

Ida B. Wells

Holly Springs, Mississippi ' Memphis ' New York ' Chicago

In Sixty Seconds

Origins. Born July 16, 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, enslaved until the Union Army reached Mississippi. Her father was a skilled carpenter and a trustee of Rust College. Both parents and an infant brother died in the 1878 yellow fever epidemic when she was sixteen. She lied about her age to take a teaching post and keep her five surviving siblings together.

Work. At twenty-two she sued the Chesapeake, Ohio and Southwestern Railroad after a conductor dragged her from a first-class car. She won \$500 in 1884, then \$2,500 on retrial, before the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the verdict in 1887. She turned to journalism. By 1889 she co-owned the Memphis Free Speech. In March 1892 three friends of hers were lynched in Memphis. She investigated and published, and the mob burned her offices that May while she was away.

Impact. She kept counting. Southern Horrors appeared in 1892. The Red Record followed in 1895 with 160 lynchings documented by name, date, county, and pretext. She lectured across Britain and organized the first international anti-lynching campaign. She co-founded the NAACP in 1909. She founded the Alpha Suffrage Club in 1913 and refused to march with the segregated delegation at the Washington suffrage parade that spring.

Legacy. The 2020 Pulitzer Prize cited her outstanding and courageous reporting on the vicious violence against African Americans during the era of lynching. Her Chicago monument was dedicated in 2021. A U.S. quarter bearing her image was issued in 2025. The discipline of investigative data journalism begins with her arithmetic.

The Network

T. Thomas Fortune

Mentor and editor. Editor of the New York Age. Bought her share in the Memphis Free Speech after the mob destroyed it and gave her a quarter-interest in the Age in exchange. Provided the platform from which the national campaign launched in 1892.

Ferdinand L. Barnett

Husband (1895-1931). Howard-trained attorney, founder of the Chicago Conservator, assistant state's attorney for Cook County. Thirty-six years of marriage. Raised four children with her while both of them continued publishing and litigating. She took over editing the Conservator after their wedding.

Frederick Douglass

Ally and public defender. Wrote the preface to Southern Horrors in 1892 and cited her statistics in his own speaking tours. Traveled with her to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, where they co-published the pamphlet *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*.

W.E.B. Du Bois

NAACP co-founder, later estranged. Signed the 1909 call with her. They broke publicly over the direction of the Chicago branch and over what she considered his preference for university-trained male leadership. They continued to correspond intermittently for the rest of their lives.

For Discussion

1. Wells documented 160 lynchings in 1892 alone, organized by date, state, name of the victim, and the pretext given. She drew the data from the white press itself. What is the rhetorical force of using an opposing source's own record to refute its argument, and what contemporary investigations have deployed the same move?
2. The 2020 Pulitzer special citation arrived eighty-nine years after Wells's death and 125 years after *The Red Record*. What does an institutional recognition of that delay cost the institution in credibility, and what does the delayed acknowledgment still accomplish for the historical record?
3. Wells broke publicly with W.E.B. Du Bois over the direction of the Chicago NAACP and with Mary White Ovington over national strategy. What is gained and lost when a founder breaks with her co-founders, and how should the historical record read such breaks over time?
4. The Alpha Suffrage Club registered Black women to vote and delivered the decisive Black vote in the 1915 election of Oscar De Priest as the first Black alderman on the Chicago City Council. What does the three-step sequence of register, turn out, elect illustrate about the granular mechanics of political power, and where has that three-step been most visible in recent American elections?
5. At the March 3, 1913 Washington suffrage parade, Wells refused a segregated position and joined the Illinois delegation at the front of the column. What does that specific refusal accomplish that a written protest would not have, and what is the evidentiary value today of the photographs taken in that moment?

Primary Sources

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