

Ida B. Wells and Her “Light of Truth”

“The way to right wrongs is to shine the light of truth on them.”

Overview

Born into slavery, she took on structural racism and segregation in transportation, and organized boycotts more than a half century before the more popular years of the 1960s civil rights movement. She bravely used the power of her voice and pen to highlight the hypocrisy and injustice of racial terror lynching’s, and went on to pioneer reporting techniques that remain central tenets of modern journalism. She fought for women’s suffrage, and also fought within the suffrage movement for the voice of black women to be included. Despite great risk to herself, Ida B. Wells Barnett, dedicated her life to shining the “light of truth” on injustice. In this lesson, students will learn about her incredible resistance, agency and activism through participating in a rotating stations activity that utilizes readings, excerpts from a documentary, and discussion questions to highlight some of the most incredible aspects of the career of Ida B. Wells.

Grades

8-12

Essential Questions

- What economic and social problems faced the South after the Civil War?
- What injustices faced Ida B. Wells and other black people, people of color, and women throughout her lifetime?
- What strategies did Ida B. Wells employ to identify and take a stand against injustice during her lifetime?
- What was Ida B. Wells risking in her fight against various injustices?
- Despite the difficulty in doing so, why is it imperative to face the hard history of lynching, racial terrorism, and the continued impact of racism on our world today – just as Ida B. Wells did during her lifetime?

Materials

- Ida B. Wells Mural, attached and also available [here](#)
- The Courageous Life of Ida B. Wells (5 min. video providing an overview of her life), available [here](#)
 - Teachers will need a laptop with speakers & projector to play this for the class
- Station Activity:
 - Each “station” will need an internet-connected device cued up to the documentary “A Passion for Justice.” It is available for free via You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NUyPFAJE9M&feature=youtu.be&t=2209> or a 72-hour rental is available via Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/idabwellspassion4justice/456933875>
 - Station Handouts, attached and sets placed at different stations set up around the room
 - Resisting Public Segregation
 - Exposing Lynching to the World
 - Excerpts of Writing by Ida B. Wells
 - Organizing
 - Women’s Rights & Suffrage
- Notes Handout, attached
- Using Social Media to Spread Awareness of Ida B. Wells, culminating assignment attached
- Optional/additional teacher resources:
 - Overlooked: Ida B Wells <https://www.chicagohumanities.org/events/308-overlooked-ida-b-wells/>, a lecture featuring Nikole Hannah Jones

- The Ida B. Wells Papers are housed at the University of Chicago. This [online repository](#) provides a detailed list of her writing, much of it digitized and available for free.
- For related lesson plans, see [Lynching & Dehumanization](#), as well as the other [accompanying lessons](#) that were created to accompany the website, [A Red Record](#), which maps the lynchings that took place across North Carolina.

Duration

60-90 minutes

Preparation

- While this history brings up sensitive topics such as white supremacy, lynching, racism, and racial violence, students must gain of comprehensive understanding of our past and its impact on the present. Additionally, learning about the incredible activism of Ida B. Wells, who defied the odds and challenged oppressive systems regardless of the immense risk to herself, is a critical way to teach about resistance and empower students. To ensure students are able to respectfully and empathetically discuss difficult topics, however, teachers must ensure a foundation of respect, considerate dialogue and tolerance is present in the classroom. For techniques on building such a classroom community, see Carolina K-12's classroom management activities in the Database of K-12 Resources under the "[Activities](#)" section and our [Tips for Tackling Sensitive History & Controversial Current Events in the Classroom](#).
- Teachers should set up the stations prior to the beginning of class, with copies of the reading to be completed at each (copies can be laminated and stay at each station), and a device (laptop, tablet, etc.) at each station set to the documentary.

