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Chapter 1 Introduction

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Archaeology at the W.E.B. Du Bois Boyhood Homesite

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Chapter 1 Doing Archaeology at the W.E.B.
Du Bois Boyhood Homesite

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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In the summers of 1983, 1984, and 2003 the University of Massachusetts Summer Field School in Archaeology engaged in intensive survey work at the W.E.B. Du Bois Boyhood Homesite in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Today the site, though listed as a National Historic Landmark, is but an abandoned cellar hole in an overgrown wooded area, that is to say an archaeological site. The goals of the archaeology have been to assess the extent and integrity of the remains, specifically with regards to their ability to inform us about the lives of an African American family who resided at the site for over 130 years. This family, known as the Black Burghardts, counts the remarkable scholar and social activist, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, among its members. W.E.B. Du Bois lived at the site as a youth and owned the site from 1928 until 1954. Together with his ancestor's ownership and use, this site results in a remarkable archaeological record of consistent African American life in New England. The archaeological work to date contributes to better understanding this family, Du Bois himself, and furthering the goals of appropriately commemorating this remarkable man.

W.E.B. Du Bois was born in 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts and after 95 years of brilliantly principled, dedicated struggle died in Accra, Ghana in 1963. The day after Du Bois's death was the 1963 March on Washington, famous for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. At the beginning of the march Roy Wilkins informed the assembled 250,000 of Du Bois's death and reminded them "that at the dawn of the twentieth century, [Du Bois's] was the voice calling you here today" (see also Lester 1971: 147; Marable 1985: 93). Among his many accomplishments, Du Bois was the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard (Du Bois 1896). His study of African American life in Philadelphia (Du Bois 1899) is arguably the first urban ethnography. He directed a 15 volume comprehensive study of African American life while holding a faculty position at Atlanta University. *Black Reconstruction* (Du Bois 1935) contributed to reversing the generations of southern-inspired Civil War scholarship that downplayed the role of slavery as a cause of the Civil War. However, his scientific understanding of racism led him to conclude that the academic tactic of setting the record straight would not be enough to overcome the regime of U.S. white supremacy. He took up the life of a highly visible organizer and commentator, co-founder of the NAACP, long-time editor and influential contributor to its widely popular magazine, *The Crisis*, and organizer of Pan-African Conferences that set the stage for the struggle to liberate Black Africa from colonialism. He was an advocate for nuclear disarmament, a cause that earned him an indictment (but not a conviction) by the federal government in 1950. At the end of his life he accepted President Kwame Nkrumah's invitation to live in Ghana to work on an Encyclopedia Africana. For some, his career is summed up by his joining of the Communist Party at the age of 90. For many others his life is better remembered for his nearly 100 years of writing and speaking aimed at the creation of a less prejudiced and more equitably humane world.

W.E.B. Du Bois lived at the Homesite when he was a child in the early 1870s. He

received the house as a gift on his 60th birthday in 1928, worked on renovating it from 1928 into the early 1930s, and retained possession of the house until 1954, ever hoping to turn it into a country house. The site was purchased by admirers in 1967 who, in 1969, created a DuBois Memorial Foundation to own the site for purposes of commemorating Du Bois. The ceremony dedicating the site in 1969 was a contentious affair, with FBI agents provocateur and attempts to block recognition before town boards. A newspaper editorial counseled against confrontation on the day of the ceremony, advising those opposed to the dedication to “Let the memorial committee have its day and leave the monument to those who will undoubtedly take out their wrath on it in the weeks to come” (Editor 1969). The same editor came to a more generous understanding of Du Bois ten years later in an editorial entitled “Changing Attitudes” (Editor 1979), wherein he recommended that “The people of Great Barrington should be proud that their home town was the birthplace of this remarkable man.” The site was officially designated as the W.E.B. DuBois Boyhood Homesite National Historic Landmark in 1976 and dedicated as such in 1979. The Homesite was transferred to the University of Massachusetts in 1987.

In 2003 the University of Massachusetts Summer Field School in Archaeology stepped again into this remarkable place. It was an auspicious year for conducting field work at the site. Nancy Muller (2001) had recently finished a detailed study of the relevant genealogical and property records for the site. It was the 100th anniversary of the publication of Du Bois’s most famous work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois 1969). The Rev. Esther Dozier, Bernard Drew, and Rachel Fletcher of Great Barrington, among others, had engaged on a number of projects to raise Du Bois’s profile in town and increased all of our knowledge about Du Bois and Great Barrington. The Field School was welcomed in town, by officials, site neighbors, merchants, the Historical Commission, and concerned citizens; we are grateful to all for their support.

