

TENNESSEE BAR JOURNAL

AUGUST 2018 | VOLUME 54, NO. 8

TBA.ORG

Ida B. Wells

Fearless Journalist
from Memphis Who
Changed the World

ALSO: New Tax Act Brings Major Changes to
U.S. International Taxation System

Perfecting 'De Novo' Appeals



Ida B. Wells

Fearless Journalist from Memphis Who Changed the World

By David L. Hudson Jr.

**Unlike today,
there was a time
when journalists
were admired
for their
fearless pursuit
of the truth.**

Today's climate features hostility toward freedom of the press and negative attitudes toward journalists. Public perception of the press as the public's watchdog and the protective fourth estate is vanishing. Reporters have even faced assault for their reporting in the United States.¹

But, there was a time when journalists were admired for their fearless pursuit of the truth and their exposure of corruption. The late 19th and early 20th centuries featured a group of journalists, sometimes called muckrakers, who used the power of the pen to change society.² They were seemingly unafraid. An exemplar was a young black woman from Memphis who spoke out against abuses in the school system, campaigned tirelessly against the horrors of lynching, advocated for suffrage rights for women, exposed injustices, and battled against segregation laws. She did so primarily through the power of her pen. While she wrote for such famed newspapers as

The Chicago Defender, the *New York Globe* and *The Washington Bee*, much of her early writing was done in Memphis, Tennessee for *The Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*.³

Her pointed writing about lynching and discrimination caused miscreants to destroy her offices, forcing her to flee the South. But, her advocacy and writing also earned her international acclaim, traveling opportunities, and the ability to break bread with the likes of abolitionist Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony. Her name was Ida B. Wells. In this day and age of attacks upon freedom of the press, her sterling example should shine even brighter.

Background and Move to Memphis

Born in 1862 in Holley, Mississippi, just before the Emancipation Proclamation, Wells learned the value of a good education from her parents, whom she lost too soon to yellow fever.⁴ Parentless at age 16, Wells persevered. She faked her age in order to obtain a teaching job

to support her younger siblings. She moved to Memphis to pursue better teaching jobs. Wells learned early on the power of free speech but also the price to be paid for it. After she railed against the poor quality of schools and lack of financial resources for black schools, her teaching contract was not renewed. Her free speech caused her to lose her teaching job.⁵

The schools were not the only target of her wrath. She also attacked segregation laws that mandated separate accommodations on the basis of race. Keep in mind that Wells had the temerity to challenge such a law in the 19th century in the era of separate and unequal. As Russell Fowler noted in his excellent 2015 *Tennessee Bar Journal* article on her lawsuit, “[b]efore Rosa Parks there was Ida B. Wells.”⁶

Wells sued the Chesapeake, Ohio & Southwestern Railroad company after several railroad employees forcibly removed her from the first-class section of the train. She won a jury verdict of \$500. However, the Tennessee Supreme

continued on page 16

“If we only had a few men with the backbone of Mrs. [Wells-] Barnett, lynching would soon come to a halt in America.”

Wells wins her case against the Chesapeake, Ohio & Southwestern Railroad.

— *The Memphis Appeal Avalanche*,
December 25, 1884

The Tennessee Supreme Court later reversed the verdict.

A DARKY DAMSEL
OBTAINS A VERDICT FOR DAMAGES AGAINST THE CHESAPEAKE
AND OHIO RAILROAD - WHAT IT COST
TO PUT A COLORED SCHOOL TEACHER IN A SMOKING CAR - VERDICT FOR
\$500

Court reversed, writing that Wells' purpose was "to harass with a view to this suit, and that her persistence was not in good faith to obtain a comfortable seat for the short ride."⁷

She invested her money to buy an interest in *The Memphis Free Speech* and became its editor. Three of her friends were lynched by a mob of seventy-five masked white men, arguably for doing no more than succeeding with a black-owned grocery. It appeared that the only crimes of Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell and Will Stewart were that they were too successful and inspired the jealousy of whites.⁸ It became "the defining moment in her life and career."⁹ She soon railed against lynching, a tool of murderous oppression used by whites to subjugate blacks.¹⁰

Wells became incensed when several blacks she knew were subjected to his awful fate. "They were innocent," she wrote in an editorial. "I thought only felons were hanged."¹¹ She also suggested that some lynchings were caused by white anger over white women willingly having black male lovers. This angered much of the white community. The response from some angered whites was brutal. They destroyed Wells's newspaper office, causing her to remain in the North.

A National and International Spokesperson

Wells continued her attacks against lynching as a journalist in Chicago and an international lecturer in Great Britain. She compiled an anti-lynching tract called *The Red Record* (1895) that detailed the practice of lynching across the country.¹² In a speech in Chicago she called lynching "our [America's] national crime." In another speech, she warned that "no other civilized nation stands condemned before the world with a series of crimes so peculiarly national."¹³ She pointed out the hypocrisy of a country that proclaimed itself a "Christian nation" but allowed "this inhuman slaughter."¹⁴

She excoriated the practice at the Chicago World Fair, writing about the hanging of a thirteen-year-old South Carolina girl accused of poisoning a white infant and a ten-year-old boy in Alabama.¹⁵ She exposed the lynching of Will "Frog" James in Cairo, Illinois. *The Chicago Defender* proclaimed: "If we only had a few men with the backbone of Mrs. Barnett [Ida Wells had married lawyer Ferdinand Barnett], lynching would soon come to a halt in America."¹⁶