Procedure

Introduction to Ida B. Wells: The "Loudest & Most Persistent Voice for Truth"

1. As a warm up, project the attached [Ida B. Wells Mural](#) and provide students with the attached Notes handout. While projecting the image, ask students to jot down their reaction to the mural, as well as react to the text it contains. After a minute, discuss:
 - Have you heard of Ida B. Wells (Ida B. Wells-Barnett)? What do you already know about her?
 - What hints does this piece of art give us regarding who she was and what she may have done?
2. Let students know that in today's lesson, they will be exploring the incredible Ida B. Wells (1862-1931), who became a daring and groundbreaking investigative reporter and a courageous civil rights crusader for both women and black people, eventually becoming known as the "loudest and most persistent voice for truth" in an era of injustice. As an overview of the life and contributions of Ida B. Wells, play "The Courageous Life of Ida B. Wells," a 5-minute video that provides an overview of her life's work: <https://feministfrequency.com/video/the-courageous-life-of-ida-b-wells/> As students watch they should jot down anything interesting they hear regarding her exceptional life and work at the top of their notes pages. Afterwards, discuss:
 - Ida was born to enslaved people in 1862. One year later, the Emancipation Proclamation was issued and her parents are freed. What is the life like during Reconstruction?
 - In 1878 her parents died of yellow fever (and a younger sibling). While family members recommended splitting up the children to be cared for, Ida refused and as a 16-year-old full assumed care of her siblings. She left school and lied about her age in order to get a teaching job. She finished her education at night and on weekends. What sense of who she was do these facts alone give you?
 - What did you hear in that overview that you are most interested in learning more about and why?

Rotating Stations on the Life of Ida B. Wells

3. Let students know that they are going to delve into the incredible work of Ida B. Wells by traveling around the room in small groups and visiting different stations. The stations should be set up prior to class, with "pods" containing the copied reading and an internet-connected device for the stations that include

viewing an excerpt of the documentary. There are five topics, but depending on the size of the class, teachers may want to have multiple stations of each topic to keep groups smaller. As students travel through the stations, they should read, watch and discuss/answer the questions together. The stations cover:

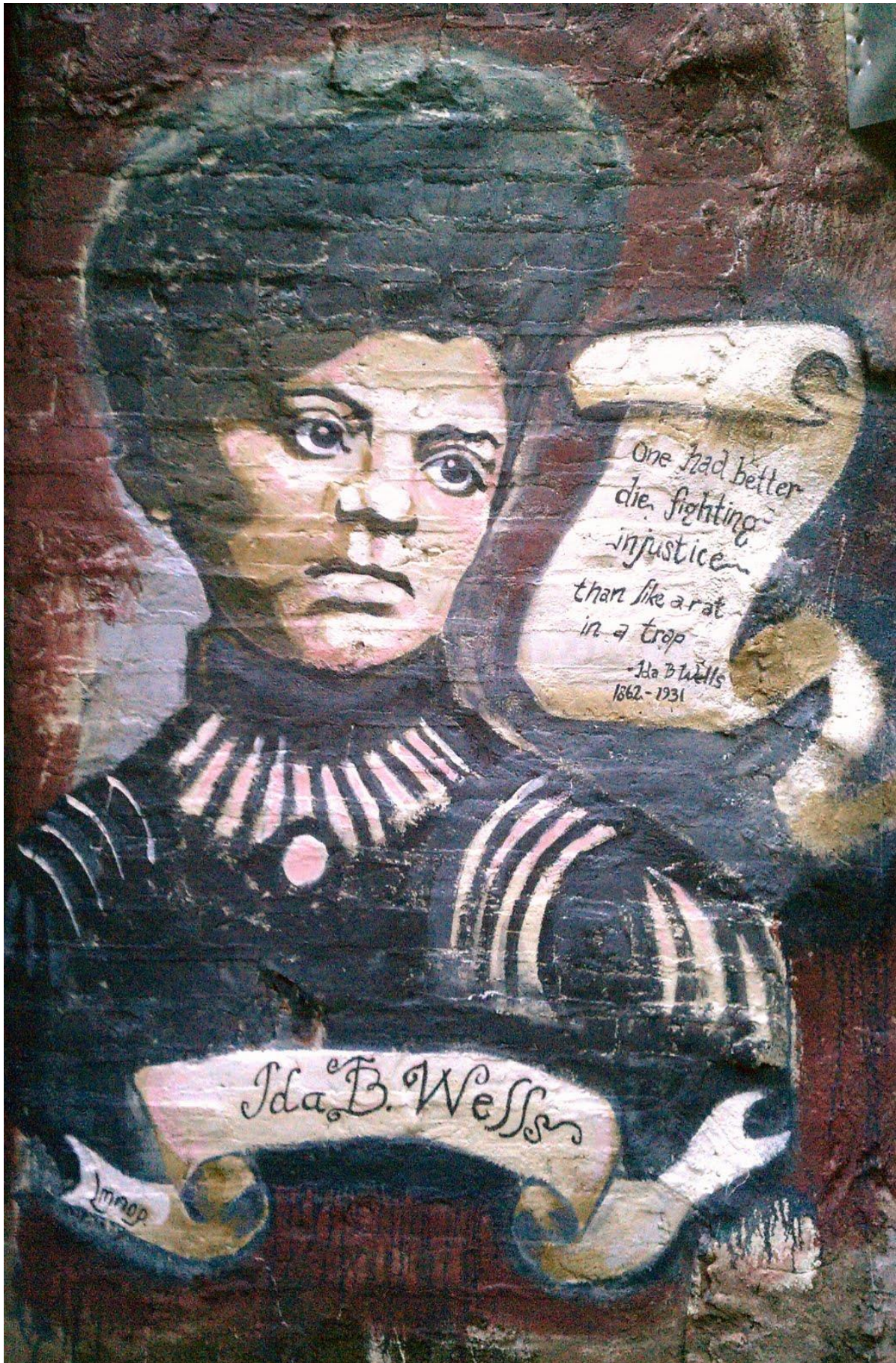
- Resisting Public Segregation
- Exposing Lynching to the World
- Excerpts of Writing by Ida B. Wells
- Organizing
- Women's Rights & Suffrage

