

This Day in History... July 16, 1862

Birth of Ida B. Wells

Ida Bell Wells was born July 16, 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, just before President Abraham Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. Wells was an early leader in the Civil Rights and Women's Suffrage movements, as well as a founder of the NAACP.

After the Civil War, Wells's parents were freed and she attended the freedmen's school Shaw University. At the age of 14, both her parents and her 10-month-old brother died of yellow fever. Rather than allow herself and her five siblings to be split up, Wells dropped out of high school and got a job as a teacher in an African-American school. Discovering that she was only making \$30 a month while white teachers were paid \$80, Wells grew increasingly interested in racial politics and improving African-American education.

In May 1884, while riding a train, Wells was ordered to give up her train seat to a white man and sit in the already packed "Jim Crow" car. When she refused, she was dragged from the car. Upon returning to Memphis, she hired an attorney and wrote a newspaper article about her experience. After the railroad company paid off her lawyer, she hired a white attorney who won the case and a \$500 settlement. Then, in 1887, the Tennessee Supreme Court reversed the ruling and ordered Wells to pay the court costs.



In 1900 Wells and Addams led a successful campaign to prevent the creation of an officially segregated school system in Chicago.

Due to the attention she received from the case, Wells was invited to write weekly editorials for the *Evening Star* and *The Living Way* newspapers. Writing under the pen name "Iola," she quickly gained significant attention for writing about race issues. In 1889, Wells became co-owner and editor of *Free Speech and Headlight*, an anti-segregationist newspaper.

In 1889, Wells's friend Thomas Moss and two other black men were arrested and lynched while she was out of town. Shocked at their brutal deaths, she wrote an article urging the black Memphis community to leave the 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." More than 6,000 people followed her suggestion and left town while others boycotted white-owned businesses. Wells began receiving threats on her life and started carrying a gun. This event also led Wells to research lynchings and what caused them. She found that the underlying reason was often a resentment of the African Americans' economic success. Moss had been targeted because he ran a successful grocery that was taking business from white-owned establishments.

In 1893 and 1894, Wells traveled to Europe to bring international attention to the lynching issue in America. On her second trip, she was asked to write articles for the *Daily Inter-Ocean*, making her the first African-American woman to be a paid correspondent for a mainstream white paper. Wells's trips led to the creation of anti-lynching groups in Europe that pressed the US government to guarantee better treatment of its African-American citizens.

Wells continued writing and speaking out for African-American and women's rights. She was one of only two women to sign "The Call" to form the NAACP and established one of the first black women's suffrage groups. Wells dedicated the last 30 years of her life to urban reform in Chicago and raising her family. When she retired, Wells began work on her autobiography. However, she died on March 25, 1931, before it was completed.



Wells was the 13th honoree in the Black Heritage Series.



Douglass offered high praise for Wells and provided financial support for some of her investigations.

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