

‘Every means in his power ... I indignantly refused’

State library has copy of historic Ida Wells case

If you read about the history of the civil rights movement, you will find reference to a lawsuit Ida Wells filed that foreshadowed events a century later. But no book I have ever seen tells you any details about this case.

Thanks to Wayne Moore, assistant state archivist at the Tennessee State Library and Archives, I found the actual documents in this suit.

In 1883, the 20-year-old Wells was making her living as a teacher in Memphis when she tried to sit in the section of a passenger train that was, by custom, reserved for whites only. The conductor told her to move to the front coach. She refused, was kicked off the train and sued the railroad for \$5,000 in damages.

According to the handwritten record of the case (*Ida Wells vs. Chesapeake, Ohio and Southwest Railroad*), the incident occurred on Sept. 15, 1883. As background to the event, the judge noted that the Tennessee General Assembly had passed laws allowing railroads to segregate races so long as they charged separate amounts for first- and second-class tickets. The judge also pointed out that, typically, railroads designated front “second-class” cars for “colored” passengers and smoking whites while reserving rear “first-class” cars for white, non-smoking passengers.

Wells was traveling alone on the day of the incident, purchased a first-class ticket from Memphis to Woodstock prior to boarding the train and sat in the rear coach. When the car had gone about a mile, conductor William Murry came by and said he would not accept her ticket until she moved. “I replied that I would not ride in the forward car, that I had a seat and intended to keep it,” Wells testified. “He said to me that he would treat me like a lady, but that I must go into the other car, and I replied that if he wished to treat me like a lady, he would leave me alone.”

When the train arrived at its first stop (Frayser), the conductor returned. “He then took hold of me to carry me to the other car,” Wells claimed. “I resisted him — holding onto my seat — when he called for help, and two white passengers helped him to carry me out.



Ida B. Wells-Barnett

“My dress was torn in the struggle, my sleeve almost torn off. Everybody in the car seemed to sympathize with the conductor and were against me ... when they got me onto the platform between the cars, I got off the train, refusing to go into the forward coach.”

Murry’s testimony differed. He claimed he used no more force than necessary and that he “got the worst of it,” saying she “bit” and “scratched me badly.” Murry also testified that he had met Wells on a previous occasion and that she had said she would prove to him that she could ride in the rear car if she wanted.

There appears to have been differences of opinion on how crowded the train was and how much smoking was taking place. In fact, the amount of testimony in regards to smoking raises the possibility that Wells' objection was not so much sitting in the all-black coach but being in a coach where other passengers were smoking and acting improperly. "The plaintiff (Wells) is a person of lady-like appearance and deportment, a school teacher and one who might be expected to object to traveling in the company of rough or boisterous men, smokers or drunkards," the judge wrote.

On Christmas Eve in 1884, Circuit Court Judge Pierce ruled in favor of Wells and awarded her \$500 in damages. His handwritten ruling states that, if the railroad sold her a first-class ticket, it had to allow her to sit in the first-class section. Furthermore, Pierce said that requiring nonsmokers to inhale smoke is an act of "cruelty." He noted that, if the railroad had provided cars of "equal first-class construction," meaning that it provided the same safe, quiet and comfortable atmosphere to all passengers who paid for the privilege, then he would have ruled in the railroad's favor. Instead, the railroad failed to provide such a car for passengers like Wells (young, refined colored women); therefore, she was entitled to ride in the rear car.

The railroad won an appeal before the Tennessee Supreme Court two and a half years later. The court opinion read, "We know of no rule that requires railroad companies to yield to the disposition of passengers to arbitrarily determine as to the coach in which they take passage."

There is something about the Wells legal file that confused me. Books about her refer to a single time in which she was kicked off the train. But, according to the file, there appears to have been another incident that occurred on May 4, 1884, when Wells, riding from Woodstock to Memphis, was stopped by conductor C.E. Clark and told she could not sit in the rear coach. After an argument, the train stopped about 400 yards from the Woodstock station, and a black porter escorted her off the train.

In 1891, Wells became a co-owner of the Memphis Free Speech newspaper, where she investigated and wrote about lynchings. As a result of her articles, some white citizens of Memphis burned the newspaper office; Wells fled Memphis, moving north like thousands of other African-Americans of her era.

Over the next several years, Wells became one of America's most prolific writers and speakers about lynchings that were happening with some regularity in the South. She wrote hundreds of articles and essays and twice conducted speaking tours of England. She had many admirers, but her



Ida B. Wells-Barnett Museum in Holly Springs, Miss.

candor earned her many critics as well. She was not invited to speak at the 1899 conference of the National Association of Colored Women because white donors said they would no longer support the organization financially if it embraced Wells.

Along the way, Wells married Ferdinand Barnett, a Chicago attorney who shared her convictions. From that point forward she was known by the hyphenated name Ida B. Wells-Barnett (very unusual in an era when women almost universally took their husbands' last names). In addition to being an active writer and speaker for her entire life, she managed to also have and raise four children. In 1931, while working on her autobiography, Wells-Barnett died.

Today, Wells' story is a required part of the Tennessee history curriculum in the fifth and 11th grades. Yet there is some irony in this. After all, she lived in Tennessee a short time and probably would have had her life threatened had she returned. Also, she wasn't really acknowledged in her time the way civil rights leaders of the late 20th century were honored; she was more like a "voice in the wilderness," doing, saying and writing things that few of her peers dared do, say and write. I think the defining moment of her life was on that passenger train from Memphis to Woodstock.

Wells-Barnett birthday celebration

Ida B. Wells-Barnett's hometown of Holly Springs, Miss., southeast of Memphis, will celebrate the life and achievements of the influential civil rights pioneer this month.

The Ida B. Wells Arts and Crafts Festival and Birthday Celebration will be held July 15-17 at the Eddie L. Smith Multipurpose Center at 235 N. Memphis St., offering arts, crafts, creative dance, music, soul food and a walk through history.

And on July 16, the Hudsonville Life Center on Highway 7 North hosts the Ida B. Wells-Barnett Commemorative Banquet. Tickets are \$30 each, and proceeds support the Ida B. Wells-Barnett Museum at her childhood home.

For more information, call 662-252-3232 or email idadwells@bellsouth.net.

There's more on the Web ←

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