4. The reading level of the class will determine the length of time needed at the various stations. Teachers are encouraged to edit the station material as they see fit (the material can be edited, shortened, combined, etc.) to suit each class's time constraints. Ideally, students would rotate through all stations, but teachers may also choose to limit the number of stations groups visit. In this case, students could report out and teach others. After the station activity is complete, teachers should bring the entire class back together for a debriefing conversation:

- What economic and social problems faced the South after the Civil War?
- What injustices faced Ida B. Wells and other black people, people of color, and women?
- What strategies did Ida B. Wells employ to identify and take a stand against injustice during her lifetime?
- Why was the work that Ida B. Wells did so dangerous? Why do you think she did it anyway?
- Despite the difficulty in doing so, why is it imperative to face the hard history of lynching, racial terrorism, and the continued impact of racism on our world today – just as Ida B. Wells did during her lifetime? Why do we need to learn about and face this history?
- What issues face our society today that you might “shine the light of truth upon?” What strategies could you use to do this?

Culminating Activity: Using Social Media to Spread Awareness of Ida B. Wells

5. Provide the attached culminating activity sheet to students, and explain that despite the incredible life and legacy of Ida B. Wells, she is not as well-known as many other civil rights activists. To culminate what they have learned about Ida B. Wells, tell students to imagine they have been hired by the [National Museum of African American History](#) to help elevate the important work of Ida B. Wells. Their first task is to create a social media post that can be shared on Instagram, Facebook, etc. to help raise awareness of her. Go over the activity requirements. You may want to let students have the option of either designing their work on paper, or actually creating it within the social media platform they choose – then taking a screen shot of their work to turn in.) Make sure students understand that their final work must include an image, explanatory text, and a quote from Ida B. Wells (and/or any other stipulations chosen by the teacher.)
- **Teacher Note:** Because so much of Wells's work dealt with fighting racism, racial terror and racialized violence such as lynching, teachers should discuss with students ahead of time about what language and images are acceptable for the assignment. While students want to be encouraged to “shine the light of truth,” it is a safer choice to ask students to not show images of lynching or use racial epithets in their work, since these can be such triggering aspects of this history, particularly if their work is to be displayed.)
6. On the due date, teachers can have students display their work around the classroom (or school at large) and do a gallery walk as a review of the life and work of Ida B. Wells.

