

Ida B. Wells

*Adapted from Ida B. Wells - Let the Truth Be Told and
Ida B. Wells - Mother of the Civil Rights Movement*

Ida B. Wells, later known as Ida B. Wells-Barnett after her marriage, is not someone you may have heard of before when it comes to learning about the Civil Rights Movement. Often we think of the Civil Rights Movement as beginning when the Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools were illegal in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954. We think of the Little Rock 9, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and mostly of the 1950s and 1960s. Wells might be overlooked because she lived from 1862-1931. It is not until we broaden our perspective on the meaning of the fight for justice to include those activists living and working in the late 1800s and early 1900s do we begin to appreciate their significance. As the authors of Ida B. Wells Mother of the Civil Rights Movement state:

“Most people know that by refusing to relinquish her seat to a white passenger on an Alabama bus in 1955, Rosa Parks helped end segregation in public places in the United States. Yet few people realize that seventy-one years earlier, in 1884, Ida B. Wells fought a similar battle by refusing to give up her seat [a first class ticket which she paid for] in an ‘White only’ ladies coach car in Tennessee. It took three men to drag the twenty-one-year-old school teacher from the train, and all the influence the railroad could summon to defeat her subsequent lawsuit.

“Most people also know that during the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the struggle for black people to obtain justice in the fields of education, jobs, and housing. Yet few people know that Ida B. Wells led similar struggles as far back as the 1890s. Among her many achievements, she helped create the NAACP, which still works for the rights of black people and other minorities.

Susan B. Anthony is remembered for leading the campaign for women’s voting rights. Ida B. Wells was a leader in that movement, too. She created the Alpha Suffrage Club, one of the countries first organizations to work for the rights of black women to vote.”

In fact, she marched in the same parade that Alice Paul and Lucy Burns of the National Women’s Party organized in 1913 in Washington, D.C., right before Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration. Even women, such as those in the NWP, who were on the forefront of radical change were awestruck at a black woman walking with white women in the parade. Wells was “encouraged” to only march with the other black women who came with her from Illinois, since white southern women would be against it. Wells flatly refused and continued marching with everyone else.

Truly, the Civil Rights Movement began much earlier than we once thought.

Early Life

In her early life, Wells dealt with quite a bit of adversity. She was born in 1862 in Mississippi to James and Elizabeth Wells. Her parents were both slaves, so therefore she was too. Her status as a slave changed pretty quickly at the end of the Civil War in 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment was passed making slavery illegal. From a young age, Wells went to a school set up by a religious group and excelled. But in 1878,

Ida lost both her parents and a younger brother to a disease called yellow fever. At age 16 she took over responsibility of her remaining five siblings and started working full time as a teacher to provide for the family. After moving to Memphis, Tennessee at age 19 so part of the family could live with their aunt and she could find better teaching opportunities, Wells experienced personally the segregation and discrimination she had witnessed in her life and as a teacher in a segregated school. The school that she worked at was 10 miles from where she lived so she had to travel by train to get to work each day. In 1881 Tennessee had a law which required black and white passengers to sit on separate train cars. Wells defied the law for three years (she bought her ticket, sat in the "Ladies Coach" and no one bothered her) until one day, in 1884, a conductor ordered her to move. When she refused, the conductor had her forcibly removed. Although Wells won her initial case and damages for \$500, she later lost her battle in a higher court and never received the money.

"Princess of the Press"

Those many train rides changed Wells in more ways than one. To pass the time back and forth to the school, Wells often read books and newspapers and wrote letters and started a diary. It was this practice of writing that perhaps caused Wells to write about the confrontation that day in May 1884 on the train car and the ensuing legal battle. The article she penned in her church newspaper, and later ones published in a newspaper called *New York Age* got her noticed as someone who was strong, clear, and persuasive. By 1889, Wells had quit her job as a teacher and was writing full time for the *Free Speech and Headlight*. It was the articles she published in this newspaper, and later pamphlets which she had printed and widely distributed which caused some in the white community to target her as a trouble-maker and some in the black community as "a flame of righteous indignation," "a hot-head," "radical," and "militant." Nonetheless, Wells' writing got her noticed. She was elected as Secretary of the Colored Press in 1889 where she was dubbed, the "Princess of the Press."

