals. A Massachusetts native, born in 1868, three years after the Civil War’s end, Du Bois

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<sup>1</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Listen to the Blood: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Dreams of the Dead,” Box 265, Folder 8, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, UMass Amherst.

<sup>2</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois to Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, February 1, 1952, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers Digital Archive (Identifier mums312-b137-i407).

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Aptheker, “Introduction,” *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois, Volume I: Selections 1877-1934*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst: UMass Press, 1973), xxiii.

died in Ghana at age 95, in August of 1963, just hours before Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington.

Shirley Graham married W. E. B. Du Bois in 1951 and worked tirelessly to preserve his work and curate his legacy. Two years after they were married, Shirley created the Du Bois Foundation.<sup>4</sup> The Cold War era’s anticommunist context hampered black radicals like the Du Boises from finding hospitable publishing venues for their work. The Foundation sought to publish Du Bois’s remaining scholarship and fund the republishing of earlier writings dating back to the 1880s. Another central concern of the Foundation was the preservation of Du Bois’s archive. Shirley described how “nine steel file cases and 30 smaller wooded cases are bursting with papers.”<sup>5</sup>

Through the efforts of Shirley, and subsequently her son David Graham Du Bois, the Foundation succeeded in amplifying W. E. B.’s radical intellectual legacy. When the Du Boises moved from New York to Ghana in 1961, they took a third of the archive with them. Herbert Aptheker received another third, which he stored in his Brooklyn basement until 1973. There, Aptheker and his wife, Fay, read and edited the massive collection of Du Bois’s correspondence, part of which was published by University of Massachusetts Press. Through the efforts of Fisk librarian and Harlem Renaissance literary luminary Arna Bontemps, Fisk University received the remaining portion, an acquisition that marks its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021.<sup>6</sup> Bontemps commented in 1961 that the expansive archive of [Du Bois’s manuscript materials](#) “forms an impressive basis for research.”<sup>7</sup> Fisk houses the second largest collection of Du Bois archival materials: it holds a substantial archive of his speeches, NAACP materials, records of his expansive Pan-African activism, and manuscript drafts of many of Du Bois’s books. Of particular importance are the files associated with his unpublished study of Black soldiers in World War I, *The Black Man and the Wounded World*.

Shirley’s literary efforts to craft Du Bois’s intellectual heritage through preserving his papers bore substantial fruit. From the materials taken to Africa, she published two definitive studies on Du Bois.<sup>8</sup> Her global advocacy for Du Bois’s political legacy found support among some members of the UMass Amherst community, including faculty from the W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies and Chancellor Randolph Bromery. In 1973, she received an honorary doctorate from UMass and taught for two years in Afro-American Studies.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 1970s, Bromery strategized to bring the Du Bois Papers to the university. Like Shirley Graham, Bromery passionately promoted Du Bois’s legacy in Massachusetts and across the world. Bromery’s unflinching commitment to advancing and preserving Du Bois’s intellectual and educational legacy persuaded Shirley that UMass was the ideal home for her husband’s papers.

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<sup>4</sup> Phillip Luke Sinitiere, “‘There must be no idle mourning’: W. E. B. Du Bois’s Legacy as a Black Radical Intellectual,” *Socialism and Democracy* 32/3 (2018): 207-230.

<sup>5</sup> Shirley Graham Du Bois to Robert M. Hutchins, March 16, 1957, Box 11, Folder 20, Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, Harvard University.

<sup>6</sup> Arna Bontemps to Paul Partington, September 19, 1961, Box 28, Folder 8, Arna Bontemps Papers, Fisk University; Fisk University Library to Shirley Graham Du Bois, September 19, 1961, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers Digital Archive (Identifier mums312-b153-i136).

<sup>7</sup> Arna Bontemps, “The Private Library and Personal Papers of W.E.B. Du Bois,” Box 56, Folder 6, Arna Bontemps Papers, Fisk University.

<sup>8</sup> Shirley Graham Du Bois, *His Day is Marching On: A Memoir of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1971); Shirley Graham Du Bois, *Du Bois: A Pictorial Biography* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> *Du Bois Lines* (Fall 1984), Box 266, Folder 6, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, UMass; Shirley Graham Du Bois, Class of 1973 Commencement, University Photograph Collection, UMass.