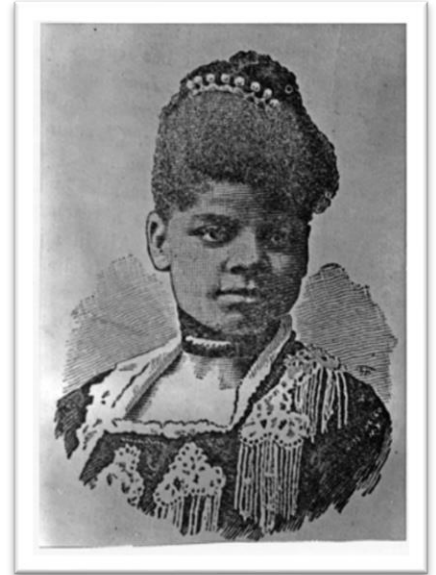


Station 1: Resisting Public Segregation

Ida B. Wells was born in Holly Springs, Miss., in 1862, less than a year before Emancipation. She was one of 8 siblings. She grew up during Reconstruction, a period when the South was experiencing the tremors of social and political change, as African Americans voted and held political offices for the first time.

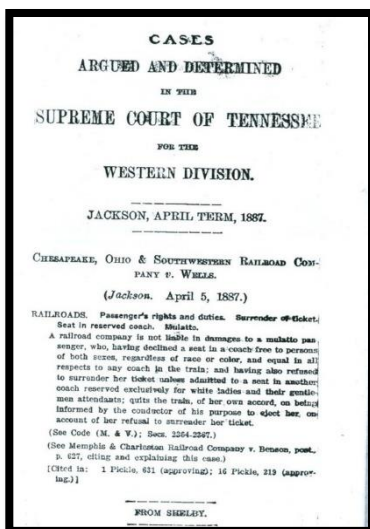
In 1878, her parents both tragically died of yellow fever, along with one of her brothers; and at 16, she took on caring for the rest of her siblings. She supported them by working as a teacher after dropping out of high school and lying about her age. She finished her own education at night and on weekends. Despite the challenges facing her, Wells found a path to educate herself and cultivate an incredible career at a time when it was rare for a black woman to be able to do so.

Yet despite the hope of progress of the time, and despite the long debated but finally approved Civil Rights Act of 1875, which outlawed racial segregation in public places, Ida B. Wells experienced a life-changing moment of injustice in 1883. As she traveled by train from Memphis to Woodstock, Tennessee, where she was working as a teacher, she was told to move to a different car because of her race. Wells refused. In addition to being well educated, Wells held powerful and insightful political opinions. She kept her seat and fought back as she was forced off the train to the cheers of white passengers.



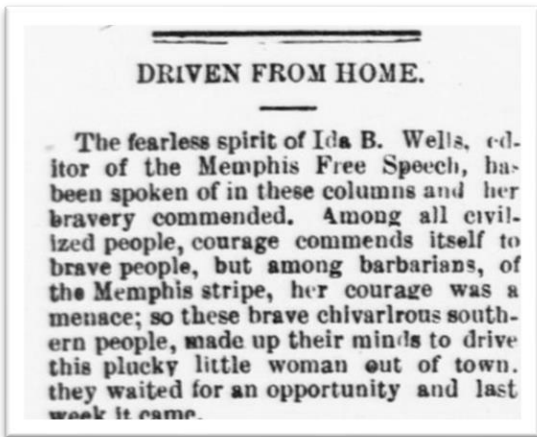
Never one to backdown in the face of injustice, Wells wrote an editorial about her experience, and in 1884, she sued the railroad company. The court decided in her favor and ordered the railroad company to pay damages. However, when the railroad appealed the case, the state Supreme Court decided in favor of the railroad company, reversing the earlier decision. She was frustrated, but she did not give up. She began writing political columns in church newspapers. She saved her money and became part owner of a small newspaper in Memphis. In 1891 she was dismissed from the Memphis school system for a strong article she wrote pointing out unequal funding of the black schools by the board of education. This only powered her pen, however, and she would continue writing for justice undeterred.

