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# William Monroe Trotter: A One-Man Protester for Civil Rights

by  
Robert C. Hayden

William Monroe Trotter was the first, the only and the last of Boston's significant protest leaders for civil rights, equality and justice for black Americans in this century. He gained national stature between 1901 and 1934.

Trotter was uncompromising in his demand for complete and immediate equality for black Americans in the early 1900s. His stress on militant protest for integration, legal and voting rights for blacks during the first quarter of this century became the hallmark of the modern civil rights movements of the 1954-65 period. William Monroe Trotter was a man 50 years ahead of his time.

From the time I was five years old, I was dedicated to working for race equality. I did not seek a career of agitation and organization for equality for my race. The burden was dropped upon me by the desertion of others and I would not desert the duty.<sup>1</sup>

Who was this man whose career as a protest leader in race politics left him broken-hearted, penniless, friendless and perhaps suicidal in 1934? Who was this man for whom a Boston elementary school was named 35 years after his death? (The William Monroe Trotter School on Humboldt Avenue opened as Boston's first officially desegregated school in September 1969.) Let's go back to his family roots.

## Trotter's Background

The greatest influence on his early life, and his constant inspiration later, was his father James Monroe Trotter. His father was a major force in moving him into a career as a protest leader in race politics. When the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863, Afro-Americans were permitted for the first time to volunteer for military services in the Civil War. James Trotter left Ohio for Boston to enlist in the all-black 55th Massachusetts Regiment. The War Department had promised black soldiers the same pay as white troops, but at first the black soldiers received lower wages than white soldiers. James Trotter and members of the 55th Massachusetts Regiment did not accept this unequal treatment, and he led a successful protest to received equal wages.

After the Civil War James Trotter settled in Boston and became a clerk in the Boston Post Office. He married Virginia Isaacs, and William Monroe Trotter was born in April 1872. The Trotters also had two daughters, Maude, born in 1874, and Bessie in 1883.



After ten years of outstanding service at the Post Office, James Trotter faced discrimination because of his race. He resigned his job in 1882 as a protest when a white worker was promoted over him. He then supported his family through a successful real estate business.

The Trotters first lived in the South End, and later moved to an all-white section of Boston called Hyde Park, when most of Boston's black population of 6,000 lived on the north slope of Beacon Hill. William Monroe Trotter excelled in his all-white elementary and high school classes. In 1891, he entered Harvard College, graduating in 1895 with high honors, having earned a Phi Beta Kappa key in his first year.

## Development of Militancy

Despite his scholarship at Harvard, his father's prominence in business and politics and his own high expectations, Trotter faced job discrimination in his home city because of his "color." He was unable to gain employment in a downtown Boston bank and took a job as a shipping clerk for a bookseller. When he inherited his father's real estate holdings in 1899, he went into business for himself as a real estate broker-manager and insurance agent. The business prospered and, by his own later testimony, was soon "starting to rise." In 1899, when he married Geraldine Louise Pindell, Trotter was making a comfortable living.

Trotter was proud of the freedom of Boston's black population compared to that of southern blacks, but he became dismayed with what he saw as the worsening plight of blacks in the South under the leadership of Booker T. Washington. In his famous Atlanta Compromise Speech Washington said that blacks should start at the "bottom of the ladder," learn the industrial trades and be obedient and thrifty in order to gradually earn the respect of white Americans. For the next twenty years Washington was the most powerful and influential black person in the United States. And William Monroe Trotter, in opposing Washington, became his rival opposition leader.



Around 1900 segregation had begun to creep into Boston. Most of Boston's black population of 10,000 had moved from their nineteenth century Beacon Hill neighborhood into the South End and Lower Roxbury, and southern migrants were settling in these neighborhoods, too.

I can recall going to the theater, and when the movie was over, Mr. Trotter was standing outside, and when we came out, he came over and asked us where we were seated, and we told him we were seated in the balcony and he said, "Well, were there other seats available?" I said, "Yes, downstairs was open, there were many seats downstairs, but they told us to go upstairs and we sat." These are the things that he fought against.<sup>2</sup>

Trotter became more and more involved in race politics. In 1901 he gave a protest speech that attacked Booker T. Washington's subservient position. Following that speech, he and George Forbes, a journalist, decided to start a weekly newspaper. Trotter had the financing for a publishing venture, and Forbes had the newspaper experience.

