

# Bill of Rights in Action



SPRING 2018

Volume 33 №3

## IDA B. WELLS AND HER CRUSADE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

The abolition of slavery after the Civil War became the foundation for Ida B. Wells's life work as a teacher, journalist, anti-lynching activist, community organizer, and woman suffragist.

Ida Bell Wells was born a slave in 1862 in the small city of Holly Springs, Mississippi. After emancipation, her father became active in the Republican Party, the party of Lincoln, during the Reconstruction period in the South. Her deeply Christian mother was a cook. Both valued education for their children.

Wells and her brothers and sisters attended an elementary school established by the Freedmen's Bureau, which was created by Congress to help the former slaves make the transition to freedom. She became an avid reader and learned much on her own. As she advanced through the grades, the school added a high school and Rust College, which she attended.

In 1878, Wells was only 16 when both her parents died in a yellow fever epidemic. To keep her family together, she got a job teaching at a rural black school.

### Suing the Railroad

At 19, Wells moved with two of her younger sisters to Memphis, Tennessee, to live with their aunt. She got another teaching job near Memphis. She took classes during the summer at Fiske College in Nashville to earn a state credential in order to teach in the Memphis schools.

One Sunday in 1884 on her way back to Memphis from a visit to Holly Springs, she bought a first class railroad car ticket. She took a seat in the first class "ladies car," where white women normally sat. But the white conductor ordered her to the "colored car." She refused. The conductor began to pull her from the seat. She hung



Wikimedia Commons/Mary Garrity (ca. 1893)

While still an elementary-school teacher, Ida B. Wells became the editor and co-owner of the *Free Speech and Headlight* anti-segregation newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee.

on to it and even bit the conductor. Finally, he and two white men dragged her out of the "ladies car" as the white passengers cheered.

Wells sued the railroad in a Memphis court for assault and for discrimination. Incredibly, she won! In 1884, Judge James Pierce, a former Union soldier, ruled ▶

### FACING CHALLENGES

The first article in this issue analyzes the career of the great African American journalist Ida B. Wells and her campaigns against lynching and for racial equality in the women's suffrage movement. The second article takes a close look at the revolutions that challenged Europe's monarchical regimes in 1848. The third article outlines challenges to the 2015 international agreement to limit Iran's nuclear weapons production.

**U.S. History:** *Ida B. Wells and Her Crusade for Racial Justice* by longtime contributor Carlton Martz

**World History:** *The Revolutions of 1848* by contributing writer Patrick Jenning

**U.S. Government/Current Issues:** *The Iran Nuclear Deal and Its Critics* by CRF's law school extern Patrick Hale

T2T

### Look for Supplemental Activities!

Teacher-leaders from CRF's T2T Collab have created innovative activities for lessons in this issue! Look for the T2T symbol to access activities.

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that the “colored car” was not a first class car. He ordered the railroad to pay Wells \$500 in damages.

The railroad appealed the case to the Tennessee Supreme Court, which was packed with ex-Confederates. In 1887, they reversed Judge Pierce’s ruling, cancelled his \$500 award to Wells, and ordered her to pay court costs. Wells wrote in her diary, “O God, is there no redress, no peace, no justice in this land for us?”

### The Memphis Lynching

By 1889, Wells had earned her credential and was teaching in a black Memphis school. She was also writing for church newsletters on racial issues. She discovered that writing was her passion.

While still teaching, she became one-third owner and editor of a black Memphis newspaper, the *Free Speech*. She took a militant stand against the suppression of black civil rights in the South. (Wells used the terms “Negro,” “colored,” “black” and “Afro-Americans” to refer to her fellow African Americans.)

Wells was fired by the Memphis all-white school board when she wrote editorials about the poor condition of the city’s black schools. She was now, however, free to start her career as a full-time journalist, one of the first black women to do this.

In 1892, a lynching took place in Memphis that changed the life of Wells. Lynching means punishing a person or persons, usually by a mob, without a lawful trial. Although lynching by hanging someone from a tree was common, mobs used numerous methods such as shooting, stabbing, beating, burning alive, and torture.

In this case, a white grocery store owner, William Barrett, became angry after Thomas Moss and other black men opened a competing store across the street. One day a minor dispute led to a fistfight between the supporters of both men.

After the fight ended, Moss’s black supporters armed themselves, fearing Barrett would return with more men. Barrett did return, but with the sheriff and some deputies who came to arrest Moss’s clerk for clubbing him during the fight.

