IDA B. WELLS

IDA B. WELLS was a teacher, speaker, and writer who fearlessly wrote about lynching—the horrific way some blacks were killed by whites in the South after the Civil War. She was also active in the women's suffrage movement and worked toward ensuring that men and women of all races were treated fairly and equally.

EARLY YEARS

Ida B. Wells was born a slave in Holly Spring, Mississippi, in 1862. By the time she was three, the Civil War was over and all slaves were emancipated. Wells's mother, Elizabeth, had grown up a slave. She'd been cruelly separated from her family and sold from one plantation to the next. Her father, James, was the son of a black slave and a white plantation owner. Although he had a privileged position on the plantation and was taught carpentry, he was still considered a slave. He knew that even with **emancipation**, there would be a fight to be treated fairly and have equal access to educational and economic opportunities.

Wells's parents valued education and sent Wells, the eldest, and her siblings to a school run by a white northern Methodist. Wells was taught to read and write and encouraged to work hard and have good manners. Her mother was strict. She made sure her children did their homework and finished their chores.

Woodcut of Wells in 1891

Wells's parents spoke about their lives before emancipation and about how things were changing in the new, post–Civil War era called Reconstruction. Some of the change was frightening. Some in the southern

A freeman, John Campbell, vainly begs for mercy from the KKK in Moore County, North Carolina, August 10, 1871

white communities were angry and resentful that they'd lost the war and disliked the new way of life they felt had been imposed on them. Some even joined the **Ku Klux Klan**, a secretive white organization that harassed and terrorized people who didn't agree with their views. The Klan accused many black people of crimes and often lynched them before they could be brought to court or trial. The violent activities of the Ku Klux Klan left many blacks worried and fearful for their lives. No one knew where the Klan might strike next.

Despite living in fear, James Wells attended political meetings. His group discussed ways for blacks to have greater economic opportunities and live safer lives.

YELLOW FEVER

Luckily, Wells and her family didn't experience the Klan's brutality directly. Wells went to school, studied, did her chores, visited her grandparents, and helped her family.

But when she was sixteen and visiting her grandmother Peggy in Memphis, Tennessee, she heard terrible news: Yellow fever had hit her community. The disease killed her parents and one of her brothers.

Wells was devastated. How could she go home? What if she caught yellow fever, too? Everyone warned her not to return. Even passenger trains wouldn't stop in Holly Springs because people feared they'd catch yellow fever. Little was known about how the disease was spread in those days. (We now know it's spread by infected mosquitoes.)

But Wells was determined. Her surviving siblings needed her. She hopped on a freight train and arrived home to a town of deserted streets. Many in the community had died. Two of her siblings were sick. Wells was grateful that the local doctor, Dr. Gray, a kind white man, helped her family. Dr. Gray spoke warmly of her father and his efforts to help the community when yellow fever first struck.

When the epidemic finally died down, friends of Wells's family decided that her brothers and sister should be split up among different families and that one of her siblings, Eugenia, who was paralyzed, should be sent to a poor house. Wells said she could take care of them all. Her father had left them the house and a little money. She'd find a job and keep the family together.

Wells took a teaching test, and when she passed, she found a teaching position six miles away from home. During the week, Wells's grandma Peggy, who moved to Holly Springs to help out, looked after the smaller children. When Grandma Peggy had a stroke, a family friend helped out. On the weekends Wells came home, did the laundry, cooked, and cleaned. It was a burden for such a young woman, but Wells did what she had to do to keep her family together.

MEMPHIS

When Wells was nineteen, she knew she needed a change. She also wanted to earn more money, so she decided to move to Memphis to find a better-paying teaching job. Her siblings were now older, and two of her aunts offered to board them. Memphis was a bustling city with factories, a waterfront, and railways. Blacks had built churches and schools. They could ride the same bus as whites, vote, and serve in public office.

Memphis Reservoir, Tennessee

When Wells found a job outside of Memphis in a country school in Woodstock, she rode the train to work and studied for her licensing exam so she could teach in the city.

One day on the train, as usual, she sat down in the seats reserved for "ladies" in first class. But this time, the conductor demanded that she move to a car in the back of the train—the one for smokers and blacks. Wells refused. She'd paid for her seat. She was entitled to sit there! The conductor grabbed her by the hand and tried yanking her out of her seat. As soon as he touched her, Wells bit his hand. The stunned conductor stormed off for help and recruited three men to drag Wells out of her seat. As they pulled her, the sleeve of her linen coat ripped. Wells got off the train.

Although she had stood up for her rights, it was a humiliating and infuriating experience. Wells was so outraged that she hired a lawyer to sue the railroad. While she waited to hear back, she found a job teaching first grade in a Memphis school. Wells began to teach but realized that she didn't enjoy teaching a large, rowdy, unmotivated class. And then she heard that the black lawyer she'd hired had been paid off by the railroad to prevent the case from going to court. She was hurt and angry and hired another lawyer. When the case was finally heard, Wells was awarded $500.