In 1901 Trotter started the *Guardian*, which served black Americans in Boston and beyond. From its inception the *Guardian* promised to be "an organ which is to voice intelligently the needs and aspirations of the colored American." "Every Right with All Thy Might" was the motto that appeared on the *Guardian's* masthead.

## Trotter and Washington

The first issue of the *Guardian* appeared on November 9, 1901, with Trotter as publisher and editor. Thereafter, the *Guardian* appeared on the newsstand every Saturday, filled with local and national news concerning black affairs. Trotter's editorials made the *Guardian* controversial and well-known. They were hard-hitting attacks on Washington and his policy of accepting a low place for black people in America. Boston became the battleground for Washington's supporters and opponents.

W.E.B. DuBois said of Trotter's journalism:

The *Guardian* was bitter, satirical and personal, but it was well-edited, it was earnest, and it published facts. It attracted wide attention across the country; it was quoted and discussed. I did not wholly agree with the *Guardian*, and indeed only a few Negroes did, but nearly all read it and were influenced by it.<sup>3</sup>

Trotter and Washington agreed on only one thing: that education was crucial for blacks' progress. But they completely disagreed on what type of education was right for black Americans. Trotter stressed the development of the mind. Washington stressed farming and industrial training and the use of one's hands, which would provide jobs and give black people security.

Stephen Fox, in his biography of Trotter which appears in *The Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, says:

The *Guardian* indicted Washington on three major points: first, that he was responding to increasingly intolerable racial conditions with an unreal, complacent optimism that things were actually improv-

ing. Living in Alabama, Washington had a need to be circumspect; living in Boston, Trotter called for "the spirit of protest, of independence, of revolt."

Second, that he led a hypocritical political life. On the one hand, Washington would demean political rights in favor of economic development and the acquisition of bourgeois habits. On the other hand, he was proud of being able to vote himself, and was President Theodore Roosevelt's trusted first-term advisor on southern and racial politics. Trotter, a political independent, distrusted such an alliance between the White House and the race's most public figure.

Third, that he was building his own monument at Tuskegee Institute and trampling on the rights of Negroes who aspired to other forms of education. Trotter, the Harvard graduate, was insulted by Washington's self-serving promotion of manual and industrial training, and by his denigration of classical forms of education.<sup>4</sup>

The bitter battle between Trotter and Washington broke out in what became known as the Boston Riot on July 30, 1903. Washington and his Boston followers met at the Columbus Avenue AME Church to organize the National Negro Business League. Nine questions had been prepared by the *Guardian* editors a week before and published as a challenge to Washington, inviting him to respond when he arrived in Boston.

In view of the fact that you are understood to be unwilling to insist upon the Negro having his every right (both civil and political), would it not be a calamity at this juncture to make you our leader? Don't you know you would help the race more by exposing the new form of slavery just outside the gates of Tuskegee than by preaching submission? Are the rope and the torch all the race is to get under your leadership?!<sup>5</sup>

Trotter and his followers attended this public meeting and disrupted it by shouting these questions at Washington. Trotter supporters threw eggs at Washington, and chairs were upset in a shoving and shouting match.

*Trotter was uncompromising in his demand for complete and immediate equality for black Americans in the early 1900s.*

Trotter, leader of the Washington opposition, was arrested for inciting a riot. He was fined \$50 and imprisoned for a month at the Charles Street Jail. His imprisonment made him even more militant, and he continued to write the *Guardian* from his jail cell. The on-going war with Washington helped keep the *Guardian* a widely-read newspaper across the country.

W.E.B. DuBois, an equal rights fighter and professor at Atlanta University, was moved by Trotter's jailing and the backward movement for blacks under Washington's leadership. DuBois led the so-called radical forces to a meeting with Washington and his followers. The meeting was fruitless, and in 1905 DuBois, Trotter and 27 others



founded the Niagara Movement to begin an all-out assault on Washington and his gradual approach to race relations. The Niagara Movement gave birth to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.

Trotter attended the founding conference of the NAACP in New York in 1909, but aside from occasional contacts over the next few years, never joined forces with the new organization. He could not be reconciled with the two main leaders of the early NAACP, Oswald Garrison Villard and his nemesis DuBois. He was also estranged from the group's local leadership in Boston. More to the point, he could not accept the white money and was suspicious of white leadership roles in an organization that was battling for the civil rights of blacks. As the NAACP's influence grew, Trotter's leadership became increasingly idiosyncratic and isolated on the left wing of the race's leadership.