The sheriff and his men, however, were all in plain clothes, and Moss’s defenders mistook them for a mob intent on attacking the store. The defenders fired shots at the deputies, wounding three. One was shot in the face and lost an eye.

The sheriff later returned and arrested Moss and two employees. Memphis newspapers printed inflammatory stories about how the deputies had been cruelly ambushed.

Several days later, a white mob broke into the jail where the three black men were held. The mob

dragged them out of their cells to a field and shot them to death. The lynchers aimed for their faces and eyes. Later, a grand jury decided that the lynching was at “the hands of persons unknown.”

Shocked at the lynching, Wells condemned it in a *Free Speech* editorial. She recommended to the black community that the only thing to do was “to 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.”

Thousands of black people in Memphis followed her advice. Many headed west for the Oklahoma Territory land rushes. While saving money for their exodus, most cut back on spending in the city’s stores and stopped riding the streetcars. In effect, this was a boycott that damaged the city’s economy.

Wells began to research lynchings and the reasons behind them, becoming the first journalist to do so. One commonly held belief was that lynchings were justified because they almost always punished black men for raping white women. Wells investigated this claim and found that it was not true.

In her *Free Speech* editorials, Wells denounced the “rape myth.” She also reported newspaper accounts of white women who *voluntarily* had affairs with black men who were lynched when this relationship was discovered.

Enraged by Wells’s editorials, a mob of white men at night destroyed the *Free Speech* printing press and left a death threat to Wells. She decided it was now time for her to leave Memphis.

### Southern Horrors

Wells soon became the editor and part-owner of the *New York Age* newspaper. She wrote articles on the Memphis lynching and gave lectures on her research findings.

Later in 1892, Wells published a pamphlet called *Southern Horrors*, describing examples of the brutality of lynchings in the South and the many reasons why they occurred. She reported, according to the white-owned *Chicago Tribune* newspaper, that 728 black people had been lynched during the past eight years. Two-thirds of them were never accused of raping a white woman.

Wells argued that the real cause of lynching was to enforce white supremacy and keep black people down. The “mob spirit” has grown, she explained, as black people advanced in property ownership, business, and education.

Wells accused white southerners of depriving “the young manhood of the [black] race” of his basic rights. “They have cheated him out of his ballot,” she declared, “deprived him of civil rights, or redress

*Wells urged  
black people to  
boycott businesses  
and railroads.*

therefore in the courts, robbed him of the fruits of his labor, and is still murdering, burning, and lynching him.”

Wells urged black people to boycott businesses and railroads to force them to end racial segregation and discrimination and to pressure state legislatures to enact anti-lynching laws. She also observed that “the only times an Afro-American who was assaulted [and] got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense.” She said the lesson of that was “a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home.”

Wells ended *Southern Horrors* by pleading with her readers to get the facts to the press in order to influence white public opinion. “There is no education to compare with the press,” she said.

### Campaign Against Lynching

With the publication of *Southern Horrors* in 1892, Wells launched a major campaign against lynching. She continued to write editorials and deliver lectures. She collaborated with Frederick Douglass, the famous black abolitionist, to write another pamphlet on the condition of black Americans. They then distributed it to visitors of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Wells’s anti-lynching campaign soon gained the attention of former British abolition leaders who invited her to cross the Atlantic to give a series of lectures. She traveled to Britain in 1893 and 1894 and was enthusiastically received by British audiences.

One important result of her lectures in Britain was the formation of the British Anti-Lynching Committee. Members wrote letters to southern governors and other politicians, pressing them to enact anti-lynching laws or face losing British bank loans and investments. Some southern states did pass such laws, but their enforcement was often weak.



Lynching of a black man accused of murder in Paris, Texas, in 1893. The exceedingly large crowd shows this is a “spectacle lynching.”

### A Red Record

In 1895, Wells published *A Red Record*, a pamphlet that updated her lynching statistics, again based mainly on those collected by the *Chicago Tribune*. She reported that black men in the South made up the great majority of the 534 U.S. lynching victims between 1892 and 1894.

Wells described cases that involved innocent victims, the mentally disabled, and those lynched for no known reason. She also introduced a new category of “spectacle lynchings” that involved thousands of participants.

Wells described a brutal spectacle lynching that happened in Paris, Texas, in 1893. Henry Smith, a black man known in the community as “weak minded,” was accused of murdering a four year-old white girl. The white people of the town grew more enraged at Smith when false rumors circulated that he had also raped the little girl.