SPEAKING HER MIND

Wells didn't like teaching, but she enjoyed life in Memphis. She went to picnics, church fairs, the theater, concerts, and visited friends. She even took speech lessons. She joined a lecture club and one day a member of the group offered her a job as a writer for the *Evening Star*, a newsletter. Wells enjoyed writing. After she described being dragged off the rail train, she was asked to write a weekly column for the *Living Way*, a black church publication. Her column was popular, and soon Wells was contributing to other black newspapers. Her opinions earned her both praise and criticism, but she kept writing. Conditions for blacks had become increasingly difficult in the South after Reconstruction, and Wells wrote about how the new Jim Crow laws restricted the rights of black people on trains, restaurants, streetcars, and parks. Blacks were being forced to sit separately from whites all over the South.

IDA J. WELLS SPEAKS

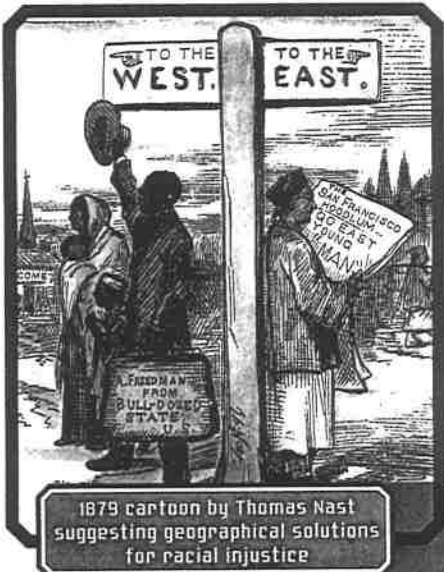
SHE DENOUNCES THE WHOLESALE LYNCHING IN TENNESSEE,

And Says It Is High Time Steps Were Taken to Make Such Crimes Impossible.

CHICAGO, Sept. 2.—Ida J. Wells, the young colored woman whose work on the lecture platform here and abroad in behalf of the anti-lynching movement has made her name well known, could scarcely restrain her emotion when she read the published account of the fate visited upon six of her race near Millington, Tenn.

"Granting that those men were guilty of the crime charged," she said, "there is no other place in the world where a capital offense is made of burning barns. I scarcely know what to say of the men who are responsible for this butchery. This last example of lynch law is but a sample of the sort of things done in the South. The white men down there do not think any more of killing a negro than they do of slaying a mad dog. This incident serves to back up the contention that the negroes are not lynched solely for the perpetration of foul crimes, notwithstanding the symposium contributed recently ... York newspaper by a number ... men, reaffirming that ... never took place in ... for crimes committed ... children. An excuse ... for the purpose of ... and leaving them ... the negroes they wish ... of races and nations, the Southern white man vainly believes he can keep down an entire race by such methods of oppression and intimidation. The South has more than once insisted upon being left alone with the negro problem. The Nation has obligingly accommodated her, and to-day the spectacle is pre-...

An article about Wells



1879 cartoon by Thomas Nast suggesting geographical solutions for racial injustice

In 1887, as the atmosphere became increasingly hostile to blacks, the courts retried Wells's case against the railroad. This time the ruling went against her. The court stated that the railroad had done nothing wrong in dragging Wells out of the seat she'd paid for. The railroad didn't have to pay her a cent. Wells was charged $200. She was crushed by the new decision and the new attitude in the South.

In 1889, Wells bought a one-third interest in a black newspaper, *Free Speech and Headlight*. She continued writing articles that encouraged blacks to work hard and save money. She also criticized black schools, which were not maintained properly and hired poorly trained teachers. The Memphis school board was so enraged by Wells's opinions that they wouldn't hire her back to teach. And to Wells's disappointment, the parents of the black students at the schools didn't stand up for her, either.

IDA B. WELLS, TROUBLEMAKER

When Wells heard that T. Thomas Fortune, editor of the *New York Age*, was starting an Afro-American organization to fight against discrimination, she was thrilled. She spoke eloquently at the group's second convention in 1891. Soon, the word was out. Ida Wells was outspoken and a troublemaker.

But even more trouble was about to swirl around her. After Wells's paper published a piece supporting blacks who protested lynching by setting fire to their town in Kentucky, whites in the area were enraged, and *Free Speech and Headlight* was accused of stirring up violence. One of the paper's publishers, Reverend Taylor Nightingale, was convicted of assault and fled to Oklahoma. Wells and J. L. Fleming were now in charge of the paper. Wells wanted to drum up business for the paper, so she traveled to nearby states to promote it. While she was away, her friend Tom Moss, and his friends who owned a new grocery store in Memphis, were lynched because a white grocer resented the competition and provoked a showdown. Moss and his friends were warned that a mob was going to attack their store, so they armed themselves. In the scuffle that followed, three white men were wounded and the black grocers were arrested. Before they could go to trial, the grocers were dragged out of the city jails and shot. Wells

was outraged at her friend's murder. She hurried home to comfort Moss's family.