Wells urged others to get involved in exposing the evils of lynching. "If indeed 'the pen is mightier than the sword,' the time has come as never before that the wielders of the pen belonging to the race which is so tortured and outraged, should take serious thought and purposeful action," she wrote.¹⁷

While she was the country's most prominent opponent of lynching, she advocated other causes. She wrote about the lack of education among her people and called on the "need of the press as an educator."¹⁸ She exposed the horrible treatment of black sharecroppers in Elaine, Arkansas, in what was known as the "Arkansas Race Riot."¹⁹ The black sharecroppers were accused of violence toward whites but in reality were defending themselves from white attacks after trying to organize a Progressive Farmers and Household Union. Wells explained: "The terrible



Ida and her children: Charles, Herman, Ida and Alfreda in 1909

crime these men had committed was to organize their members into a union for the purpose of getting the market price for their cotton."²⁰

She wrote on the plight of blacks in the Delta region after the horrific Mississippi Flood of 1927, even corresponding with then Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover to aid those in need. She also campaigned tirelessly to get an anti-lynching bill through the U.S. Congress in the early 1920s.

Upon her death, she was eulogized as a true "crusader for justice" and "internationally known for two generations for her agitation and leadership of women and public thought."²¹

The world today seems rife with racial turmoil and attacks on press freedoms. The example of Ida B. Wells hopefully can serve as an exemplar for committed journalists, writers, activists, and all concerned citizens.

MRS. IDA BARNETT, COLORED LEADER, 62, DIES SUDDENLY.

Mrs. Ida B. Wells-Barnett for many years a recognized leader of the Negro race in efforts to obtain social and economic equality in the United States died last night at Daily Hospital after an illness of only two days. She was 62.

Wells' obituary from *The Chicago Tribune*, March 25, 1931



DAVID L. HUDSON JR. is the author, co-author or co-editor of more than 40 books, including several on the First Amendment. He is a visiting associate professor of practice of

law at Belmont Law School and also teaches at the Nashville School of Law. Recently, the Nashville School of Law awarded him the Distinguished Teacher award for his "profound impact on the school and its students in the 13 years of his tenure, earning the respect and trust of hundreds of students who have had him in class."

Notes

1. Peter Grier and Harry Bruinius, "When hostility to the media becomes assault," *CS Monitor*, May 25, 2017, at <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2017/0525/When-hostility-to-media-becomes-assault>

2. Jane Latour, "Women Pioneers in Journalism — Ida B. Wells and Ida Tarbell," *Black Star News*, May 7, 2017, at <http://www.blackstarnews.com/us-politics/justice/women-pioneers-in-journalism-ida-b-wells-and-ida-tarbell.html>.

3. Ruth A. Rouff. *Ida B. Wells: A Woman of Courage* (Townsend Press, 2010), at 27.

4. Ellen Carol DuBois. "Raking Muck: Ida B. Wells let neither sex nor her race keep her from life as a crusading journalist," *New York Times*,

Feb. 14, 1999, at p. BR31.

5. Naomi Millender. "Great Black Women': Ida B. Wells: Dynamic Lady," *Chicago Daily Defender*, Apr. 9, 1970, at p. 17.

6. Russell Fowler, "Ida B. Wells at the Tennessee Supreme Court," *Tenn. B.J.* Nov. 2015, at p. 29.

7. *Chesapeake, O. & S. R. Co. v. Wells*, 85 Tenn. 613, 614 (1887).

8. Ida B. Wells. "Lynch Law In All Its Phases," in *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader* (ed. Mia Bay), at p. 99.

9. Ethan Michaeli. *The Defender: How The Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America*. Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company, 2016, at p. 13.

10. Amii Larkin Barnard, "The Application of Critical Race Feminism to the Anti-Lynching Movement: Black Women's Fight Against Race and Gender Ideology, 1892 – 1920," 3 *UCLA Women's LJ*. 1, 6 (1993).

11. Quoted in Eugene P. Feldman, "Ida B. Wells — Lynch Mob's Target, Foe," *Chicago Daily Defender*, Feb. 14, 1966, at p. 4.

12. Ida B. Wells, "Lynch Law in America," Blackpast.org, at <http://www.blackpast.org/1900-ida-b-wells-lynch-law-america>.

13. Ida B. Wells, "A Red Record," 1895, at http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/lynching/wells2.cfm.

14. Ida B. Wells, "Lynch Law in All Its Phases," in *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader* (ed. Mia Bay), at p. 110.

15. Michaeli, supra n. 8, at 14.

16. Michaeli, supra n. 8, at 28.

17. Ida B. Wells, "The Requirements of Southern Journalism," in *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader* (ed. Mia Bay), at p. 89.

18. *Id.* at 91.

19. Ida B. Wells, "Condemned Arkansas Rioters Look to Chicago for Help," *The Chicago Defender*, Dec. 13, 1919, at p. 20.

20. Ida B. Wells, "The Arkansas Race Riot, 1920," in *The Light of Truth*, at p. 501.

21. "Ida B. Wells-Barnett Passes Away," *The Chicago Defender*, Mar. 28, 1931, at p. 1.



Ferdinand Lee Barnett, Wells' husband, c.1900