The article that got Wells started down the path of using writing to expose injustice was about an incident which occurred at the People's Grocery store in Memphis. Three black men, one of whom was close friends with Wells, owned a prosperous store which sold groceries to nearby residents. One day in 1892, they were visited by a group of white men who threatened them and wanted the store to close because their store across the street had been losing business ever since the People's Grocery opened. A few nights later, the dispute turned physical when some of the men broke into the store. The owners defended themselves and injured three of the men. Consequently the store owners were arrested and held in jail. Before they could be tried in court, the three store owners were taken from their jail cell, lined up and shot by white men, all residents of Memphis.

Wells, upon learning about the murder, was enraged and pledged to tell the truth to the world. "This is what opened my eyes to what lynching¹ really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property," she later stated in her autobiography. The article she wrote in *Free Speech* targeted the men who murdered her friends and the white community for being bystanders. She encouraged the black community to fight back, but not with violence: don't spend money in white-owned businesses, don't buy tickets on white-owned street cars, or even more bold, "Save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a

¹ Lynching means to put to death, especially by hanging, by mob action and without legal authority

fair trial in the courts, but takes us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons.” While Wells was on a trip to New York City, the office of her newspaper was completely destroyed. Had she been there, it is believed that she would have been killed. Her statement was so public and so bold that she was forced to leave town. Wells moved to New York and then Chicago.

The Crusade For Justice

She continued speaking out against lynching and other incidents of violence towards the black community. Wells published “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All its Phases” and “A Red Record” and went on a speaking tour in Britain. She wrote “Mob Rule in New Orleans” in 1900 in which she continued to criticize the perpetrators of the crime and bystanders alike: “Men and women of America, are you proud of the record [of lynching]? Your silence seems to say that you are. Only by earnest, active, united endeavor to arouse public sentiment can we hope to put a stop to these demonstrations of American barbarism.” Some in the black community felt that even more violence would be directed at them because of her harsh criticism of white America. Some even asked her to tone it down. She was “militantly outspoken at a time when black people were expected to ‘know their place.’” Wells only continued to speak out, in writing and through speeches, against injustice.

In 1900 while living in Chicago, Wells spoke out against people who wanted the public schools to be segregated. With the help of her friend Jane Addams, a white woman and activist, and some members of the business community, also white, Wells defeated the proposal. By this time, Wells had married a lawyer named Ferdinand Barnett and they had two young children. Some people were shocked to see a wife and mother so publicly speaking out about an issue. Many of the civil rights activists at the time were men and did not want to be seen as being led by a woman.

Wells-Barnett continued being outspoken to try to fight against racism and sexism; however, this time she advocated that the right to vote be granted to women. In 1913, Wells-Barnett created the Alpha Suffrage Club, the first voting organization for women in the history of Illinois. As you read on the first page, she brought her group to Washington, D.C. to join the more than 5,000 other women pushing for suffrage. A poem entitled, “Queen of our Race,” was created by Bettiola H. Fortson about Wells-Barnett’s leadership during the march in D.C.:

Side by side with the whites she walked,
Step after step the southerners balked,
But Illinois, fold of order and grace,
Stuck to the black Queen of our race.

‘Tis true, they’re able at this age to bar,
But justice will soon send the doors ajar
And sit the black and white face to face.
There will be seen the Queen of our race.

Page after page in history you’ll read
Of one who was ready and able to lead,
Who set the nation on fire with her pace
And the heroine will be the Queen of our race.

Later Accomplishments and Legacy

During the last twenty years of her life, Wells-Barnett was active in trying to help boys and men lead successful lives, especially after being released from prison. She created the Negro Fellowship League in 1910 and for the next ten years assisted countless boys and men by giving them a temporary place to live and finding them jobs. Through her husband's legal contacts, she was also able to come to the aid of many in the black community who needed someone to speak for them in navigating a justice system to often deprived black people of a fair trial. In one case in 1922, Wells-Barnett was secretly brought into a jail in Little Rock, Arkansas to interview men who were accused of plotting a riot to kill white people. After a trial that lasted a few minutes, the twelve men were sentenced to death by an all white jury. Eventually, the people who represented the men used notes that Wells-Barnett compiled about the story in their case that reached the Supreme Court². The justices found that the men were not given a fair trial in the lower courts and they were set free.

Ida B. after a trial that lasted a few minutes died in 1931. Although she left a world full of segregation, lynching was practically nonexistent due to her efforts. On her headstone in Chicago's Oak Woods Cemetery where she is buried with her husband, it says, "CRUSADERS FOR JUSTICE."

² *Moore v. Dempsey* 1923