A lynch mob and their dogs

How could this happen to a man who was just trying to run a respectable business? Wells knew Moss, and she knew he wouldn't have become involved in a fight unless he had no choice. After Moss and his friends were lynched, a mob shot at blacks, raided the grocery store, and destroyed it.

Wells had to do something. She protested by writing about the events in her newspaper. She believed that lynching was a way whites tried to frighten and control blacks. She suggested that blacks stop supporting white businesses and stop riding streetcars. She encouraged blacks to leave Memphis for good. In two months, six thousand black people followed her advice. The white community couldn't believe it. They were losing workers and business.

Meanwhile, Wells began reading more about lynching. What she read shocked her. So many people had been

19th century Front Street, Memphis

lynched. Her sharp words against lynching drew threats from the white community. In 1892, hoodlums invaded Wells's office and destroyed it.

Wells was forced to leave Memphis.

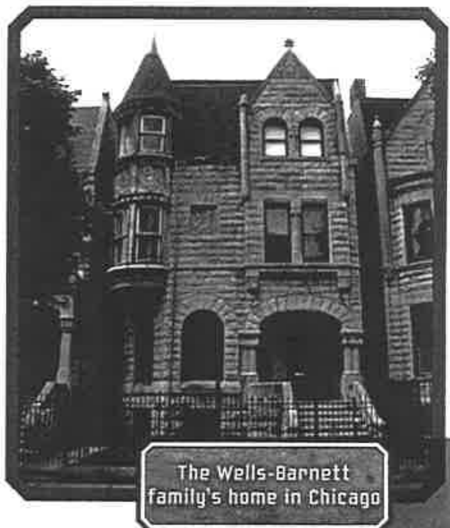
NOTHING STOPS WELLS

Wells moved to Chicago and wrote columns for the *New York Age* about lynching. She noted the dates and people who were innocent and had been lynched. Famed black reformer Frederick Douglass admired her courage to tell the shameful story of lynching in the South. Wells soon wrote a pamphlet, called *Southern Horrors*, about lynching. Her writing and her speeches drew widespread attention, and she was asked to speak around the United States and also in England and Scotland. It was unusual in those days

for a single woman to travel to Europe, so Wells traveled with Dr. Georgia Patton, the first black female physician in Memphis. Her campaign to let the world know about lynching was working. The people of Britain were shocked. Wells helped form the British Anti-Lynching Committee.

When she returned home, she spoke during the Chicago Columbian Exposition. Wells's talks attracted many women. A club was even formed called the Ida B. Wells Club, and women gathered for discussions, lectures, and musical events.

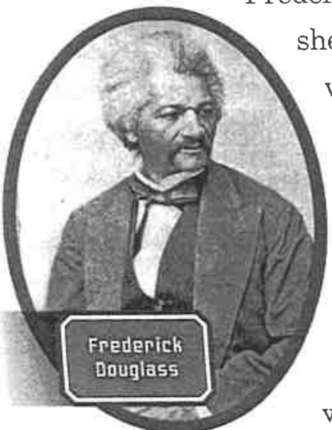
Wells liked Chicago. She decided that this city would now be her home. But she would also continue to travel and give speeches. She returned to Britain in 1894 and was pleased that several British groups now actively condemned lynching. But it was back in the United States where she had to do more. When she returned to the U.S., she spoke to both black and white audiences. She became friends with women's rights advocate Susan B. Anthony and embraced that cause, too.



The Wells-Barnett family's home in Chicago

Once, when Anthony invited Wells to her house, Anthony's secretary refused to work for Wells because she was black. Anthony fired her immediately. Wells was proud of her friend's unwavering support.

But there were two areas in which they differed. Anthony believed that women's rights should be supported equally with black rights and resented that black men were granted the vote and not women. Anthony wouldn't invite Frederick Douglass to a meeting because she was afraid that southern women would be offended. Wells disagreed.


Frederick Douglass

And when Wells married Ferdinand Barnett, an attorney and newspaper publisher in 1895, Anthony worried that married life would take Wells away from the causes she believed in. Some blacks worried about that, too.

