

# Jones Hill journalist, activist helped found precursor to NAACP

by Anthony Sammarco

**W**illiam Monroe Trotter, a resident of Dorchester's Jones Hill, was a leading civil rights leader and journalist at the turn of this century. His life, though short, was one dedicated to bringing about the recognition of the achievements of African Americans in this country.

Born in Hyde Park, William Monroe Trotter (1872-1934) was the son of James Monroe Trotter, a school teacher who had served as a lieutenant in the Fifty-fifth Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry. This company was composed of African Americans who enlisted in the Civil War and Trotter was a well respected member of "Company G". Trotter attended Hyde Park High School and in 1890 entered Harvard as an honor student.

He graduated in 1894, Magna Cum Laude, and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, a prestigious fraternity of which he was the first African American member. His friendship with a fellow student, William E.B. DuBois, who was studying for his doctorate at Harvard, led to a friendship that was to extend into their careers as civil rights leaders. DuBois, a graduate of Williams College, was the first African-American to be awarded a doctorate from Harvard.

TROTTER BEGAN HIS CAREER AS A REAL ESTATE BROKER in Boston. However, in 1901, he founded *The Guardian*, a newspaper somewhat critical of the treatment of people of color. The main purpose of the paper, in Trotter's words, was "propaganda against discrimination based on color and denial of citizenship rights because of color."

Trotter was a crusader and a born leader in this movement and he chose for his newspaper office the building which William Lloyd Garrison, an ardent abolitionist, had used for the publication of his anti-slavery newspaper *The Liberator* and also where *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been printed.

Trotter's editorship of *The Guardian* was respected, but he led a precarious life that caused great self-denial. Trotter said of his chosen career that "the conviction grew upon me that pursuit of business, money, civic or literary position was like building a house upon sands; if race prejudice and persecution and public discrimination for mere color was to spread up from the South and result in a fixed caste of color... every colored American would be really a civil outcast, forever an alien, in public life".

HIS NEWSPAPER AND HIS ARDENT BELIEF in equality made him a respected citizen of this country. In 1905, with the assistance of his friend W.E.B DuBois, he founded the Niagra Movement in New York, which was the forerunner of what we now know as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).



WILLIAM MONROE TROTTER, 1872-1934

Trotter was a dedicated editor of his newspaper. He received great support from his wife, Geraldine L. Pindell, whom he married in 1899 and moved to 97 Sawyer Avenue on Jones Hill. Geraldine Trotter's family had been ardent supporters of the desegregation of the Boston schools in the 1850s, and her family paid her way to college.

Her support of her husband contributed to an apparently idyllic marriage. Their home, which still stands, looked out "over all the country as far as Blue Hill and from my bedroom window over all the bay down to the red buildings on Deer Island," said Trotter. This stable home life enabled him to become the "watchdog" of discrimination, as he became known.

*Trotter published a weekly newspaper, The Guardian, which served as the voice of Boston's African American community.*

Throughout his life, he was supported by his wife, who assisted him in the weekly publishing of *The Guardian*. Her interests ran from the support of St. Monica's Home for elderly black women to petitioning the government to make African-Americans serving in World War I more comfortable. Her death in 1918 during the influenza epidemic caused a void in her husband's life, and the editorial page of *The Guardian*, had a dedication for the next 16 years to his wife "who helped...so loyally, faithfully, conscientiously, unselfishly".

Following World War I, Trotter led a delegation to Washington to protest the treatment of African-

Americans who were employed by the government. He was later to attend the Peace Conference in Paris as a delegate of the National Equal Rights League, which tried to outlaw discrimination.

William Monroe Trotter dedicated his life not only to the full participation of African Americans in life, but to their self-realization that they too had opinions and should be allowed to express them freely. Trotter's life after his wife's death was precarious, and he often was bothered by the many problems facing him. He said "my burdens are more than I can bear, you don't understand, you see one side, the public another side, but I see the third side".

His career, though controversial at times, proved that he really did see the "third side", the side that had made him an ardent journalist, a civil rights leader, the "watchdog" of discrimination and one of Dorchester's proudest sons.

Award winning historian Anthony Sammarco is a volunteer contributor to *Dorchester Community News*.

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