Wells was one of the earliest Americans to challenge segregation in public accommodations – Pauli Murray, Claudette Colvin, Rosa Parks, the Greensboro Four and thousands of others would eventually follow her lead. The experience helped to galvanize Wells to fight injustice, regardless of risk, for the rest of her life - one that we will see was filled with activism to defend the dignity of marginalized people.



WATCH: Go to <https://tinyurl.com/IncredibleIdaBWells> where you will view an excerpt of a documentary about Ida B. Wells, “A Passion for Justice.” Start at the 10:30 mark and stop at 13:43.

Station 2: Journalism & Exposing Lynching to the World



Ida B. Wells was one of the first and strongest voices of protest against lynching. Lynchings were a form of terrorism committed predominantly against black people, and were used by lynch mobs to enforce racial subordination, fear and segregation. Lynchings were violent and public events that traumatized Black people throughout the country and were largely tolerated by local, state and federal officials.

In 1892, when Wells was living in Memphis, three of her black friends owned a local grocery store. Members of the white community became jealous of its success. Amidst building rumors and resentment, a large group of armed whites gathered at the store. In the fight that ensued, several white men sustained injuries.

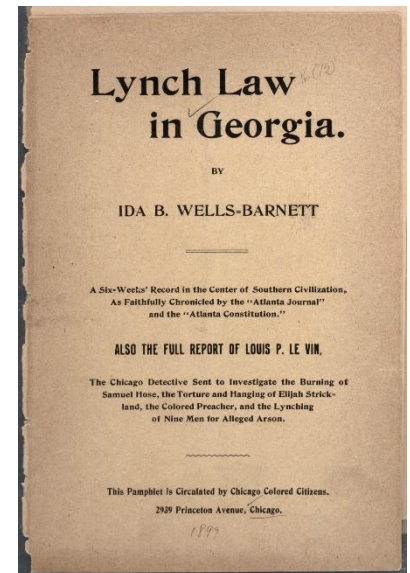
But as a result, the three black men - Calvin McDowell, Thomas Moss, and Henry Stewart - were taken to jail. Three days later the downtown jail was stormed and the men were dragged out and taken to a nearby rail yard. Though the three fought back, McDowell was shot point blank by a shotgun. Stewart resisted until he was shot in the neck. When Moss was asked if he had any final words, he said "Tell my people to go west. There is no justice for them here." He was then shot and left with the others under a pile of brush.

At this point, Wells was the editor of *The Memphis Free Speech*, a newspaper serving Memphis's growing numbers of educated African Americans. She dedicated herself to shining light on the brutality of lynchings and launched an investigation into lynchings in the South. She published her findings in a series of fiery editorials and in a pamphlet called *Southern Horrors* in 1892.

While traveling in Philadelphia in 1892, she learned that an editorial she'd published in *The Memphis Free Speech* had caused a riot, resulting in the office of the newspaper she co-owned being destroyed and her co-editor run out of town. Her life was threatened and it was too dangerous for her to return to Memphis, so she decided to stay in the north. Over the next several years, she traveled widely in the United States and Europe to talk about lynching. It was in Chicago, though, that she finally found her new home.

In 1895, Wells published *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States, 1892-1894*. She continued to use quantitative work on lynching throughout her career. She used statistics not just to make her point, but to shape the terms of the debate — to force other critics of lynching, as well as defenders, to reckon with the facts about why white mobs lynched (mostly black) victims. In her journals, she lamented that her subjects would have otherwise been forgotten by all "save the night wind, no memorial service to bemoan their sad and horrible fate." Her work was often reprinted abroad, as well as in the more than 200 black weeklies then in circulation in the United States. Whenever possible, Wells named the victims of racist violence and told their stories.

