

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • ACTIVIST

A Red Record

Ida B. Wells and the Anti-Lynching Crusade

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Contribution Track • ERA IV • Memphis, Tennessee

Who She Is

Ida Bell Wells was born enslaved on July 16, 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, freed as an infant when Union troops occupied the town. At sixteen, a yellow fever epidemic killed both her parents and an infant sibling; rather than see her seven surviving siblings split up among relatives, she misrepresented her age as eighteen and took a teaching job to keep the family together. She went on to become one of the era's most rigorous investigative journalists, building a documented, statistical case against lynching at a time when most of the country preferred not to look at it directly.

The Train

On May 4, 1884, traveling from Memphis to Nashville with a first-class ticket, Wells refused a conductor's order to move to the smoking car reserved for Black passengers. Forcibly removed, she bit one of the crew members in the struggle, then sued the railroad. A local court awarded her \$500 in December 1884; the Tennessee Supreme Court reversed the verdict in 1887, finding her suit's "purpose... was to harass."

"I felt so disappointed because I had hoped such great things from my suit." — Ida B. Wells

Free Speech and the People's Grocery

By 1889 Wells owned a one-third share of a Memphis paper, Free Speech and Headlight. On March 9, 1892, a mob lynched her close friend Thomas Moss and his business partners Calvin McDowell and William Stewart, owners of the People's Grocery, a Black-owned store that had drawn white retaliation simply by competing successfully. Wells was godmother to Moss's daughter. Her editorials afterward urged Black Memphians to leave a city that would not protect them, and a May 21, 1892 piece challenging the pretext of rape allegations behind Southern lynching provoked a white mob to destroy her newspaper's office while she was traveling in New York. She was warned never to return to Memphis on pain of death, and never did. No original copies of Free Speech survive.

Southern Horrors and The Red Record

Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases (1892) argued that lynching enforced a racial caste system and economic control, not sexual morality. Frederick Douglass wrote to her directly: "You have done your people and mine a service... What a revelation." The Red Record (1895) compiled statistical, case-by-case documentation of lynching from 1863 through the mid-1890s, built largely from the white press's own reporting — turning the perpetrators' own newspapers into the evidence against them.

Britain

Invited after Douglass declined for health reasons, Wells toured England, Scotland, and Wales in 1893 armed with Southern Horrors and lynching photographs, and returned in 1894 as a paid correspondent for the Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean — reportedly the first African American woman paid as a correspondent for a mainstream white American newspaper. The tour produced a British Anti-Lynching Committee and drew a contemptuous response from the New York Times, which called her "a slanderous and nasty-minded Mulatress." Her own account of how she was received abroad was matter-of-fact: "Everywhere I was received on a perfect equality with the ladies."

Chicago and the Segregated Parade

Wells married attorney Ferdinand Barnett in 1895, keeping her own name attached in an era when that alone was unusual. In Chicago she founded or co-founded a run of organizations — the club that became the Ida B. Wells Club, the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, the Negro Fellowship League, and in January 1913 the Alpha Suffrage Club, one of the first Black women's suffrage clubs in the country. At the national suffrage parade in Washington on March 3, 1913, organizers directed Black delegations to march at the rear, segregated from the rest. Wells refused, stepping out of the crowd and into the Illinois delegation as it passed, marching arm in arm with two white Illinois suffragists for the rest of the route.

She was among the signers of the 1909 call that founded the NAACP, though her name was left off the organization's initial founders' roster — accounts differ on whether she withdrew or was excluded, and she grew estranged from the organization's cautious leadership within a few years. She died March 25, 1931, in Chicago, at sixty-eight. In 2020 she received a posthumous Pulitzer Prize Special Citation for her lynching journalism.

NC Local Lens

No source consulted documents a personal visit, lecture stop, or organizing tie between Ida B. Wells and North Carolina, and none is claimed here — her circuits ran through the urban North, the British Isles, and, early in her career, Tennessee and Mississippi. The one genuine, if indirect, North Carolina connection is legislative rather than personal: NCPedia's own account of the state's 1893 anti-lynching statute credits it in part to "the efforts of activist Ida Wells of Memphis, Tennessee" as part of a broader wave of such laws. That is a real but statewide, secondhand influence — not a Fayetteville or Cumberland County connection, and this entry does not pretend otherwise.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

Railroad name in the 1884 case: sources conflict between the Chesapeake, Ohio & Southwestern Railroad and the larger Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad — verify which entity was actually the defendant.

NAACP founding-member status: genuinely disputed between her own account and Du Bois's — present both facts rather than resolving it.

Free Speech circulation figures: no institutional source gives a verified number; no original copies of the paper survive.

1892 mob size: given as "approximately 75" in secondary sources only — an estimate, not a documented count.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "Ida B. Wells," National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/people/idabwells.htm>.
2. "A Noble Endeavor: Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Suffrage," National Park Service, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/a-noble-endeavor-ida-b-wells-barnett-and-suffrage.htm>.
3. Sara Gunasekara, "Ida B. Wells and the Activism of Investigative Journalism," Headlines & Heroes (blog), Library of Congress, February 2020, <https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2020/02/ida-b-wells-and-the-activism-of-investigative-journalism/>.
4. "Ida Wells-Barnett (1862–1931)," BlackPast.org, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://blackpast.org/african-american-history/barnett-ida-wells-1862-1931/>.
5. "Lynching," NCpedia, North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.ncpedia.org/lynching>.
6. Ida B. Wells, *The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* (1895), full text via Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14977/14977-h/14977-h.htm>.
7. "Wells-Barnett, Ida B.," Tennessee Encyclopedia, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/ida-b-wells-barnett/>.

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