Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Her Passion for Justice, Lee D. Baker
As you read this biography of Wells, underline and note in the margin each different tactic she used or recommended to try to change society.



Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a fearless anti-lynching crusader, suffragist, women's rights advocate, journalist, and speaker. She stands as one of our nation's most uncompromising leaders and most ardent defenders of democracy. She was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1862 and died in Chicago, Illinois 1931 at the age of sixty-nine.

Although enslaved prior to the Civil War, her parents were able to support their seven children because her mother was a "famous" cook and her father was a skilled carpenter. When Ida was only fourteen, a tragic epidemic of Yellow Fever swept through Holly Springs and killed her parents and youngest sibling. Emblematic of the righteousness, responsibility, and fortitude that characterized her life, she kept the family together by securing a job teaching. She managed to continue her education by attending near-by Rust College. She eventually moved to Memphis to live with her aunt and help raise her youngest sisters.

It was in Memphis where she first began to fight (literally) for racial and gender 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 her into the smoking or "Jim Crow" car, which was already crowded with other passengers. Despite the 1875 Civil Rights Act banning discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or color, in theaters, hotels, transports, and other public accommodations, several railroad companies defied this congressional mandate and racially segregated its passengers. It is important to realize that her defiant act was before *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the U.S. Supreme Court decision that established the fallacious doctrine of "separate but equal," which constitutionalized racial segregation. Wells wrote in her autobiography:

> I refused, saying that the forward car [closest to the locomotive] was a smoker, and as I was in the ladies' car, I proposed to stay. . . [The conductor] tried to drag me out of the seat, but the moment he caught hold of my arm I fastened my teeth in the back of his hand. I had braced my feet against the seat in front and was holding to the back, and as he had already been badly bitten he didn't try it again by himself. He went forward and got the baggageman and another man to help him and of course they succeeded in dragging me out.

Wells was forcefully removed from the train and the other passengers--all whites--applauded. When Wells 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, and it reversed the lower court's ruling. This was the first of many struggles Wells engaged, and from that moment forward, she worked tirelessly and fearlessly to overturn injustices against women and people of color.

Her suit against the railroad company also sparked her career as a journalist. Many papers wanted to hear about the experiences of the 25-year-old school teacher who stood up against white supremacy.

Her writing career blossomed in papers geared to African Americans.

In 1892 three of her friends were lynched. Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart. These three men were owners of People's Grocery Company, and their small grocery had taken away customers from competing white businesses. A group of angry white men thought they would "eliminate" the competition so they attacked People's grocery, but the owners fought back, shooting one of the attackers. The owners of People's Grocery were arrested, but a lynch-mob broke into the jail, dragged them away from town, and brutally murdered all three. Again, this atrocity galvanized her mettle. She wrote in *The Free Speech:*

> The city of Memphis has demonstrated that neither character nor standing avails the Negro if he dares to protect himself against the white man or become his rival. There is nothing we can do about the lynching now, as we are out-numbered and without arms. The white mob could help itself to ammunition without pay, but the order is rigidly enforced against the selling of guns to Negroes. There is therefore only one thing left to do; save our money and leave a 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.

Many people took the advice Wells penned in her paper and left town; other members of the Black community organized a boycott of white owned business to try to stem the terror of lynchings. Her newspaper office was destroyed as a result of the muckraking and investigative journalism she pursued after the killing of her three friends. She could not return to Memphis, so she moved to Chicago. She however continued her blistering journalistic attacks on Southern injustices, being especially active in investigating and exposing the fraudulent "reasons" given to lynch Black men, which by now had become a common occurrence.

In Chicago, she helped develop numerous African American women and reform organizations, but she remained diligent in her anti-lynching crusade, writing *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*. She also became a tireless worker for women's suffrage, and happened to march in the famous 1913 march for universal suffrage in Washington, D.C. Not able to tolerate injustice of any kind, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, along with Jane Addams, successfully blocked the establishment of segregated schools in Chicago.

In 1895 Wells married the editor of one of Chicago's early Black newspapers. She wrote: "I was married in the city of Chicago to Attorney F. L. Barnett, and retired to what I thought was the privacy of a home." She did not stay retired long and continued writing and organizing. In 1906, she joined with William E.B. DuBois and others to further the Niagara Movement, and she was one of two African American women to sign "the call" to form the NAACP in 1909. Although Ida B. Wells was one of the founding members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), she was also among the few Black leaders to explicitly oppose Booker T. Washington and his strategies. As a result, she was viewed as one the most radical of the so-called "radicals" who organized the NAACP and marginalized from positions within its leadership. As late as 1930, she became disgusted by the nominees of the major parties to the state legislature, so Wells-Barnett decided to run for the Illinois State legislature, which made her one of the first Black women to run for public office in the United States. A year later, she passed away after a lifetime crusading for justice.

Lee D. Baker, April 1996 in Franklin, Vincent P. 1995 Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of African American Intellectual Tradition. 1995: Oxford Univ. Press.