

Bound on the east by the Berkshire Hills and on the west by the Taconic Range, a treasured place is given life by the Housatonic River.

This place has played an important role in the political, religious, industrial, and cultural history of the region and the nation. What has largely gone unrecognized is a rich history of African Americans who played pivotal roles in key national and international events and made significant contributions to our culture. They spent their lives defining the tenets of freedom and democracy, hoping to claim the “inalienable rights” our founding fathers deemed “self-evident.”

Several dozen Blacks served in the Revolutionary War, among them Agrippa Hull of Stockbridge. Elizabeth (“Mum Bett”) Freeman of Sheffield pioneered the fight against slavery with her successful suit for her freedom



in 1781, contributing to Massachusetts’s decision to abolish slavery statewide in 1783. In the Civil War, more Blacks from the region enlisted in the famed 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment than from anywhere else in the state, among them Chaplain Samuel Harrison of Pittsfield, farmer Edward A. Croslear of Sheffield, and laborer Milo J. Freeland of Sheffield and East Canaan, the first volunteer to complete his term.

Modern times brought the famous Lenox-born photographer of the Harlem Renaissance, James VanDerZee; NAACP leaders such as Mary White Ovington; composer of the “Negro National Anthem” James Weldon Johnson of Great Barrington; and Williamstown and Pittsfield citizen Frank Grant of professional baseball fame.

By following the African American Heritage Trail, you can share in this history, retracing the footsteps of those who have made a difference.

The Upper Housatonic Valley African American Heritage Trail honors our region’s—

Pioneers of Freedom

“I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills, five years after the Emancipation Proclamation.”

—W.E.B. Du Bois

W.E.B. DU BOIS BOYHOOD HOMESITE IN GREAT BARRINGTON

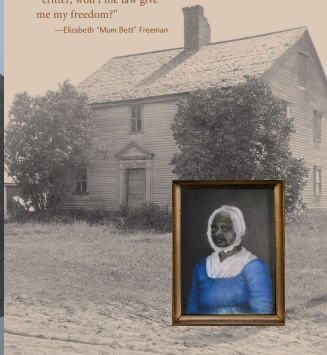
The Burghardt homestead where the maternal family of Du Bois lived from the 1820s and the young Du Bois lived for a time

Great Barrington native W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) helped establish the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its magazine, *The Crisis*, and authored *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Black Reconstruction*. Considered the father of the Pan-African and American civil rights movements, he died in Accra, Ghana, on August 27, on the eve of the 1963 March on Washington.

*Other sites are connected to the Lenox-born Harlem Renaissance photographer James VanDerZee, essayist and NAACP leader James Weldon Johnson, and dozens of local personages.

“I heard that paper read yesterday, that says, ‘All men are born equal and that every man has a right to freedom.’ I am not a dumb critter; won’t the law give me my freedom?”

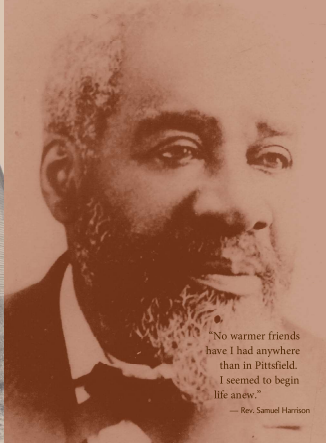
—Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman



ASHLEY HOUSE IN SHEFFIELD WHERE ELIZABETH “MUM BETT” FREEMAN WAS ENSLAVED

Her successful suit for liberty set the stage for the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts

Mum Bett (c. 1744–1829) was enslaved in the Sheffield home of Col. John Ashley. In 1781 she successfully sued Col. Ashley for her freedom, whereupon she took the name of Elizabeth Freeman and went with her daughter to work for the Sedgwick family in Stockbridge. She was respected as a skilled and caring nurse and midwife and lived the last twenty-one years of her life in her own home with her family. She is buried in their family plot in the Stockbridge Cemetery.



“No warmer friends have I had anywhere than in Pittsfield. I seemed to begin life anew.”

—Rev. Samuel Harrison

REV. SAMUEL HARRISON HOUSE IN PITTSFIELD

Home of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment chaplain who protested discriminatory pay practices

Minister and formerly enslaved Samuel Harrison (1818–1900) in 1850 became the first minister of the Second Congregational Church of Pittsfield, the first Black church founded in the county. In 1863 Harrison was appointed chaplain of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment and promptly protested discriminatory pay practices. Massachusetts governor John A. Andrew and the attorney general Edward Bates penned letters to President Lincoln on Harrison’s behalf.