

**NO.56 FALL 2000**  
**BENE LEGERE**  
 NEWSLETTER OF THE  
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## NEWS FROM BANCROFT LIBRARY

# ETHEL NANCE-W.E.B. DU BOIS CORRESPONDENCE: DU BOIS IN CONTEXT

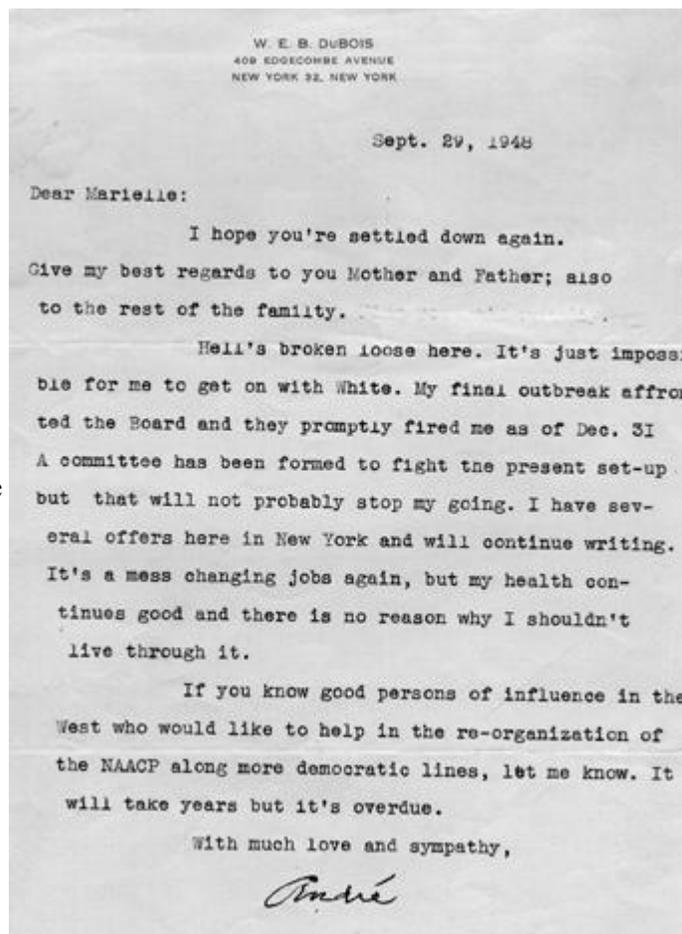
Anthony Bliss, Rare Book Librarian, Bancroft Library

One of the often overlooked shortcomings of collecting a famous person's papers is that most of the time a repository only receives one side of the correspondence. The letters that the "famous person" wrote were sent off to someone else, and that corpus of material is therefore scattered. Sometimes, famous people keep copies of outgoing letters, but it is rarely systematic.

This little meditation comes up in the case of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963), one of our major African American leaders. His long life and boundless energy brought him into contact with key figures from Booker T. Washington to the civil rights activists of the early 1960s. Most of the Du Bois papers are at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, but a significant group of his letters has recently turned up in San Francisco and come to Bancroft.

Ethel Ray Nance served Du Bois as his West Coast secretary and coordinator for four decades, from the 1920s to the 1960s. Her son, Glenn Nance, has recently presented to the Library 107 letters to his mother from Du Bois. The letters provide an overview of Du Bois' activities and thoughts over a period of forty years as he builds up and then defects from the NAACP. The letters also document his writing and other efforts on behalf of African Americans.

But there is significant added value to this collection of letters: Ethel Nance wrote a running commentary on all of this material, setting it in context and



explaining some of the less obvious references in the correspondence. Her commentary and memoir run to 250 pages and provide a privileged view of Du Bois and his work that could only come from someone who knew him so well.

In addition to the Du Bois letters, there are also letters that Ethel Nance received from Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, and other major writers and activists. Add to this some printed items, ephemeral pieces, and photographs, and the Nance papers form a unique and highly important resource for understanding the work of Du Bois over four decades of ceaseless activity. The collection also sets Du Bois in a California context, detailing his interactions with reformers on the West Coast as well as his participation in the organization of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945.

The Nance-Du Bois correspondence nicely complements holdings of papers of the West Coast Regional Office of the NAACP already in Bancroft. The Library is deeply grateful to Glenn Nance for presenting this important collection to Berkeley.

In a related development: University Archivist William Roberts has come across a letter that W.E.B. Du Bois wrote to UC President Robert Gordon Sproul in 1931 inquiring about the status of Blacks in the University. The reply noted a number of African Americans who were making their mark at UC Berkeley. In 1990s terms, the University's answer to Dr. Du Bois would seem weak, but the year was 1931 and there was a lot of progress yet to be made.



Standing (left to right): Mrs. Griffin, Anita Nance, ----, Mary-Louise Hooper, J. Kennedy. Second row seated (left to right): N.W. Griffin, ----, Clarence Nance, Mrs. Du Bois, Dr. Du Bois, Ethel Nance, Ella Baker. Front row seated (left to right): Claire Johnson, Lucy Wilson, Goldie Nance, Charles Wilson.

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