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Geraldine Pindell Trotter

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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

¹*Guardian*, December 28, 1918.

²Interview with Charlotte McLaurin, 1984, Boston, Massachusetts.

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

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

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

⁶Fox. *Guardian of Boston*. P. 140.

⁷Interview 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.¹ Socially, the Pindells belonged to Boston's black elite.² 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.³

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*.⁴

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.⁵ 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.^{6,7}

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

career in real estate, negotiating mortgages. He worked first for a white-owned company and then set up in business on his own account; among his largely white clientele he soon established a reputation for efficiency and honest dealing.

Giving up her office work, Geraldine Trotter assumed the role of wife to a successful entrepreneur. She began entertaining. Amongst those who were part of the Trotters' social circle and welcome at their Sawyer Avenue home were the members of the Grimké family. Archibald Grimké, a former slave and the nephew of white abolitionists Sarah and Angeline Grimké, was a lawyer like Geraldine's father. The Trotters also received lengthy visits from W.E.B. DuBois and his family. DuBois, at this time, was more a friend of Geraldine's than of her husband's. He had, in fact, courted her when he was a graduate student at Harvard. Long after her death he remembered her as "a fine forthright woman, blonde, blue-eyed and fragile." He regretted that he had had "no chance to choose her" for she had chosen another, and he had left Boston to pursue his academic career.⁸

She urged those like herself, "who have had the advantages of education, who have seen life in its broadest light, to be willing to sacrifice and to care for our race."

In 1901, when her husband and a friend, Amherst graduate George W. Forbes, began publishing a weekly paper, the *Guardian*, Geraldine Trotter could have had little idea of how profoundly this would change her life. Her husband had been interested in the whole issue of civil rights before their marriage. He was a founder-member of the Boston Literary and Historical Association, which became a base for community politics, and he played an active role in the Massachusetts Racial Protective Association. His distrust of Booker T. Washington was evident long before the appearance of the *Guardian*, and his editorials certainly minced no words when describing "the Wizard of Tuskegee." Still, Trotter was hardly taking a radical position. Washington was only too well aware that he had few friends among Boston's black intellectuals.

Until her husband's arrest in the so-called Boston Riot of 1903, Geraldine Trotter evidently remained aloof from the *Guardian* and the viewpoint that it espoused. Trotter did recall her mildly complaining about his late hours as he spent more and more of his time at the *Guardian* office. It may also have concerned her that Trotter was giving less attention to his real estate business. However, she apparently accepted the situation because she certainly could not change it.⁹

At the time of the Boston Riot, W.E.B. DuBois had already sent his wife and young daughter to the Trotters for their annual visit, and he was on his way to join them when he learned of Trotter's arrest. As he explained to the banker George Foster Peabody, Mrs. Trotter was an old friend, and he could not help but take an interest in the fate of her husband.¹⁰ In a meeting at the Trotter house with a number of the editor's friends, DuBois insisted that it was one thing to attack Washington's policies and

another to attack his person; however, he was convinced that the Washingtonians were pursuing Trotter through the courts out of sheer vindictiveness. They wanted other critics to take note and abandon their opposition.

Despite his incarceration, Trotter was determined that the *Guardian* should not be silenced. With the aid of Geraldine, the newspaper continued to appear; Trotter wrote the editorials from his jail cell. On his release he needed all the support he could get. Forbes, his co-editor, was alarmed by the turn of events and determined to distance himself from Trotter. He resigned his interest in the *Guardian*, and more and more work fell to Geraldine Trotter until finally she became associate editor. She was in charge of the society columns, for Trotter knew that condemnations of Washington alone would not sell the paper. Geraldine also contributed articles on fashion and household management in the hope of attracting more female readers. Even Trotter's staunchest allies conceded that his bookkeeping methods were sloppy at best. Here Geraldine's professional training stood him in good stead as she took over the business ledgers.

All of Geraldine's business skills could not make the newspaper profitable. Trotter refused to raise the subscription price until after World War I, despite rising costs. To pay for publication the Trotters' comfortable home had to be mortgaged and eventually sold. Instead of her privileged life in Dorchester, Geraldine Trotter found herself in rented rooms. Nor was the rent always on hand. Her husband's real estate business dwindled away; he was a full-time newspaper editor with all the hardships and risks that that entailed.

It was not only Trotter's business that gradually fell away. His ideological clashes and personal differences with his fellow activists robbed Geraldine of many of her friends. Archibald Grimké was drawn closer and closer to the Washingtonians. Clement G. Morgan, a radical black lawyer, split with Trotter over the course of the Niagara Movement, and Geraldine was deliberately excluded from a fund-raiser organized by his wife and other prominent Bostonians, both black and white.¹¹ Eventually, even the summer visits from the DuBois family ceased as DuBois and Trotter came into conflict on issues of policy. Over the years Geraldine had followed DuBois's work with interest. When he published his personal Credo she wrote (from the *Guardian* office) to congratulate him on such a firm statement of belief and to ask a favor. "Some of us Boston women, who are very proud of you and very much interested in the welfare of our Race are anxious to print your creed and sell it, the money to go to a work which we are aiding." (DuBois told her to go ahead and reprint it and put it to whatever use she and her associates chose.)¹² However, with the estrangement between her husband and DuBois, her friendship with DuBois gradually waned.

