

Biography of Ida B. Wells

Ida B. Wells was an African American journalist and activist. She worked to promote equal rights and justice for African Americans and women, and was an early leader in the campaign against lynching in the United States.

Wells was born in 1862 in Holly Springs, Mississippi to enslaved parents during the early years of the Civil War. As a young teacher in Tennessee, Wells refused to budge when a train conductor ordered her to move from the first-class seat she had purchased to a crowded train car designated for African Americans. After being removed from the train, she took legal action against the railroad company.

Wells frequently wrote about racial injustice, and became a co-owner, editor, and reporter for a newspaper in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1892, after several of her friends were lynched, she focused her writing on the topic. Lynching is the mob killing of someone for an alleged offense, without authorization by the law. Mobs killed victims by hanging, shooting, burning, or other means. Lynching was a problem that worsened throughout Wells's lifetime—it increased in the wake of the Civil War and intensified after Reconstruction. In 1892, several men in Tennessee threatened to torture and kill her because of her work. She left the South, and continued writing and speaking internationally on the topic of lynching. Wells also contributed to the founding of the National Association for Colored Women (NACW) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Wells's campaign challenged popular misperceptions about lynching, and advocated for equal treatment and protection for African Americans under the rule of law. By providing information about specific cases, Wells portrayed lynching as a brutal and oppressive tool that whites used to maintain power and authority.

In the preface to one of her pamphlets on lynching, Wells writes,

“This statement...is a contribution to truth, an array of facts, the perusal of which it is hoped will stimulate this great American Republic to demand that justice be done.... It is with no pleasure I have dipped my hands in the corruption here exposed. Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning, and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so.”

—Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases*, 1892



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