Wells pioneered reporting techniques that remain central tenets of modern journalism. Because of her outspoken work and given the times in which she lived, Wells continued to receive threats throughout her career. The risk she was taking to speak out as a black woman cannot be over stated, but throughout it all, her commitment to chronicling the experience of African-Americans in order to demonstrate their humanity remained unflinching.



WATCH: Return to <https://tinyurl.com/IncredibleIdaBWells> . Start at the 15:49 mark and stop at 22:42.

Station 3: Excerpts of Writing by Ida B. Wells

"The way to right wrongs is to shine the light of truth on them."



Regarding her good friend Thomas Moss, Ida B. Wells wrote in *Crusade for Justice* (1892):

"A finer man than he never walked the streets of Memphis. He was well liked, a favorite with everybody; yet he was murdered with no more consideration that if he had been a dog...The colored people feel that every white man in Memphis who consented in his death is as guilty as those who fired the guns which took his life."

PHOTO: Ida B. Wells (left) with Maurine Moss, the widow of Wells's friend and lynching victim Thomas Moss.

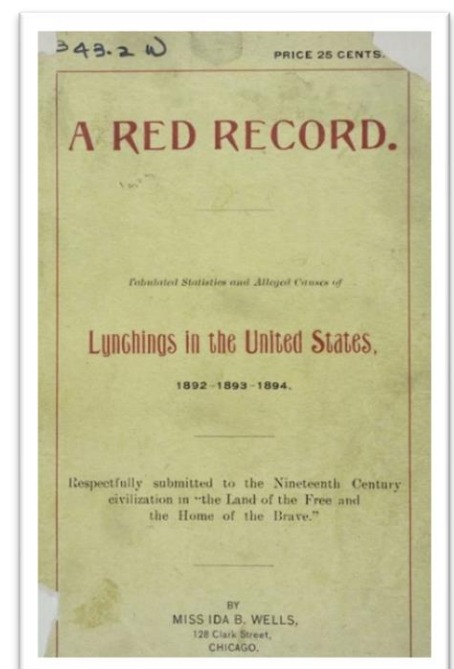
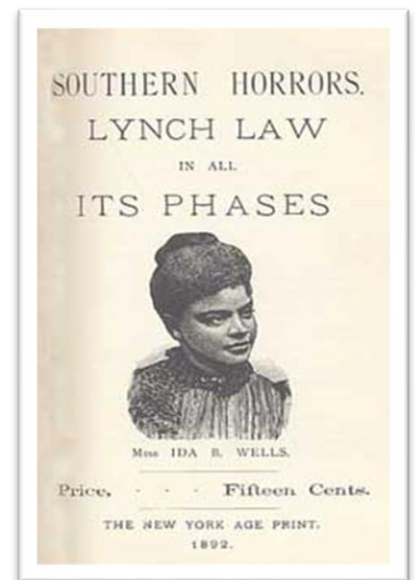
"It is with no pleasure that I have dipped my hands in the corruption here exposed," Wells wrote in 1892 in the introduction to *Southern Horrors*, one of her works about lynching, "Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning, and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so."

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"Our watchword has been 'the land of the free and the home of the brave.' Brave men do not gather by thousands to torture and murder a single individual, so gagged and bound he cannot make even feeble resistance or defense. Neither do brave men or women stand by and see such things done without compunction of conscience, nor read of them without protest... Surely it should be the nation's duty to correct its own evils!"
Lynch Law in America speech, Jan. 1900, Chicago