To pay for publication [of the Guardian] the Trotters' comfortable home had to be mortgaged and eventually sold. Instead of her privileged life in Dorchester, Geraldine Trotter found herself in rented rooms.

The growing opposition to Trotter's policies drew his wife closer to him and his work. One of his heroes was William Lloyd Garrison, and he determined that the centenary of the white abolitionist's birth would not go unmarked, even though his relations with the Garrison family were less than cordial. A day of celebration was organized, and Geraldine Trotter played a prominent role. In what was evidently her first venture onto the public platform, she delivered a speech at the old Garrison home in Roxbury. She regretted the chilly downpour because it reduced the attendance at the observances, but she reflected that "as God looked back over the years of Garrison, He thought such a day as this would better stand for his life" than a day marked by cloudless blue skies. She challenged the black community by demanding "how many of us are now willing to do for our own what that man did for us? How many of us are willing to stand out against the broadcloth mob, to stand by what is right in spite of the criticism of the many?" She urged those like herself, "who have had the advantages of education, who have seen life in its broadest light, to be willing to sacrifice and to care for our race" as much as Garrison had. Did she have herself in mind as she spoke of Garrison's wife, who had struggled to make a home for the reformer and their children and "who had been his true helpmate through all his trials"?¹³

Geraldine Trotter told her acquaintances that she and her husband had no regrets that their marriage was childless; they had no wish for children.¹⁴ It is difficult to see how they could have incorporated the task of raising a family into their lives. To Geraldine would have fallen much of the burden, since Trotter was so often preoccupied with raising funds, battling the Washingtonians or questioning white politicians about their stand on the "race question." On their reduced income the Trotters could not have given their children the same educational benefits that they had enjoyed.

Not only did Geraldine Trotter often have to take responsibility for seeing that the weekly issues of the *Guardian* appeared, but she also found time to promote reform causes within the community independent of her husband. One of the projects to which she dedicated her energies was St. Monica's Home in Roxbury. Established in 1888, it was a refuge for women and children from the black community who were in need of medical care. It was administered by an Episcopalian order of sisters, and black women raised much of the money needed to keep the home open.¹⁵ Geraldine was also active in promoting the welfare of black troops during World War I and in petitioning for the release of a black man who, she insisted, had been wrongfully convicted of murder.¹⁶

Geraldine Pindell died on October 8, 1918, one of many to succumb during the influenza pandemic. She was barely 46. Learning of her death, DuBois recalled how she

had given up her "comfortable home" and "all thought of children" to work with her husband "in utter devotion . . . living and lurching with him in the *Guardian* office, and knowing hunger and cold." It was, he concluded, "a magnificent partnership, and she died to pay for it."¹⁷

Trotter never recovered from her death. There was no second marriage and apparently no new attachment. More than a decade after Geraldine's death he wrote: "Still acute is the pain of her going, still saddened is life by daily remembrance of her and longing for the old companionship."¹⁸ For years Trotter dedicated half a column of the *Guardian* to his "fallen Comrade" who gave her life "For the rights of her race." He reprinted her photograph and paid tribute to the memory of the woman "who helped me so loyally, faithfully, conscientiously [and] unselfishly," vowing to dedicate the rest of his life "to perpetuating the *Guardian* and the Equal Rights cause and work for which she made such noble, and total sacrifice."¹⁹

NOTES

¹Harrison, W. (1946). William Monroe Trotter—Fighter. *Phylon*, 7, 240.

²On Boston's black upper class in the late nineteenth century, see Pleck, E.H. (1979). *Black Migration and Poverty: Boston 1876-1900*. New York: Academic Press. Pp. 91-95.

³Puttkammer, C.W. and R. Worthy. (1958). William Monroe Trotter, 1872-1934. *Journal of Negro History*, 43, 299n. However, Fox, S.R. (1970). *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter*. New York: Atheneum. P. 22. identifies William Pindell as an uncle of Geraldine Pindell, rather than a great-uncle.

⁴Puttkammer. William Monroe Trotter, 1872-1934. P. 299n.

⁵On Geraldine Trotter's religious faith, see Fox. *Guardian of Boston*. P. 212.

⁶Pleck, E.H. (1979). *Black Migration and Poverty: Boston 1865-1900*. New York: Academic Press. Pp. 93, 95.

⁷Daniels, J. (1914). *In Freedom's Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Reprinted edition. New York: Arno Press. (1969). Pp. 209-10.

⁸DuBois, W.E.B. (1968). *The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois*. New York: International Publishers. Pp. 137-38.

⁹Fox. *Guardian of Boston*. P. 80.

¹⁰Aptheker, H. (Ed.). (1973). *The Correspondence of W.E.B. DuBois (Vol. 1)*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press. P. 67.

¹¹Fox. *Guardian of Boston*. P. 104.

¹²Aptheker. *Correspondence of W.E.B. DuBois*. Pp. 82-83.

¹³*Guardian*. December 16, 1905.

¹⁴Fox, *Guardian of Boston*. P. 212.

¹⁵Daniels. *In Freedom's Birthplace*. P. 196.

¹⁶Fox. *Guardian of Boston*. P. 212.

¹⁷Aptheker, H. (May 1934). *The Crisis*, 47. In *Writings in Periodicals Edited by W.E.B. DuBois: Selections from the Crisis (1926-34)*. (1983). Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomas. P. 753.

¹⁸Fox, *Guardian of Boston*. P. 212.

¹⁹*Guardian*. April 12, 1919.

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