

Ida B. Wells

“Journalist, educator and early activist for suffrage and civil rights”

July 16, 1862 – March 25, 1931



Ida B. Wells was born enslaved in Mississippi on July 16, 1862. Following the Civil War, during the Reconstruction Era, Wells's parents actively participated in the Republican Party. Her father worked with the Freedman's Aid Society and helped to found Rust College, which remains a historically black liberal arts college. Wells attended Rust College, but the death of both of her parents and one of her siblings to a yellow fever outbreak forced her to drop out at sixteen. Wells managed to secure a job as a teacher to take care of her siblings, eventually moving with her sisters to Memphis, Tennessee to live with their aunt. For a period of time, Wells resumed her education at Fisk University in Nashville.

On one of her journeys from Memphis to Nashville in May 1884, Wells was forced to move to the

black car of the train despite having paid for a first-class ticket. Wells refused to move, but was then forcibly removed from the train, during which time she bit one of the crew members. Wells sued the railroad and a circuit case court settlement awarded her \$500, only to have the decision overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court.

After this incident, Wells became a prolific writer about issues of race and politics in the South, later owning two newspapers: *The Memphis Free Speech and Headlight* and *Free Speech*. At the same time as she worked as a publisher and journalist, Wells taught at a segregated public school in Memphis and was an outspoken critic of the segregated system, leading to her firing in 1891.

The next year, Wells turned her attention to anti-lynching after a friend and two of his colleagues were murdered by a lynch mob. Wells began to write articles speaking out against this evil and further risked her own life traveling to the south to research lynchings, eventually staying in the north after her life was threatened. She wrote an extensive report on lynching in America for the *New York Age* and brought her anti-lynching campaign to the White House in 1898, demanding President McKinley take action. In 1896, Wells founded several civil rights organizations including the National Association of Colored Women. Wells became an active member of the fight for women's suffrage, especially as it pertained to black women, founding the Alpha Suffrage Club in Chicago on January 30, 1913. The main goal of the Alpha Suffrage Club was to organize woman in Chicago to elect candidates that would be most beneficial for the black community.

As president of the Alpha Club, Wells received an invitation to march in the 1913 Suffrage Parade in Washington, DC with several other of her club members. Organizers of the parade feared offending and alienating southern white suffragists and asked women of color to march at the back of the parade. Wells refused, standing on the sidelines of the parade until the white women from Chicago marched past, at which point she joined the parade, while the rest of her club still marched at the back.

The work of Wells and her Alpha Suffrage Club played a pivotal yet often unsung role in the consequent victory of the 19th Amendment and securing of women's suffrage in Illinois with the passage of the Illinois Equal Suffrage Act on June 25, 1913. Even after the passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment, Wells continued to travel throughout Illinois to encourage and educate black women to participate in politics and exercise their vote.

Wells died of kidney disease on March 25, 1931, leaving a remarkable legacy of change and activism across numerous fields.

Sources

<https://www.nps.gov/people/idabwells.htm>

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<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ida-b-wells-barnett>