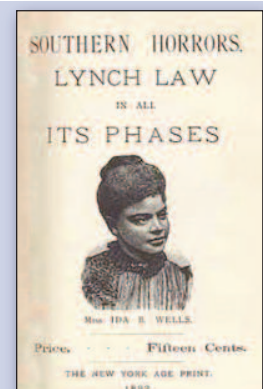
Smith was captured by a posse and confessed. But he may have been intimidated by his angry captors. The posse took Smith back to Paris where a mob of 10,000 men, women, and children had assembled to see Smith lynched.

## FROM SOUTHERN HORRORS:

Of the many inhuman outrages of this present year, the only case where the proposed lynching did *not* occur, was where the men armed themselves in Jacksonville, Fla., and Paducah, Ky., and prevented it. The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense.

The lesson this teaches and which every Afro-American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for that protection which the law refuses to give. . . .

Nothing is more definitely settled than [the Afro-American] must act for himself. I have shown how he may employ the boycott, emigration and the press, and I feel that by a combination of all these agencies can be effectually stamped out lynch law, that last relic of barbarism and slavery. “The gods help those who help themselves.”



The father of the murdered girl led others in slowly torturing Smith by searing his flesh with red hot irons and thrusting them into his eyes and down his throat as the onlookers cheered. Finally, Smith was set afire. Afterward, people took pieces of his charred skin, teeth, and other remains as souvenirs.

### Community Organizing in Chicago

In 1895, Wells decided to move to Chicago where she married Fernando Barnett, the first black Illinois assistant state attorney. She finally started a family and had four children.

Wells pulled back from some of her anti-lynching work to focus on improving the lives of black people in Chicago, many of whom had recently arrived from the rural South during what has been called the Great Migration.

She formed black women's reform-minded clubs and established the city's first kindergarten for African-American children.

In 1908, she created the Negro Fellowship League (NFL) that aimed to get young unemployed black men off the streets. The NFL offered services such as meals, a reading room, Bible classes, job placement, and inspirational speakers.

### A Black Woman Suffragist

Wells believed strongly in the "sacred ballot" as the way for black people to fight racism in all its many forms. She joined Susan B. Anthony who led the national women's suffrage (right to vote) movement.

In 1913, she and a group of black and white suffragists from Illinois traveled to Washington to join a women's right to vote parade. At the last minute, the parade organizers ruled that the black suffragists would have to march in a separate unit so as not to offend southern members of Congress.

Wells was outraged and refused to march in a racially segregated parade. When it began, she bolted from the crowd of onlookers and joined the Illinois unit with two white supporters on either side of her.

After the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the right to vote, Wells worked to register black women to vote. In 1930, she ran in a state senate primary in a majority black district, but lost badly.

### Crusade for Justice

After 1900, Wells's reputation as an outspoken radical black woman worked against her among both white and black reform leaders who were almost always men. For example, she played a significant part in the founding of the National

Association of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. But the male leaders denied her a leadership role.

In 1928, she began to write her autobiography about her life's work. In it she adopted abolitionist Wendell Phillips's words, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," as her motto. She never completed her autobiography and died of kidney failure at 68 in 1931.

Wells was largely forgotten until her daughter Alfreda published her unfinished autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, in 1970. Wells is now recognized as the first journalist to challenge the common beliefs about race and lynching. She is also celebrated as one of the first black women to work for uplifting the condition of the ex-slaves and to fight for their civil rights.

Congress never passed an anti-lynching law, although some states did. Between 1880 and 1930 there were over 3,000 lynchings in the U.S. The peak occurred in 1892 then slowly declined. That was the same year Wells launched her anti-lynching campaign.



U.S. Postal Service

### WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. According to Ida B. Wells, why did the lynching of mainly black men occur in the South?
2. Historians have argued that lynching was used as a way to terrorize black people. How were "spectacle lynchings" evidence of this?
3. Aside from Wells's anti-lynching campaign, what accomplishment among her many other activities do you think was the most important? Why?

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### ACTIVITY: You're the Journalist!

Imagine you are a journalist in the 1890s. You write opinion articles for a newspaper. You are going to write an article outlining how lynching can be stopped in your state.

Form small groups of four. Discuss the facts and arguments presented by Ida B. Wells that you have read about with your fellow journalists. Take notes.

After discussion, you will need to do the following on your own:

1. Write your opinion article. You will need to describe at least three ways for your readers to prevent lynching from happening (e.g., supporting an anti-lynching law).
2. The article should be three paragraphs long and between 300 to 400 words in length.