This report brings together results from the archaeological field studies conducted in the 1980s with those conducted in the summer of 2003. Results of the 1980s work have been presented and published in a number of academic venues (Muller 1994; Muller 2001; Muller-Milligan 1985; Paynter 1997; Paynter 1990; Paynter 2001; Paynter, et al. 1994; Paynter and McGuire 1991; Pomerantz 1984). The thrust of these studies were somewhat different from what had driven most historical archaeological investigations of African American sites. A major focus of the archaeology of African American sites has been to note the cultural differences between these and EuroAmerican sites. Deetz (1977) had highlighted differences in housing styles and use patterns at Parting Ways in southeastern Massachusetts. Baker (1978) had wondered if there were ceramic markers of an African identity in a poor woman’s trash. To the south there were raging debates about the ethnic/cultural identity of the makers of colonoware and Kwardata motifs (Emerson 1994; Emerson 1999; Ferguson 1991; Ferguson 1992; Mouer 1999; Orser 1996; pages). These are certainly important matters, but Paynter had argued that they could be better addressed by considering the political economic situation of the Burghardt family in rural 19th century Massachusetts (1990). This conviction, plus reading Du Bois on *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924) led to a study of the multivalent (Perry and Paynter 1999) ways that artifacts carry meaning (Paynter 1992). This perspective argues that the lack of an explicit record of African-inspired cultural traits in the material recovered from the 1980s did not mean that African people lived an acculturated version of European lifeways. Instead, it meant that a White-dominated profession would need to listen to African American people if they were to understand the ways people put the material world to use to build successful lives in spite of the constraints of ignorant and at times exploitative neighbors (Paynter 1992). It was only such a perspective that could begin to make sense of how a W.E.B. Du Bois could arise out of such

materially impoverished conditions. As a result, the work at the Homesite has been driven to understand the material conditions that were precedent for and product of how men, women, and children made their lives, material conditions that engaged and were the result of their distinctive vantage point on African, African American, European and Euro American culture.

Landscape was the concept that primarily drove how these material conditions could best be understood; by understanding the way people organized and conducted the parts of their daily lives involved with rural production and family household reproduction. Power was manifest in these relations, a power to create complex and rich lives as well as a power in the White dominated racial formation that constrained these creations (Paynter and McGuire 1991). In this regard, work at the Du Bois site has sought to meet the twin goals identified by Theresa Singleton (1995) to understand African American lives on their own terms as well as in the face of the constraints of racial power regimes.

Though the general outlines of these previous studies were corroborated by the 2003 work, there are some notable new discoveries. One involves the size of the property owned and used by Du Bois and his relatives; it was much smaller than the 5-acre parcel that is the Boyhood Homesite. Another is that previous studies concentrated on the artifacts and landscape of the site to the rear of the house; this new work concentrates on the area of the house. This has brought an appreciation of change at the Homesite, including a sense of the cultural content of African-inspired religion among the Burghardts. Finally, better understanding of the site and the biographical information makes for a better linking of material and documentary materials. We have a better understanding of who was creating the material assemblages across the site. This said, this is still only the report of an intensive survey study, one aiming at the questions of site extent and integrity. As will become clear, plenty of questions remain to be addressed, in the ground and in the documents.

Though this is not the place for an extensive treatise, a few comments about method and theory are in order. There has been much fruitful discussion in historical archeology about the relationship between documentary and material records. In this study we make use of ideas explicated by Mark Leone (Leone 1988; Leone and Crosby 1987; Leone and Potter 1988) and Alison Wylie (1995; 2002) about a method of tacking back and forth between various classes of information as a means to build an understanding and interpretation for a site and its areas. In this method various classes of data -- ceramics and glassware, artifacts and features, objects and documents -- are played off one another, noting conjunctions and disjunctions, to develop an understanding of how a locale was created, used, and abandoned. Wurst's (1999) and McGuire's (1992) introduction of Bertel Ollman's philosophy of dialectics (Ollman 1993) allowed for a clearer understanding on our part of the role of generalization between artifacts and functional categories.

Observations in the field developed over time. Though not deployed in the 1980s work, Harris's methodology for stratigraphic analysis (Harris 1979) was a welcome development for reassessing the earlier studies and guiding the 2003 observations on soils and developing their stratigraphic interpretations. The 1983 studies were overwhelmingly surface collections. The 1984 small excavations (generally .5x.5m units) were defined by natural/cultural units or by an arbitrary 10 cm levels, whichever came first. Students were instructed to dig to a soil change or 10 cms, stopping at whichever observation came first. Each of these levels (natural/cultural or arbitrary 10 cm) was given its own designation (ID). The named natural/cultural units were explicitly identified only the strata of deposition; the strata of destruction were noted by implication. For instance, the fill for a pit received an explicit ID designation, whereas the cut for the pit was noted only in the narrative identifying the feature as a pit. In 2003 we followed Harris and gave both Harris level

identifications. A second difference between the soil observations in the 1980s and in 2003, also brought to the surface by the Harris method, was distinguishing units of analysis from units of interpretation. In the 1980s the units of deposition or the 10cm arbitrary level were treated as units of interpretation, unless something in the lab called an interpretation into question. In 2003 we distinguished between units of analysis (Excavation Levels) that were, as in the 1980s, based on the observation of a soil change or an arbitrary 10 cm, and units of interpretation, Harris levels, which reflected a judgment made in the field about a cultural action. How we integrated these results into those in 2003 using a Harris methodology is discussed below when considering the 1980s stratigraphic information.

