

Ida B. Wells

(1862-1931)

Ida B. Wells has been described as a fearless crusader for justice and as a defender of democracy. Wells was characterized as a militant and uncompromising leader for her efforts to abolish lynching and establish racial equality. Wells challenged segregation decades before Rosa Parks, ran for Congress and attended suffrage meetings with the likes of Susan B. Anthony and Jane Addams, yet most of her efforts are largely unknown due to the fact that she is African American and female.

It was in Memphis where Ida first began to fight (literally) for racial and gender justice. In 1884, a Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad Company conductor ordered her to give up her seat on the train to a white man and move to the overcrowded "Jim Crow" car. Despite the 1875 Civil Rights Act banning discrimination on the basis of race in public accommodations, several railroad companies defied this congressional mandate and continued to racially segregate passengers. Wells was forcefully removed from the train while the other passengers, all white, applauded. When Wells returned to Memphis, she immediately hired an attorney to sue the railroad. She won her case in the local circuit courts, but the ruling was overturned by the Supreme

Court of Tennessee. From that moment forward, Wells worked tirelessly and fearlessly to overturn injustices against women and people of color.

Ida's suit against the railroad company sparked her career as a journalist. In 1892, Wells wrote a scathing series of editorials following the lynching of three prominent African-American businessmen in Memphis who were friends of hers. In the aftermath of the lynching and her outspoken criticism of it, her newspaper's office was destroyed. Wells then moved to New York City, where she continued to write editorials and exposés against lynching, which was at an epidemic level in the years after Reconstruction. Joining the staff of *The New York Age*, Wells became a much-sought-after lecturer and organizer for anti-lynching societies made up of men and women of all races. She traveled throughout the U.S. and went to Britain twice to speak about anti-lynching activities.

In 1895, at the age of 33, Wells married Ferdinand L. Barnett, a Chicago lawyer, activist and editor. Barnett was the owner and founder of the first black newspaper in Chicago, the *Conservator*—which Wells eventually bought and assumed leadership as editor. After 1895 Wells limited her activities to Chicago, but she was quite active in Chicago's rapidly-growing African-American

community. In Chicago, she helped develop numerous African American women and reform organizations. She also remained diligent in her anti-lynching crusade, writing *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* and *A Red Record*.

In 1906, she joined with W.E.B. DuBois and others to further the Niagara Movement, and she was one of two African American women to sign "the call" to form the NAACP in 1909. Although Ida B. Wells was one of the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), she was also among the few Black leaders to explicitly oppose Booker T. Washington and his strategies. As a result, she was viewed as one the most radical of the so-called "radicals" who organized the NAACP and marginalized from positions within its leadership. She also became a tireless worker for women's suffrage, and happened to march in the famous 1913 march for universal suffrage in Washington, D.C. Not able to tolerate injustice of any kind, Ida B. Wells, along with Jane Addams, successfully blocked the establishment of segregated schools in Chicago.

After a life of organizing and writing, Wells died in Chicago on March 25, 1931. Ida B. Wells will be remembered as a fearless crusader for the rights of

African-Americans and women in this country. Her writings exposed lynching as an act of terror perpetrated against a race of people in order to maintain power and control and not as spontaneous punishment for crimes. She is one of this country's true heroes.

The Works of Ida B. Wells

- *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases*
- *On Lynchings*
- *A Red Record*
- *Mob Rule in New Orleans*



The Words of Ida B. Wells

“The appetite grows for what it feeds on.”

“There must always be a remedy for wrong and injustice if we only know how to find it.”

“One had better die fighting against injustice than to die like a dog or a rat in a trap.”

“The doors of churches, hotels, concert halls and reading rooms are alike closed against the Negro as a man, but every place is open to him as a servant.”

Whole Woman's Health
Women's History Project

Ida B. Wells

Anti-Lynching Crusader, Suffragist,
Women's Rights Advocate, Journalist,
and Speaker



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wrong and injustice if we only know how
to find it.”*

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