

# Ida B. Wells



## Record Information

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## Description:

Ida B. Wells-Barnett was an activist, teacher, and journalist. In fiery newspaper articles, she exposed the evils of segregation and the suppression of black civil rights, supporting economic boycotts against whites. She is best known for her extensive writings and lectures against lynching—mob violence that often resulted in the deaths of blacks and sympathetic whites at the hands of white vigilantes. Another favorite target of her criticism was the submissiveness of blacks to injustice, which she hated as much as white violence. In 1909 Wells-Barnett became one of the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

One of the most outspoken journalists of her day, **Ida B. Wells** was editor of *Free Speech*, a Memphis weekly. She later campaigned for women's right to vote. **Ida Bell Wells** was born on July 6, 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, to Jim and Elizabeth **Wells**. Both of her parents were slaves at the time of her birth. Her father worked as a carpenter on the plantation where he lived, and her mother was a cook. After emancipation, **Wells** and her family remained in Holly Springs, a small town near Memphis, where she received a primary and secondary education at Shaw University. In 1878, when she was 16, **Wells** began to work as a schoolteacher in Holly Springs after the death of both of her parents during a yellow fever epidemic. She moved to Memphis with several of her siblings the following year and obtained a job as a schoolteacher in a town outside Memphis.

In 1884, while riding a train from Memphis to work, **Wells** refused to move from a car reserved for white passengers to another car that the railroad designated for black passengers. Arrested and removed from the train, **Wells** was determined to resist this form of racial segregation and discrimination. She sued the company and eventually won \$500 in a state court. This judgment was reversed **by** a Tennessee Supreme Court decision that ruled in favor of the rail company in 1887. In 1891, **Wells** was fired from a teaching job in the Memphis public schools after she wrote an article criticizing the school board for spending more money on white schools than on black ones. The following year, she became editor of the *Free Speech*, a recently founded local newspaper aimed at Memphis's African-American community. Soon after becoming editor, **Wells** was confronted with the murder of three African-American grocery store owners **by** a mob of whites. The three men, who were being held

in jail after an attack on their store by off-duty white police officers, were removed from their jail cell by the mob and lynched. Wells wrote scathing articles in the *Free Speech* about the incident. Outraged by her boldness, another white mob attacked the *Free Press*'s offices and burned down the building in which it was housed. Fortunately, Wells was not in the building at the time and was unharmed. After the destruction of her paper, Wells moved north, first to New York City, then to Chicago. She worked for the *New York Age* and other black papers, writing a series of articles about lynching in the South. In 1895, she published *A Red Record*, a book about southern lynchings that documented the increase in lynching that had occurred in the 1890s. That year, Wells married Ferdinand Barnett, a lawyer and politician in Chicago. The couple would have four children.

In 1896, Wells helped organize the National Association of Colored Women. Throughout the late 1890s and early 1900s, she continued to speak out against racial segregation, taking on segregated housing laws in Chicago and writing about attacks against blacks by whites that occurred in East Saint Louis in 1917 and Chicago in 1919. She served on the executive committee of the new National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910.

Wells also worked to get women the right to vote. In 1913, she formed the Alpha Suffrage Club to push for voting rights for women in Illinois. With other women's suffrage advocates, she picketed the White House in 1918. Ida Wells-Barnett died in Chicago on March 25, 1931.

## References and Further Information

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