Artifact coding and analysis has also changed over the course of this project. In the 1980s a unique coding system was developed for the Field Schools and these codes were converted to the University of Massachusetts Archaeological Services (UMAS) ARDVARC system in the early 1990s. These detailed artifact descriptions were arranged, sometimes uncomfortably, into a modified version of Stanley South's artifact categories (1977), especially inspired by Charles Orser's revisions (1988), that seeks to highlight class related production actions. There are of course significant problems in generalizing from a sherd to an action. Instead of making any such observations, these general categories were used to gain a sense of pattern of the artifacts deposited at a locale, a pattern to be checked by tacking back to the more detailed level of description to see if the generalization makes sense. The goal was never to establish some universal patterns, but rather to be part of a methodology of building Wylie's cables of inference. ; the check is to describe the assemblages of a locale both in terms of notable artifacts and in the case of locales with large numbers of objects at a different level of generalization, to aid in interpreting the past actions at the site. Table 1 describes the general and specific categories used in this study, providing examples of the kinds of artifacts occurring in each category.

Table 1 Functional Artifact Typology

| General Category | Specific | Examples |
|----------------------|-----------------------|--|
| Foodways | Procurement | ammunition, fishhooks, fishing weights |
| | Preparation | baking pans, cooking vessels, large knives |
| | Service | fine earthenware, flatware, tableware, include alcohol glasses |
| | Storage | coarse earthenware, coarse stonewares, glass bottles, canning jars, bottle stoppers |
| | Remains | fauna, flora |
| | Alcohol Unknown | Alcoholic beverage containers |
| Personal | Clothing | fasteners, e.g., buttons, eyelets, snaps, hook and eyes, |
| | Shoes | soles, uppers |
| | Cosmetic | hairbrushes, hair combs, jars |
| | Decorative | jewelry, hairpins, hatpins, |
| | Medicinal | medicine bottles, droppers, spectacles |
| | Recreational Other | smoking pipes, toys, musical instruments, souvenirs clothes hangers pocketknives, |
| Household/Structural | Architectural | nails, window glass, spikes, mortar, bricks, slate |
| | Hardware | hinges, tacks, nuts, bolts, staples, hooks, brackets |
| | Furnishings | furniture pieces, decorative fasteners, flower pot |
| | Heating | stove parts, coal and its by products |
| | Lighting | lamp parts, lightbulbs |
| | Plumbing | chamber pot, wash basin, pipes, lavatory porcelain |
| | Electrical | wire, insulators |
| | Other | modified wood |
| Information | Communications | telephone parts, mailbox |
| | Money | coins |
| | Production | computer parts, fountain pens, pencils, inkwells |
| | Storage | books |
| Work (Non-Food) | Agricultural | barbed wire, plow blades, scythe blades |
| | Industrial | machines, pig iron |
| | Domestic | needles, pins, scissors, thimbles |
| | Tools | hammer, saw, plane |
| | Arms/Weapons | gun part, gun flint, sword |
| | Fishing Gear | rod, reel, hooks |
| | Container | non-food container, barrel hoop |
| | Misc | wire, metal with rivet, adhesives |
| Transportation | Motorized | car parts, oil cans, gas containers |
| | Animal powered | animal shoes, harness pieces |
| | Human powered | bicycle parts |
| | Water | boat and ship parts |
| Native Artifact | | flake, point, pottery, etc |
| Natural | Fauna | |
| | Flora | |
| | Inorganic | |
| Unknown | Material | only raw material is known, unidentifiable metal, Glass, plastic, stone |
| | Unknown | |
| | Historical | historical period artifact of unknown function and material |

Too many of the artifact analyses are still based on sherd counts rather than vessel counts; however, too little of the site's assemblage has been collected to believe that in but a few exceptions that vessel reconstructions and the processes that led to sherd distributions around the site, can be reliably related to one another.

The organization of this report is to first present at some length the archaeology from the 1980s. Appendices C and D are catalogs for 1983 and 1984, respectively. The second section reports on the Documentary Background research. Though some fundamental issues, such as the general sequence of occupiers at the site, have not changed, there are richer understandings of individuals and events, thanks to Muller's hard work, to new information brought to light by Drew, and to more detailed documentary studies conducted in association with the 2003 field school. We reached a critical mass of knowledge about people that made the documents speak much more profoundly to the site in 2003 than in previous years. Having the Documentary Background follow the results of the 1980s field work can be a bit awkward; we ask for the reader's patience in the need to wait for further commentary in the Documentary section. The third section describes the goals of the 2003 season, the educational and public outreach goals, along with the driving research questions. The 2003 work is organized around these driving research questions: 1) what is the structure of the middens, 2) is there evidence for a barn, 3) what was happening in the side yard, and 4) what renovations occurred to the house. All of these questions seemed straightforward at the start of the summer; 3 of them took on new perspectives as work progressed, revealing dimensions that only further field work can resolve.