Furthermore, the *Guardian* had changed Trotter's life. The paper cost him considerable money, and it had sapped his energy. He mortgaged his home and other real estate. He and his wife sacrificed their entire lives to the newspaper and the civil rights struggle.

Trotter founded the National Equal Rights League in 1909. He described the League as "an organization OF the colored people, and FOR the colored people, and LED BY the colored people."<sup>6</sup> Through the Equal Rights League, he protested everything that was offensive to black people. He was unyielding and intensely committed to his cause.

### Militant Protest

In 1914, Trotter went to the White House to protest to President Wilson the segregation of black federal employees in the work place. After a heated 45-minute argument with Trotter's group, Wilson ordered them from his office.

In the spring of 1915 Trotter led Boston's black community in calling for a ban at the Tremont Theatre of the film *The Birth of a Nation*. This film was a fictitious anti-black view of Reconstruction. Trotter met with and appealed to the Mayor of Boston and the Governor of Massachusetts, asking them to ban the film. When they refused Trotter led a protest march up Beacon Street to the State House and led pickets in a boycott of the theater. In June when Trotter, his sister Maude and their supporters refused to leave the lobby of the Tremont Theatre, Trotter was again arrested and jailed for leading a demonstration. Maude was arrested for jabbing a policeman with her hatpin. Despite a united effort of Boston's black community, in which the NAACP and Trotter's Equal Rights League played leading roles, the film continued to play into late October.

Booker T. Washington died in 1915, and the NAACP took the place of Washington's leadership. Trotter's wife died in 1918, leaving Trotter essentially alone in his struggle. He had lost friends and supporters because of his tenacious, impetuous and sometimes arrogant style. It was a sad and frustrating time for him. It became financially difficult to keep the *Guardian* published each week.

Trotter decided to become more active on a national level by joining the National Race Congress. He and other Congress members decided to attend the Peace Confer-

ence at Versailles to represent black Americans in the negotiations, but they were denied passports to Europe. Determined, Trotter left the *Guardian* in the hands of his sister and went to New York to find a ship going to Europe. He learned French, disguised himself as a French cook and peeled potatoes in the ship's kitchen while crossing the Atlantic. Once in France, he brought the plight of black Americans to the Versailles Conference, got petitions and news releases into the French press and met with the leading delegates. His aim was to get a racial equality clause adopted into the Versailles Peace Treaty. He was not successful.

Trotter remained in France for six months and then returned to continue the struggle at home. His next major cause was against Boston's 20-year-old, black-owned and operated Plymouth Hospital. In 1908 Dr. Cornelius Garland, a community doctor, had founded a small hospital on East Springfield Street in the South End. Twenty years later, Garland and several other black doctors wanted to expand the hospital by purchasing the old Beth Israel Hospital in Upper Roxbury, then a predominantly Jewish neighborhood.

*Trotter and 27 others founded the Niagara Movement . . . which gave birth to the NAACP.*

Trotter and a supporter, Dr. William Worthy, opposed the expansion of the Plymouth Hospital. They did not want what they thought would be a segregated hospital in Boston. They won the battle but alienated many black citizens who wanted Plymouth Hospital to continue. In 1929 Trotter took on Boston City Hospital, and his persistence led to the admission of two black women to the Nursing Program and the appointment of the first black intern at City Hospital in 1931.

With the onset of the Depression in the early 1930s, the *Guardian* became more of a burden and a drain on Trotter's health. A rival Boston newspaper, the *Chronicle*, was founded in 1930, and it cut into the *Guardian's* circulation. In a time of need Trotter was now a lone voice. He couldn't collect money from his advertisers and, having lost most of his readership and his support, Trotter walked the streets of Boston with bundles of newspapers, selling them himself.

He was an interesting character to see . . . walking around the streets. He looked rather shabby . . . and I can remember . . . a walrus mustache and copies of the *Guardian* stuffed in his coat pockets. . . . But he was a fighter . . . he was controversial and lots of people didn't like him in some ways, and some people admired [him] . . . but he was out there doing his job.<sup>7</sup>

Most of Trotter's associates and friends from earlier years were dead or retired. He was penniless and friendless save a few close friends and his sister, Maude Trotter Steward, who helped him with the paper. In 1934 Trotter died in a fall from the roof of his apartment in the South End. Some believe his death was a suicide. Maude and her husband, Dr. Charles Steward, a South End dentist, kept the *Guardian* going for 23 more years, until 1957.