WELLS FIGHTS ON

Wells's friends shouldn't have worried. Wells didn't let marriage and children deter her from speaking up and writing about the causes that were important to her. Wells even kept her maiden name, an unusual step for women at that time. She now called herself Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

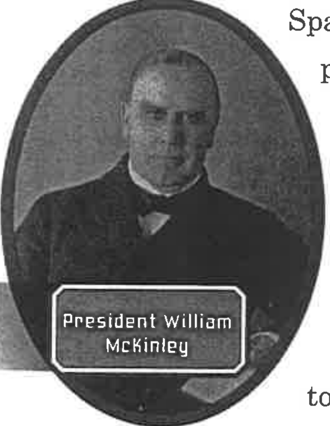
Wells also became more involved with the Ida B. Wells Clubs and started a new kind of school in those days—a kindergarten.

Ferdinand Barnett

Even when Wells had her own child, Charles, she continued to travel and speak at conferences and clubs. Sometimes she would take Charles with her. In 1897, when Wells had her second child, Herman, she took time off to spend more time with her children.

Wells and her four children

And then in 1898, a black postman was lynched in Lake City, South Carolina. A mob set his house on fire and killed the postman and his infant. Wells was outraged. She traveled to Washington, D.C., to speak to President William McKinley. The president treated her with respect and offered to help. But when the


President William McKinley

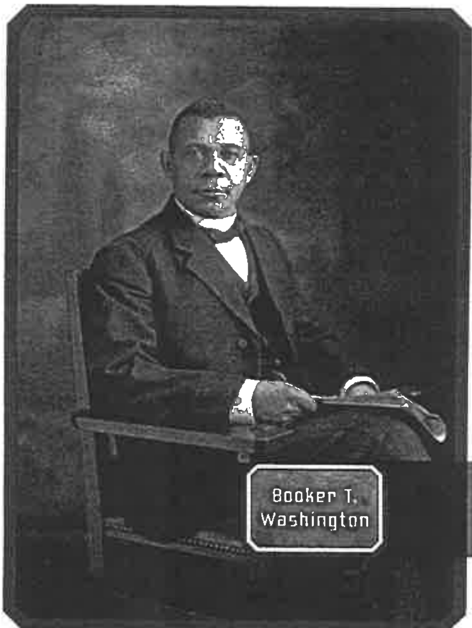
Spanish–American War broke out, the president's attention was taken up with the war. There was less interest in her cause and in stopping lynchings.

WE MUST UNITE

Wells believed it was crucial for blacks to unite and work together toward common goals. But coming together was hard. People had different agendas. Famed educator and political leader Booker T. Washington was part of one group in the National Afro-American Council. He believed that education was key, and he was less interested in political action. Wells had more radical ideas. She wanted political change. She felt that blacks would never receive fair treatment and justice until laws were changed. Some people called her a hothead. There were also rivalries and power struggles, which divided the group. The disagreements prevented people from working successfully together.

In 1901, Wells's daughter Ida was born, and in 1904, another daughter, Alfreda, was born. Wells's family was one of the first black families to move into a white neighborhood in Chicago, but the neighbors weren't pleased with their new neighbors. Sometimes Wells's boys got into fights

with local white boys. Many of Wells's white neighbors shunned them. But despite that, Wells and her family enjoyed good times in their new home listening to music and inviting company for supper.


Booker T. Washington

RIOTS

In 1908, riots broke out in Springfield, Illinois. White mobs burned black houses and stores. Three blacks were lynched. It was clear that some whites wanted to drive blacks out of the city. Wells thought that blacks weren't fighting hard enough to stop the violence. She and a group of other residents started an organization that would eventually call itself the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (the NAACP). Many whites who supported fairness for blacks also supported the NAACP.

NAACP logo

In the fall of 1909, there was another lynching in Cairo, Illinois. A homeless black man was arrested for a crime but never brought to trial. A mob found him and lynched him instead. Wells took the train to Cairo to find out what happened. She discovered that the sheriff had not protected the black man. Wells spoke up in the courtroom in Cairo and was so impressive that when she was finished, every white man in the courtroom shook her hand. The governor of Illinois supported her, too. He promised that there would be no more lynchings in his state, and there weren't.

Wells also continued to fight for women's rights. In March 1913, some white women in the suffrage movement asked the black women to march separately in Washington. Wells refused. Instead, she joined an Illinois group who welcomed blacks. Wells marched side-by-side with them at the parade.

Ida B. Wells

After World War I, Wells continued to speak out. When she and her family moved into a prosperous neighborhood in Chicago, some black families' homes in the area were bombed. In 1919, riots broke out, and tensions arose between blacks and whites. More than five hundred people were injured in the violence that followed.

Wells continued to speak up wherever there was injustice against blacks or women. She even ran for state senator of Illinois in 1930. At the time, she was in the middle of writing her autobiography. She wanted to tell her story as only she could tell it.

Ida B. Wells died on March 25, 1931, of kidney failure. Her home in Chicago is a national historical landmark, and in 1990, the U.S. postal service issued a stamp in her honor.