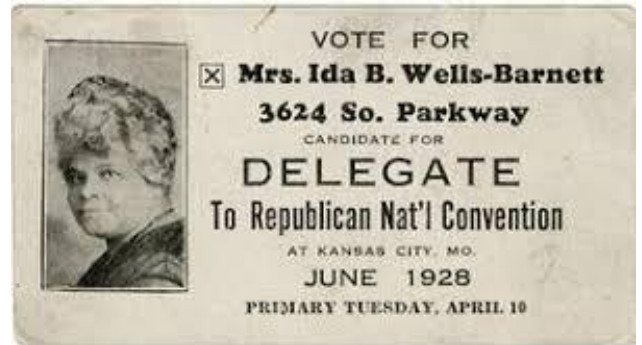
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"Men, not a few, but hundreds, have been lynched for misdemeanors, while others have suffered death for no offense known to the law, the causes assigned being "mistaken identity," "insult," "bad reputation," "unpopularity," "violating contract," "violating quarantine," "giving evidence," "frightening child by shooting at rabbits," etc. Then, strangest of all, the record shows that the sum total of lynchings for these offenses — not crimes — and for the alleged offenses which are only misdemeanors greatly exceeds the lynchings for the very crime universally declared to be the cause of lynching. *Lynching & the Excuse for It, 1901*

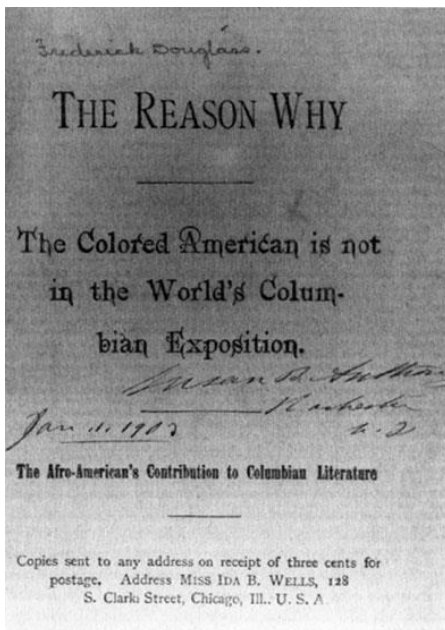


Station 4: Organizing

Ida B. Wells used her editorials in the *Memphis Free Speech* to encourage Black families to leave Memphis entirely and move out west where they might avoid racial terror such as lynching. Echoing Thomas Moss, one of the lynching victims who said just before he was killed, "Tell my people to go west, there is no justice here," Ida's writing led to thousands of black families to migrate west. This threatened the white economic power structure in Memphis, since so many white businesses relied on black customers. Approximately 6,000 black people left Memphis in the coming years.



Wells also organized a boycott of the city's new street car system, meaning she was organizing economic boycotts long before the tactic was popularized in later years by other, mostly male, civil rights activists, who are often credited with the strategy. She continued her anti-lynching work, to great risk, and traveled to Britain to rally her cause, encouraging the British to stop purchasing American cotton and angering many white Southern business owners.



When she eventually moved to Chicago, Wells attacked the exclusion of black people from the Chicago World's Fair, writing a pamphlet sponsored by Frederick Douglass and others. She also began to work tirelessly against segregation and for women's suffrage. She helped block the establishment of segregated schools in Chicago.

In 1906 she joined with William E. B. Dubois to promote the Niagara Movement, a group which advocated full civil rights for blacks. In 1909, Wells-Barnett helped form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (However, she was edged out of leadership, perhaps because she opposed Booker T. Washington's moderate position that blacks focus on economic gains rather than social and political equality with whites. Or perhaps it was because at this time women were excluded from positions of power.) From 1913-1916 she worked as a probation officer in Chicago, organizing around causes such as mass incarceration. The poet Langston Hughes said her activities in the field of social work laid the groundwork for the Urban League.

When she was sixty-eight, she ran for the Illinois legislature. Even though she was defeated, this made her one of the first black women in the nation to run for public office. A year later, in 1931, she died at the age of sixty-nine.

