

IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT

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BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Ida B. Wells (1862–1931) was born to slave parents in Holly Springs, Mississippi, on July 16, 1862, two months before President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. As a young girl, Wells watched her parents work as political activists during Reconstruction. In 1878, tragedy struck as Wells lost both of her parents and a younger brother in a yellow fever epidemic. To support her younger siblings, Wells became a teacher, eventually moving to Memphis, Tennessee. In 1884, Wells found herself in the middle of a heated lawsuit. After purchasing a first-class train ticket, Wells was ordered to move to a segregated car. She refused to give up her seat and was forcibly removed from the train. Wells filed suit against the railroad and won. This victory was short lived, however, as the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the lower court ruling in 1887. In 1892, Wells became editor and co-owner of *The Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*. Here, she used her skills as a journalist to champion the causes for African American and women's rights. Among her most known works were those on behalf of anti-lynching legislation. Until her death in 1931, Ida B. Wells dedicated her life to what she referred to as a "crusade for justice."

KEY PEOPLE

Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, W. E. B. Dubois, Frederick Douglass

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1892, Jim Crow laws and segregation flourished in the South, and lynchings, a form of vigilante justice, were prevalent. In Memphis, Tennessee, three African American men, Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart, opened the People's Grocery. Many members of the African American community moved their business from a local grocery store owned by a white businessman William Barrett to the new People's Grocery. As the new business flourished, tempers flared and racial confrontations increased. In March, owners of the People's Grocery heard rumors of a raid against their business and posted armed guards. On March 9, several white men were injured in a scuffle and authorities arrested Moss, Stewart, and McDowell, along with some supporters. Before the men could be tried in court, a white mob entered the jail, removed the owners, and murdered them. Infuriated, Ida B. Wells wrote an editorial in the *Free Speech and Headlight* denouncing lynching and the lack of police protection. Again tempers flared, and Wells fled to New York for her safety. In the years that followed, she led an extensive campaign for anti-lynching legislation, including researching lynchings, speaking engagements, and publishing numerous news articles and pamphlets.



Mary Garrity, Ida B. Wells, Smithsonian Institution, National Portrait Gallery (NPG.2009.36), <http://npg.si.edu/media/A9000072C.jpg>

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Divide the class into groups of two or three students each.
- Make and distribute one copy of the document for each group of students.
- Ask students to read the excerpts and discuss the prompts.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Ask each student to assume the role of a citizen of Memphis in 1892.
- Write a letter to the editor of the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight* expressing your opinion about recent events and Wells' advice to save your money and move west.



FUN FACT

Ida B. Wells was one of the founders of the NAACP, although she later left the group because she grew skeptical of the white leadership's ability to enact change. Learn more about her life: <https://www.biography.com/people/ida-b-wells-9527635>.

LOCAL CONNECTION

The Ida B. Wells House in Chicago, Illinois has been listed as a National Historic Landmark, but the home is privately owned and not open for tours. The Ida B. Wells Museum is located in Holly Springs, Mississippi. You can learn more at www.ibwfoundation.org.

LEARN MORE

PRIMARY SOURCES

Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, 1992

Ida B. Wells Papers, 1884–1976
Special Collections Research Center,
University of Chicago Library
<https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.IBWELLS#idp76827728>

"The Mob's Work," *The Appeal-Avalanche*, March 10, 1892
<https://lynchingsitesmem.org/archives/memphis-appeal-avalanche-3101892>

SECONDARY SOURCES

About Ida B. Wells
The Ida B. Wells Memorial Foundation
http://www.ibwfoundation.org/About_Ida_B.html

Ida B. Wells
Biography
<https://www.biography.com/people/ida-b-wells-9527635>

Memphis and the Lynching at the Curve
Lynching Sites Project Memphis
<https://lynchingsitesmem.org/news/memphis-and-lynching-curve>

IDA B. WELLS, *CRUSADE FOR JUSTICE* MANUSCRIPT, 1927–1931 (EXCERPTS)

“THE WAY TO RIGHT WRONGS IS TO SHINE THE LIGHT OF TRUTH ON THEM.” –IDA B. WELLS, *THE MEMPHIS FREE SPEECH AND HEADLIGHT*

Ida B. Wells was extremely upset following the lynching of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell and Henry Stewart. In *The Memphis Free Speech and Headlight* she denounced the murders and offered advice for the African American community.

EXCERPT FROM *CRUSADE FOR JUSTICE: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF IDA B. WELLS* MANUSCRIPT IN REFERENCE TO HER EDITORIAL IN *THE MEMPHIS FREE SPEECH AND HEADLIGHT* (CHAPTER 4)

“The city of Memphis has demonstrated that neither character nor standing availed the Negro if he dared to protect himself against a white man or become his rival. There was nothing we could do about it, as we were outnumbered and without arms. For while the white mob could help itself to ammunition without pay, the order was rigidly enforced against the selling of guns to Negroes. There is therefore only one thing we can do. Let us save our money and leave a town which will not protect our lives and property or give us a fair trial in the courts, but takes us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons.”

EXCERPT FROM *CRUSADE FOR JUSTICE: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF IDA B. WELLS* IN REFERENCE TO THOMAS MOSS (CHAPTER 5)

“A finer, cleaner man never walked the streets of Memphis. He was well-liked, a favorite with everybody yet he was killed with no more consideration than if he had been a dog, because he as a man defended his property from attack. The colored people feel that every white man in Memphis who consented to his death is as guilty as those who fired the guns which took their lives, and they want to get away from this town. We told them the week after the lynching to save their nickels and dimes so they could leave. I had no way of knowing that they were doing so before...All were intent on going to the West. Oklahoma was about to be opened up and scores sold or gave away property and shook Memphis dust off their feet.”

Ida B. Wells, Crusade for Justice Manuscript, 1927–1931 (excerpts), Box 1, Folder 4, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

1. What reasons did Wells suggest for the lynching of Moss, McDowell, and Stewart?
2. What advice did Ida Wells offer the African American community in Memphis?
3. What was Wells surprised to learn when she suggested African Americans save their money and move west?
4. Why was Oklahoma suggested as a potential home for African Americans?
5. Do you think Wells was taking a risk by publishing her editorial in the first excerpt? Why or why not?
6. Can you draw any parallels between events described by Ida B. Wells and current news stories involving minority groups?