Bromery held several strategic meetings in Cairo with Herbert Aptheker and Shirley about the archive, and he discerningly negotiated with Shirley and her lawyer, Bernard Jaffe.<sup>10</sup> “I’d like to have the papers at UMass,” Bromery told Shirley. Not only was UMass a public university, he explained, but promised, “I’ll put them on the twenty-fifth floor of the library, and if it weren’t for the curvature of the earth you could almost see Great Barrington.”<sup>11</sup>

Although anticommunist critics like the American Legion fiercely opposed having Du Bois’s archive in western Massachusetts, Bromery’s leadership, moral fortitude, and tact led to the purchase in 1973 of the Du Bois collection for \$150,000, aided by the support of the Afro-American Studies department, local university officials, UMass Press, and campus archivists.<sup>12</sup> It took nearly a decade to process the collection, organize it, and ready it for researchers. The release of Du Bois’s papers on microfilm coincided with the opening of the archive.<sup>13</sup>

In September of 1980, UMass Amherst inaugurated the opening of the W. E. B. Du Bois Papers to scholars and students with workshops that celebrated his contributions to education, history, literature, and sociology.<sup>14</sup> Herbert Aptheker spoke at the opening banquet. Drawing on his knowledge of both the papers and the person, he remarked: “The papers of Dr. Du Bois are the papers of a profound radical, a fearless and tireless scholar. . . a mind of superb capacity and infinite training.”<sup>15</sup>

The next day, Black author and *Ebony* magazine editor Lerone Bennett, Jr., gave the keynote address at the dedication ceremony. Michael Thelwell and Esther Terry, faculty in the Afro-American Studies department, concluded the two-day event by reading a proclamation encouraging scholars to translate intellectual production into political liberation, a practice that embodies Du Bois’s legacy.<sup>16</sup>

Bennett’s dedication speech effectively captured the tenor of celebration, what he called a “day of jubilee.” Yet he also understood the intellectual and prophetic gifts contained within the Du Bois collection: *You read these papers at your own risk.*

The problems of Du Bois’s life and times continue to bedevil the planet. Yet he plumbed the depths of his own political and creative imagination and worked purposefully toward freedom and justice. The evidence of those efforts resides in his archive. If we are willing to listen to history, then we

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<sup>10</sup> Bernard Jaffe to Shirley Graham Du Bois, December 7, 1971; Leone Stein to Shirley Graham Du Bois, February 7, 1972; Shirley Graham Du Bois to Bernard Jaffe, July 10, 1972; Shirley Graham Du Bois to Bernard Jaffe, March 3, 1973, Box 2, Folders 2-4, Bernard Jaffe Papers, UMass Amherst.

<sup>11</sup> “Randolph W. Bromery,” National Visionary Leadership Project, <http://www.visionaryproject.org/bromeryrandolph/>; Randolph Bromery, “W. E. B. Du Bois Papers—Part 2,” Visionary Project, March 12, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2117Hfks2U>; Randolph Bromery, “Interpreting the Legacy of W. E. B. Du Bois,” UMass Oral History, January 6, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43aMQiG7q7E>.

<sup>12</sup> On UMass Amherst history during the Bromery era, see Rob Cox, “UMass on the Eve of the Disco Era,” 2017, [https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/murg186\\_100-i00179](https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/murg186_100-i00179), University Films and Video, University Archives, UMass Amherst; Du Bois Papers UMass Press Release, June 4, 1973; “Legion Hits Purchase,” *Worcester Telegram*, July 17, 1973; “UMass Answers Legion About Du Bois Papers,” *Greenfield (Mass.) Recorder*, July 16, 1973, Randolph Bromery Papers, UMass Amherst.

<sup>13</sup> Robert W. McDonnell, “The W.E.B. Du Bois Papers,” *The Crisis*, November 1980, 359-364.

<sup>14</sup> The W.E.B. Du Bois Papers Dedication Ceremony Flyer, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Box 265, Folder 8, UMass Amherst.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert Aptheker, “Dinner Address,” W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Box 265, Folder 8, UMass Amherst.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Thelwell and Esther Terry, “W.E.B. Du Bois Papers Dedication Statement,” September 20, 1980, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Box 265, Folder 8, UMass Amherst.

may yet discover the keys to our collective liberation today, a paper chase worth pursuing in honor of Du Bois's enduring legacy.

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