Wells-Barnett, Ida B.

BORN TO SLAVE parents in the middle of the Civil War, Ida B. Wells was studying to be a teacher in 1878 when her mother and father died in a yellow fever epidemic. Only 16, she kept her younger brothers and sisters together and supported the family by teaching school in and around Memphis, Tennessee. When she was traveling by train one day, a conductor forcibly ejected her from a segregated passenger car reserved for white women. Wells sued the railroad and published her story in a local black newspaper. Although a lower court ruled in her favor, the state Supreme Court reversed the decision and ended her case.

In the meantime, Wells had begun a career as a journalist. Using the pen name Iola, she wrote for black newspapers all around the country, earning a reputation as an uncompromising idealist and a critic of folly and injustice. She became a powerful foe of all forms of racism. In 1892, when ensnared and murdered three successful black Memphis grocers, Wells launched an anti-lynching crusade for which she became famous.

In a series of articles and pamphlets, Wells attacked the common justification for lynching—that it protected white women from black rapists. With meticulous research, Wells repeatedly demonstrated that only a tiny number of lynchings were actually about charges of rape. Many lynchings, in fact, were acts of revenge against African Americans for becoming educated and economically successful. "This," wrote Wells, in an autobiography published after her death, "is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. An excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property and thus keep the race terrorized and 'keep the nigger down.'"

She advised her black readers to protect themselves from white violence by whatever means necessary and to leave Memphis and the South if they could. Wells's Free Speech editorials earned her the undying enmity of white Memphis. While she was attending a convention out of town, angry whites destroyed her newspaper offices. The death threats that followed kept Wells from ever returning to the South.

Wells moved to New York City, where she wrote for the New York Age, and later to Chicago. Her lectures on lynching throughout the northern United States and in Great Britain earned her so much acclaim that her message became impossible to ignore.

In the North, her crusade provoked outrage at the prevalence of the "southern horror" and aroused a new comprehension that rape was a manufactured pretext for lynching, not a persistent factor of southern life. As she later said in her autobiography, "Having lost my paper, had a price put on my life, and been made an exile from home for hating at the truth, I felt that I owed it to myself and to my race to tell the whole truth now that I was where I could do so freely."

Allied with the venerable abolitionist Frederick Douglass, in the summer of 1893, Wells publicized the exclusion of African Americans from the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in a pamphlet entitled "The Reason Why the Colored American is Not at the World's Columbian Exposition." They arranged to have the pamphlet distributed to crowds of visitors outside the gates, because black Americans, other than laborers, were not allowed elsewhere on the fairgrounds.

In 1895, Wells married Ferdinand Barnett, a Chicago attorney. Together they had four children. In addition to continuing her writing, she became a civic activist and woman suffrage leader in Chicago. Although critical of the racism in the movement to secure the vote for women, she allied with suffragist Susan B. Anthony. Wells also helped organize the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909-10. She served as a probation officer in Chicago, helped to defeat a move to segregate Chicago's public schools, and ran unsuccessfully for the state senate in the late 1920s. Her work on behalf of racial justice was a lifelong crusade.