

Everybody Loves DuBois

By Ben Cromie

I am continually renewed by the interest that people of all backgrounds have taken in the Mapping the DuBois *Philadelphia Negro* project. This appreciation comes from folks beyond the academic world in which we are headquartered (in the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania) - high school students, bloggers, artists, social workers, people of faith, as well as historians, city planners, professors, researchers, and undeclared undergraduates, have all joined the discussion in one way or another. On a personal level, it has also been fun to read genuine enthusiasm on the faces of my friends and family when I talk about our work.

I think the main reason for this enthusiasm is the fun fact that maps are cool. It is neat to see where people lived, where street names have changed and how demographics have shifted over the course of 109 years. Often the real surprise, however, is how much the city has stayed the same. Seeing the blocks and the buildings as they have stood for generations makes a person feel an unexpected connection to the folks who came before.

I was initially concerned that the the DuBois Project would be marginalized as an African-American story and not the story of a gifted American scholar mapping the course of cultural and economic integration in the big city. I am a firm believer that African-American history should be an integral part of American history as a whole; I think folks of all backgrounds would benefit just as much as African Americans from hearing the inspiring tales of struggle and triumph of black America. Teaching American History and African-American History as different subjects gives non-blacks the opportunity to opt out. Knowing this risk, the Philadelphia school system recently required all students to study African-American history, regardless of their heritage.

My fear has been that non-blacks will overlook or ignore the value of DuBois' work. This would indeed be sad. The work he set in motion over one hundred years ago is clearly not yet complete. If we are to overcome the persistent problems facing many of the disadvantaged in our city, we need to continue to listen to history.

I am glad to report, however, that as far as my eyes have seen, these fears appear to be unjustified. Granted, my eyes can only see so far, but the people I speak with have again and again pricked up their ears when I mention my work on Mapping DuBois. Philadelphians in particular, are proud of DuBois' work and keenly curious about the physical and demographic changes in the Seventh Ward, which now one of the loveliest and most diverse sections of Center City.