

Ida B. Wells-Barnett: The Mother of Black Feminism and Intersectional Analysis

(July 16, 1862 to March 25, 1931: prolific investigative journalist, anti-lynching crusader, and suffragist)

“I will not begin at this late day by doing what my soul abhors: sugaring men, weak deceitful creatures with flattery to retain them as escorts or to gratify a revenge.” As written by Ida B. Wells in 1886

Ida B. Wells-Barnett was an indefatigable and relentless warrior for racial and gender equality and justice. Confronting multiple presidential administrations, Wells never relented in her crusade to obtain federal anti-lynching legislation. In her lifetime, Wells’ petitions were reviewed before the following presidents: William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Warren G. Harding. After nearly 200 attempts, on March 29, 2022, President Joe Biden passed HR. 55: The Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act.

The legacy of Wells all began in Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1862. Wells was born a slave. Her father, James Madison Wells was the product of the predatory dynamic prevalent at the time: his mother Peggy was repeatedly raped and impregnated by the owner of the plantation. Altogether, Madison-Wells was one of ten children. Wells’ mother, Elizabeth Lizzie Warrenton Wells became known as a skilled cook. The Wells sired a relatively large family, which was common at the time, Ida was one of eight children.

Interesting Fact: Ida was emancipated two years after she was born.

After Emancipation, Madison Wells became a carpenter and trustee. In the latter instance, he established Shaw University, which is now Rust College. He also became a staunch member of the Republican Party and was known as a race man, due to his position on racial issues even in the racially volatile Reconstruction Era.

Wells was a child prodigy: by the age of 14, she had enrolled at Rust College; at the age of 16 she began to teach. In 1878, the Wells family fell victim to the yellow fever epidemic. Wells lost both of her parents and her youngest brother. Keeping she and her siblings together would be her biggest initial fight in life. Her mother Peggy was separated from all of her siblings when she was a child, as such, Wells was determined to keep her siblings out of foster care.

The years following her parents’ death were hard on Wells. She worked as a teacher during the week and cooked and cleaned to insure that her siblings had what they needed while she worked. The strain took its toll and eventually they moved from their grandmother’s home to Memphis Tennessee with their aunt. As with the many fights she would encounter throughout her life, Wells’ tenacity would yield success: through hard work, through determination, she kept her family together.

Wells-Barnett would then go on to obtain at least three degrees: from Rust College; Fisk University; and LeMoyné-Owen College. Her fight for Civil Rights began on September 15, 1883. A passenger on a racially segregated train, Wells refused to give up her seat when she was ordered by the train's white train conductor. She put up a fight: she bit the train conductor as he dragged her from her seat.

On December 24, 1884, Wells memorialized the experience in a local newspaper, "The Living Way." She then sued and initially prevailed in the amount of \$500. The railway appealed, and the Circuit Court reversed the lower Court. It would be her first substantive experience with the injustice of the judicial system. Wells did not let the defeat define her, instead it prompted her to do what she did best, write and fight.

De jure discrimination by way of Jim Crow was de rigueur. As a teacher and as a writer for the local newspaper, Wells began to document the disparities in the all black school system. She wrote of deplorable and inferior conditions and facilities. Displeased, the Memphis School system elected not to renew Wells' teaching engagement. Devastated, she proceeded to write for the local newspapers, she would also eventually found a successful newspaper of her own.

The events of March 9, 1892 would be the impetus to Wells' life-long crusade to obtain federal anti-lynching legislation. Three of Wells' closest friends owned a market that catered to the area's Black residents. By comparison, the competing white market did not reap as much profit.

On March 9th however, an interracial group of boys were engaged in a game in front of the market owned by Wells' friends. It was initially a fight amongst the children, then adults from both sides got involved. Some of the combatants included Wells' friends. Since they were armed, they initially prevailed. However, since the fight involved whites, her friends were arrested and detained. Dissatisfied with this outcome, 75 white men abducted and lynched Wells' friends. Tragedy had hit close to home for Wells again, and again she was galvanized to write and to fight.

On October 26, 1892, Wells began to publish her research on lynchings: "Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases." The language in the book proved incendiary to the whites in the town, and led to her being forced out of Memphis. In Southern Horrors, she described the plight of poor blind Afro American Samsons who fell prey to white Delilahs. It was a sarcastic take on the brutal and unjust reality that many black men at the time faced: false and lethal accusations of raping white women.

The aforementioned language enraged the town's whites. While Wells was out of town on speaking engagements, the town's whites: broke into the offices of her newspaper; and ransacked and destroyed the equipment. In addition to this blatant vandalism, the town's whites threatened Wells' life if she ever returned.

Despite these losses and threats on her life, Wells continued her anti-lynching advocacy. In 1893 and 1894 Wells went to Britain on speaking tours. While away, she was approached by William Penn Nixon, who owned the Daily Inter Ocean. His paper was the first American mainstream white paper that openly denounced lynchings. Penn Nixon asked Wells to report on her travels in Britain. Her work for the Daily Inter Ocean made Wells the first paid African American correspondent to write for a white mainstream newspaper.

