

This Day in History... March 25, 1931

Death of Ida B. Wells

On March 25, 1931, civil rights leader, journalist, and suffragette Ida B. Wells died at the age of 68. Her life's work—documenting injustice with facts and confronting violence with fearless reporting—left a detailed record of a nation struggling with race and equality.

Ida Bell Wells was born on July 16, 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, just months before President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Her parents, James and Elizabeth Wells, had been enslaved. After the Civil War, they became active in Reconstruction-era efforts and ensured their daughter received an education at Shaw University, a school for freed people.

Wells' early life changed suddenly in 1878. A yellow fever epidemic swept through her town, killing both her parents and her infant brother. At just 16, Wells made a decision that shaped the rest of her life. She refused to let her family be separated. She left school, found work as a teacher, and supported her five surviving siblings. Teaching paid little. She earned about \$30 a month, while white teachers in similar positions earned closer to \$80. This gap sharpened her awareness of racial inequality.

In 1884, Wells challenged segregation directly. While riding a train in Tennessee, she purchased a first-class ticket and took a seat in the ladies' car. A conductor ordered her to move to the segregated "Jim Crow" car. When she refused, he and two other men forcibly removed her. Wells sued the railroad. A local court awarded her \$500 in damages. However, in 1887, the Tennessee Supreme Court reversed the ruling and ordered her to pay court costs. The case drew public attention and pushed Wells toward journalism.

She began writing under the pen name "Iola" for Black newspapers such as *The Living Way* and the *Evening Star*. Her articles focused on education, voting rights, and racial discrimination. In 1889, she became co-owner and editor of the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*, a newspaper that challenged segregation and violence in the South.

A turning point came in 1892. Three Black businessmen in Memphis, including Wells' close friend Thomas Moss, were arrested after defending their grocery store from a white mob. While in jail, they were taken by a mob and lynched. Wells investigated the case and published editorials condemning the killings. She urged Black residents to leave Memphis if they could not receive protection under the law. More than 6,000 people left the city, and others organized boycotts of white-owned businesses.

As Wells continued her reporting, she began collecting data on lynchings. She documented cases, examined accusations, and compared them to evidence. Her findings challenged a common claim of the time—that lynchings were primarily punishment for crimes. Wells showed that many victims had not been charged with serious offenses. She argued that economic competition and racial control were often the real motives.

Her work brought threats. In 1892, while she was traveling, a mob destroyed her newspaper office in Memphis. She did not return. Instead, she moved to Chicago, where she continued writing and speaking. In 1895, she published *The Red Record*, one of the first statistical studies of lynching in the United States.

Wells also took her message abroad. In 1893 and again in 1894, she traveled to England and Scotland. There, she gave lectures and wrote articles describing lynching in the United States. She became a correspondent for the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, making her one of the first Black women paid by a major white newspaper. Her international efforts helped form anti-lynching groups in Britain that pressured American officials.

Wells used her newspaper to document lynching with facts, despite threats and the destruction of her press. Her work showed how a free press could confront injustice, even at great personal risk.

In Chicago, Wells expanded her work into community organizing. She helped establish institutions that supported Black residents, including kindergartens and social centers. She also became active in the women's suffrage movement. In 1913, she founded the Alpha Suffrage Club, one of the first Black women's suffrage organizations in the United States. The group worked to register Black women voters and support political reform.

Wells was also involved in early civil rights organizations. She was one of the signers of "The Call," the 1909 document that led to the creation of the NAACP. Though she later distanced herself from some of its leadership, she remained committed to civil rights advocacy.

In her later years, Wells focused on local reform efforts in Chicago, including housing and education. She also raised her family while continuing to write. Near the end of her life, she began working on an autobiography to document her experiences in her own words.

Ida B. Wells died on March 25, 1931, before completing that manuscript. Her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, was later published from her unfinished work. Today, her writings remain a detailed and firsthand record of her investigations, her activism, and the conditions she fought to change.



Wells was the 13th honoree in the Black Heritage Series.



In 1913, Wells refused to march at the back of the Woman Suffrage Parade in Washington, DC, and instead stepped into the Illinois delegation mid-procession, defying segregation. She later helped register Black women voters in Chicago and ran for the Illinois State Senate in 1930—one of the first Black women to seek that office.

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