

Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931)

Compiled by the Center for American Women and Politics – August 2014

Ida Bell Wells, a daughter of slaves, was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi on July 16, 1862. As a journalist, Wells led an anti-lynching crusade in the United States in the 1890s. She went on to found the first suffrage club for black women and become a leader for groups striving for African-American justice.

In 1884 she was asked by the conductor of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad Company to give up her seat on the train to a white man and ordered into the smoking or "Jim Crow" car (although the 1875 Civil Rights Act banned discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or color in public accommodations, several railroad companies ignored this law and continued to racially segregated passengers). Wells refused and was forcibly removed from the train. When she returned to Memphis, she immediately hired an attorney to sue the railroad. She won her case in the local circuit courts, but the railroad company appealed to the Supreme Court of Tennessee, which reversed the lower court's ruling.

As a teacher, Wells openly criticized the racism that contributed to the poor conditions of Memphis' black schools. This caused her to lose her teaching job in 1891, after which turned to journalism full-time.

As editor and co-owner of the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*, Wells-Barnett championed African American rights and led an anti-lynching campaign, raising awareness of the problem by documenting lynchings across the country. Wells was threatened and harassed as a result and her newspaper offices were destroyed. Afterwards she moved from Memphis to Chicago and carried her crusade north where she published *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*.

In 1895 Wells married the editor of one of Chicago's early Black newspapers, F. L. Barnett. After settling in Chicago, Wells-Barnett founded the Negro Fellowship League for black men, the first kindergarten for black children, and, in 1913, the first suffrage club for black women.

A tireless worker for women's suffrage, Wells-Barnett successfully integrated the U.S. suffrage movement when she refused to walk with the other black women at the rear of a 1913 Washington parade, and instead joined the ranks of her white Illinois "peers" after the march began.

Ida B. Wells was one of the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and was one of two African American, women along with Mary Church Terrell, to sign a petition to form the NAACP in 1909.

After a lifetime crusading for justice, Ida B. Wells Barnett died in 1931 in Chicago, Illinois.