Wells' advocacy in Britain proved efficacious. Outraged, British textile manufacturers began to boycott American cotton. The pressure led Southern businessmen to outwardly condemn lynching.

In 1895, Wells would continue her crusade against lynching in the 100 page pamphlet, entitled: "The Red Book." This work proved compelling at the time, because it combined quantitative data analysis with sociological investigations of individual lynchings. To support her findings, Wells compiled 14 pages of statistics that related to lynchings that took place from 1892 to 1895:

"10,000 Negroes have been killed in cold blood without the formality of judicial trial[s] and legal executions since 1865, the final year of the civil war."

-An excerpt from The Red Book

The phenomenon of jury nullification would also emerge in the context of the prosecution of lynchings. Time and time again, despite photogenic evidence of culpability, all white juries would refuse to convict white defendants on trial for lynching blacks. The phenomenon of white jury nullification would remain prevalent throughout American jurisprudence. By way of the Baldus Study, almost 100 years later, the Supreme Court would address it directly in its decision in McCleskey v. Kemp, 481 U.S. 279 (1987).

In 1895, Wells would move to Chicago. On June 27, 1895, she would marry Ferdinand Lee Barnett. Barnett was a widower with two children. He was also a successful lawyer who owned a newspaper. According to Wells' granddaughter, Barnett liked strong women and was willing to support Wells' activism. She took over his newspaper, while Barnett continued his legal practice. The couple would have four children together. Unusual for the time, was Barnett's willingness to hire a nurse so that Wells could continue to write and travel on speaking engagements.

In 1900 Wells and Jane Addams fought against a racially segregated school system in Chicago. Wells also continued to write, that year she wrote another compelling work: "Mob Rule in New Orleans: the Story of Robert Charles." The death of Charles led to race riots in New Orleans. Yet again, people were outraged by the savagery of yet another lynching.

Throughout the decade, Wells would go on to form a number of civil rights organizations. A Black woman during the 20s inevitably encountered numerous obstacles when they sought leadership positions or even parity in political movements. Unfortunately, Wells was no exception to this rule.

In 1909, Wells gave a speech at the National Negro Conference, the quote below again showed Wells' relentless fearlessness in her crusade against lynching:

“During the last 10 years, from 1899 to 1908, inclusive the number lynched was 959. Of the number 102 were white, while the colored victims numbered 857. No other nation, civilized or savage burns its criminals, only under that Stars and Stripes is the human holocaust possible. Twenty-eight human beings burned at the stake, one of them a woman and two of them children is the awful indictment against American civilization, the gruesome tribute which the nation pays to the color line.”

Interesting Fact: In 1909, Wells and WEB DuBois were amongst a group that founded the NAACP. However, she was not given credit for her role by DuBois and or Booker T. Washington. Many attribute this slight to her gender and DuBois' unwillingness to acknowledge her peer.

Wells would also experience these same slights in the suffragist movement and the Republican party. In 1924 she lost the presidency of the National Association of Colored Women to the more diplomatic Mary Bethune. In 1928, she tried to become a delegate to the Republican National Convention but lost to Oscar De Priest. Although she enjoyed the support of Frederick Douglas, WEB DuBois and Booker T. Washington also deemed Wells too radical.

Due to this marginalization in both contexts, Wells is seen as the mother of the Black Suffragist movement. The position of Black Suffragists, is that Black women experience concomitant discrimination based on the inextricable intersectionality of their race and gender. The impact of this school of thought can be seen today, in the academic writings of Professors Kimberle Crenshaw and Mari Matsuda.

Interesting Fact: after World War I, the US government placed Wells under surveillance as a dangerous race agitator. It wasn't Wells' writings or international anti-lynching advocacy, but her friendships with other persona non grata: Marcus Garvey, Monroe Trotter and Madame CJ Walker.

Wells indeed lived a full life where her talent and tenacity, made her a relentless crusader. She died of kidney failure on March 25, 1931. Perhaps the quote below best describes Wells' view of her life and its significance:

“If this work can contribute in any way toward providing this, and at the same time arouse the conscience of the American people to a demand for justice to every citizen and punishment by law for the lawless, I shall feel I have done my race a service.”

Notable Works:

- Southern Horrors: Lynch law in All Its Phases (1892)
- The Red Record (1895)
- Mob Rule in New Orleans (1900)
- Crusade for Justice, An Autobiography of Ida B. Wells (it was posthumously completed by her daughter Alfreda Marguerite Barnett Duster in 1970)

References and Additional Reading:

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- The Guttenberg Project E-Book, Mob Rule in New Orleans, by Ida B. Wells-Barnett,
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14976/14976-h/14976-h.htm>

Documentaries on YouTube:

- Ida B. Wells; A Chicago Stories Special Documentary,
<https://youtu.be/ML8XiKVStWQ?si=JT6LdRBQES-TF1cO>
- The Red Record by Ida B. Wells, the Full Audio Book,
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