Mr. Trotter, in my mind and in the minds of many who knew him, was a one-man protester. He was one of the gallant leaders of his day because he did what needed to be done. At a critical time in the history of the nation, William Monroe Trotter kept the protest tradition alive. He remains one of Boston's and America's important black leaders in the militant tradition for human equality and dignity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Guardian*, December 28, 1918.

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Charlotte McLaurin, 1984, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>3</sup>DuBois, W.E.B. (1968). *The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois*. New York: International Publishers. P. 238.

<sup>4</sup>Logan, R.W. and M.R. Winston (Eds.). (1982). *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*. New York: W.W. Norton. P. 604.

<sup>5</sup>Fox, S.R. (1970). *The Guardian of Boston*. New York: Atheneum. Pp. 50–51.

<sup>6</sup>Fox. *Guardian of Boston*. P. 140.

<sup>7</sup>Interview with Allen R. Crite, 1984, Boston, Massachusetts.

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# Geraldine Pindell Trotter

by  
Julie Winch

William Monroe Trotter, Phi Beta Kappa, magna cum laude from Harvard, was a prize that many a society matron in Boston's tight-knit black upper class in the last years of the nineteenth century must have coveted for her daughter. His father, James Monroe Trotter, a Civil War veteran and Democratic office-holder, had left him handsomely provided for. Clearly money would never be a problem for the future Mrs. Trotter.

William Monroe Trotter, a serious young man of strong religious principles, had rejected a career in the church, but he could call upon his father's associates, both black and white, if he decided to emulate Trotter, Sr., and enter the real estate business. He might even be able to parlay his wealth, education and connections into a political office — as long as he could be persuaded to abandon his father's affiliation to the Democratic party. All in all, the society ladies concluded, the woman who finally persuaded him into matrimony would have little to complain of. In the years that followed, many of those same ladies must have given heartfelt thanks that Trotter's choice had fallen not upon *their* daughters, but upon the long-suffering Geraldine Pindell.

Geraldine Louise Pindell (or "Deenie" as she was known to those in her circle) was born on October 3, 1872, the daughter of lawyer Charles Edward Pindell and his wife, Mary Frances Pindell.<sup>1</sup> Socially, the Pindells belonged to Boston's black elite.<sup>2</sup> Eschewing the Baptist and the AME churches, the Pindells were Episcopalians. Genteel, cultured and wealthy, the family was not without a commitment to the welfare of the larger black community. Geraldine's great-uncle, William Pindell, had been one of the leaders in the struggle against school segregation in antebellum Boston.<sup>3</sup>

Charles and Mary Pindell educated their daughter in the public school system in Everett and then sent her on to a business college. Prior to her marriage she lived with her parents and worked as a bookkeeper and stenographer — experience which would prove invaluable to the editor of the *Guardian*.<sup>4</sup>

Geraldine Pindell had known William Monroe Trotter, six months her senior, since childhood. Their engagement could hardly have been a surprise to their families or their



friends. In many respects it was an eminently suitable match. There was no disparity in wealth. True, the Pindells were northerners and Trotter's family was originally from the South, but he himself had been born in Ohio and raised in Boston. Both Geraldine and Trotter were deeply religious and both were committed to the cause of temperance.<sup>5</sup> They even had many of the same friends. Their marriage took place on June 27, 1899 when she was 26 and he was 27.

Almost immediately they moved into a comfortable house in what had previously been an all-white section of Dorchester, and it seemed that Geraldine Trotter's life was mapped out for her — raising a brood of children, entertaining friends to elegant afternoon teas and exchanging visits with other members of the elite. If she chose to take an interest in social reform — and there was every indication that she would — it could be done through the Episcopal church and such elite black organizations as the Women's Era Club, with its dedication to culture, charitable work and voting rights for women.<sup>6,7</sup>

At first Geraldine Trotter's married life did indeed follow this pattern. Her husband briefly considered settling in Europe as the agent of a major international banking house, in the hope of escaping the prejudice that confronted even a man of his education in the United States. Eventually, however, he followed his father and began a