Du Bois, W. E. B.

II. EARLY LIFE

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. A descendant of African American, French, and Dutch ancestors, he demonstrated his intellectual gifts at an early age. He graduated from high school at age 16, the valedictorian and only black in his graduating class of 12. He was orphaned shortly after his graduation and was forced to fund his own college education. He won a scholarship to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he excelled and saw for the first time the plight of Southern blacks.

Du Bois had grown up with more privileges and advantages than most blacks living in the United States at that time, and, unlike most blacks living in the South, he had suffered neither severe economic hardship nor repeated encounters with blatant racism. As violence against blacks increased in the South throughout the 1880s, Du Bois's scholarly education was matched by the hard lessons he learned about race relations. He followed reports about the increasing frequency of lynchings, calling each racially motivated killing “a scar” upon his soul. Through these and other encounters with racial hatred, as well as through his experience teaching in poor black communities in rural Tennessee during the summers, Du Bois began to develop his racial consciousness and the desire to help improve conditions for all blacks.

Du Bois received his bachelor's degree from Fisk in 1888, and won a scholarship to attend Harvard University. Harvard considered his high school education and Fisk degree inadequate preparation for a master's program, and he had to register as an undergraduate. Du Bois received his second bachelor's degree in 1890 and then enrolled in Harvard’s graduate school. He earned his master’s degree and then his doctoral degree in 1895, becoming the first black to receive that degree from Harvard.

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