Ida B. Wells-Barnett  
(1862-1931)

1862  Born July 16 in Holly Springs, Mississippi, the first of eight children born to James Wells and Lizzie Warren. James Wells was the son of a slave woman and her master; later became a skilled carpenter. Lizzie Warren was born into slavery in Virginia, sold, and eventually arrived on a plantation in Mississippi where she met James Wells. The couple were "married" according to slave customs since marriage between slaves was not recognized in law and their vows legal after Emancipation.

1878  James Wells, Lizzie Warren, and Ida's infant brother Stanley die in a yellow fever epidemic. Ida is left to raise the five surviving children (a brother fell ill and died several years earlier from spinal meningitis). She leaves Shaw University, earns her certification as a teacher, and begins work at a school a few miles from Holly Springs for a salary of $25 a month.

1879  An aunt invites Ida to move to Memphis, Tennessee where she might enjoy better opportunities. She leaves her two surviving brothers and a sister, Eugenie, who is paralyzed, in the care of relatives. The two remaining sisters accompany Ida to Memphis where she quickly finds and accepts a teaching position in the Shelby County school system. Ida moves into the small but vital African-American community in Memphis, finding other middle-class, educated, and striving blacks.

1884  Ida B. Wells sues the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad because she is told by the conductor that she must leave and sit, instead, in a segregated car for blacks. She refuses and is involved in a scuffle with the conductor. Wells is forcibly removed from the train. She hires a black lawyer, files a lawsuit against the railroad, and is awarded $500 in 1887; the decision is upheld by the Tennessee Supreme Court. Wells enters into a career in journalism, writing articles that appear in The Living Way, a weekly newspaper.

1887  The winning decision against the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad is overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court.

1889  Wells becomes part owner of the black-run Memphis newspaper, the Free Speech and Headlight and continues to write under the pen name Iola.

1892  On March 9th, three friends of Wells -- Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and William Stewart -- were lynched outside of Memphis. The three men owned and operated a store called the People's Grocery, a business that competed successfully with a white-owned store nearby. The rivalry between the two businesses escalated into violence between whites and blacks. Police charged Moss, McDowell, and Stewart with inciting a riot and arrested them. A mob then stole the men from the jail and murdered them on the outskirts of the city. In protest, Wells writes a strongly-worded and uncompromising editorial in her newspaper, attacking the lynch mob for its barbarism and exposing the South's justification for lynching -- a mob reaction to the crime of rape -- as a "thief-bare lie." Angered by the editorial, a violent mob attacks and destroys the offices of the Free Speech and Headlight.

1893  Protesting the racism that purposefully excluded African-Americans from the Chicago World's Fair, Wells publishes The Reason Why the Colored American is Not in the World's Colombian Exposition, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn and Wells' future husband, Ferdinand Barnett, contribute to the publication.


1896  Participates in the founding of the National Association of Colored Women.

1900  Mob Rule In New Orleans is published. In it, Wells-Barnett tells the story of Robert Charles, an African-American who challenged police harassment in New Orleans in May 1900.

1909  Following a race riot in Springfield, Illinois, Wells-Barnett participates in the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Suspicious of the largely white leadership, and skeptical that the organization could effectively address the most difficult racial problems, Wells-Barnett eventually leaves in protest.

1910  In an effort to help black men moving into Chicago, Wells-Barnett founded the Negro Fellowship League. This organization provided shelter, employment, and other services for the urban migrants who came to the city in search of factory work.

1913  Wells-Barnett turned her reformist energies towards winning the vote for all African-Americans; particularly women. She forms the first suffrage club for black women in the state of Illinois: the Alpha Suffrage Club. Participates in the in National American Woman's Suffrage Association's (a white women's suffrage group) parade in Washington on March 3rd; a protest timed to coincide with the inauguration of Woodrow Wilson as the nation's 28th President. Characteristically, Wells-Barnett refused to march at the back of the parade and demanded to walk alongside the white delegates from her state. "I shall not march at all," she declared, "unless I can march under the Illinois banner." Her protests failed to force a change. Along the parade route, Wells-Barnett stepped out of the crowd and into line with the main delegation, protected by sympathetic whites and still opposed by others. Her efforts mark the integration of the movement. She returned to Washington D.C. in 1918 to show her support for the Constitutional amendment that gave women the vote.

1916  Wells-Barnett speaks before Marcus Garvey's organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), congratulating the nationalist leader for unifying African-Americans and instilling them with pride in their people.

1918  Wells-Barnett is selected by the UNIA along with labor leader and fellow editor William Monroe Trotter to attend the Versailles Peace Conference in Paris: a meeting of world leaders at the end of World War I. The U.S. government denies the two permission to attend the conference, claiming that their association with groups like Garvey's made them dangerous radicals. Wells-Barnett spends the next decade challenging racism and addressing the great issues of her day.

1931  Wells dies in Chicago on March 25.

1970  Her autobiography, Crusade for Justice is published by her daughter Alfreda Duster.