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"The city of Memphis has demonstrated that neither character nor standing avails the Negro if he dares to protect himself against the white man or become his rival. There is nothing we can do about the lynching now, as we are out-numbered and without arms. The white mob could help itself to ammunition without pay, but the order is rigidly enforced against the selling of guns to Negroes. **There is, therefore, only one thing left to do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts, but takes us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons.**" *Memphis Free Speech*, 1992



Ida B. Wells, pictured here later in life, is wearing a button on her lapel with the words "MARTYRED NEGRO SOLDIERS" on it, in open resistance to the court-martialing and hanging in 1917 of three African American soldiers in Houston, Texas.

Station 5: Women's Rights & Suffrage

During the time in which Ida B. Wells lived, she was fighting for equal rights on two fronts: both as a black person and as a woman. Due to her outspoken and insistent advocacy, Wells was often labeled as “radical” by her fellow civil rights leaders. While she was admired by Frederick Douglass until his death in 1895, others did not always think a female, especially one exhibiting the strength of Wells, could or should do the serious work of leading the fight for Black liberation.

In addition to her brave journalism, social justice organizing, and anti-lynching work, Wells was also one of the most famous Black “suffragists” working towards the right to vote for women. She founded the Alpha Suffrage Club of Chicago, the first black suffrage organization in 1913.

She often called out her white counterparts in the women's suffrage movement, who she said were ignoring racism and racialized violence such as lynching, while calling for gender equality. For instance, in the women's suffrage movement, she was discouraged by her friend and leading suffragist Susan B. Anthony from attending events in the South, so as not to rile up segregationists. However, Wells would not be discouraged by the racism nor the sexism she experienced in the course of her work, even when it would come from supposed allies in justice. She continued to write, speak, organize and lead, and tirelessly fought for both racial and gender justice.

WATCH: Return to <https://tinyurl.com/IncredibleIdaBWells> - Start at [36:48 mark](#) and go to 39:07 mark.



Connecting Past & Present: As a society, we have made strides in understanding the links between gender equality and racial equality. The concept of intersectionality, which shows that racial and gender identities, among others, are not disconnected but actually overlap with one another, has grown in popularity among social justice circles. Much of that understanding is thanks to people like Ida B. Wells, who understood that reality much earlier than even her counterparts.

Warm Up:

Jot down all the interesting things about the life of Ida B. Wells that you hear in the video overview:

Station 1: Resisting Public Segregation

Points of interest from the reading & documentary clip:

From the Documentary & Reading- How would you describe Ida B. Wells based on what you read and watched? (Consider what Wells was risking, as a black woman, given the realities of the 1880s.) What do you think fueled Ida B. Wells to continue fighting, even after her case was overturned?

Why is the early resistance of people such as Ida B. Wells so important? Why should every American know her story?

Station 2: Exposing Lynching to the World

Points of interest from the reading and documentary clip:

From the Documentary - The narrator noted that Ida B. Wells “chose her weapons” wisely in fighting back against racism, injustice and racial terror lynchings. What were her various “weapons?”

Station 3: Excerpts of Writing by Ida B. Wells

What arguments does Ida B. Wells make against lynching?

What commentary is she making about white America, whether they are part of the actual lynch mob or not?

Ida B. Wells wisely wrote that “The way to right wrongs is to shine the light of truth on them.” What message was she conveying? Based on everything you have learned about her, what are the ways she committed to this throughout her life? How does this message apply to our world today, including why we are learning about this history in this class?

Station 4: Organizing

Points of interest from the reading:

With the influence of Ida B. Wells, at least 6,000 black people left Memphis for an unknown life in the west. What does this say about 1.) her skills as a writer, activist and leader and 2.) the conditions black people were facing in the South?

In what other ways did Ida B. Wells use her courageous skills of leadership and organization to continually resist oppressive injustice?

Station 5: Women's Rights & Suffrage

Points of interest from the reading and documentary clip:

What are the various ways that Ida B. Wells fought both for suffrage, but also had to fight within the movement itself?

You hear the interviewee in the documentary say that "Ida would never bite her tongue." What examples can you cite of this fact? What was Ida B. Wells risking in her lifetime by being outspoken? Do you think women today can speak freely, or do they often have to "bite their tongue?"

