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Ida B. Wells

Complete Works

Series Fifteen

The Complete Works of

IDA B. WELLS

(1862-1931)

Contents

Version 1

The Complete Works of

IDA B. WELLS

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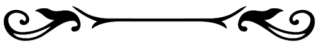
Complete Works of Ida B. Wells



First published in the United Kingdom in 2025 by Delphi Classics.

ISBN: 978 1 80170 238 6

Delphi Classics
is an imprint of
Delphi Publishing Ltd
Hastings, East Sussex
United Kingdom
Contact: sales@delphiclassics.com

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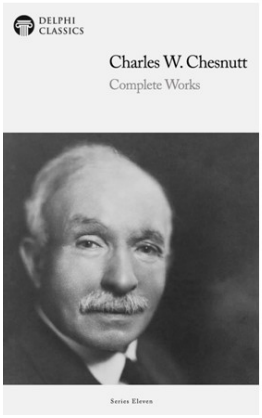

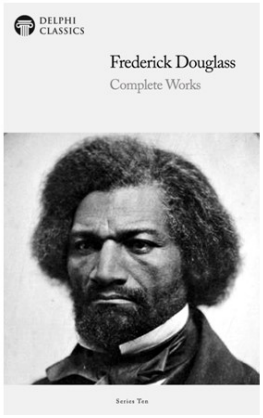

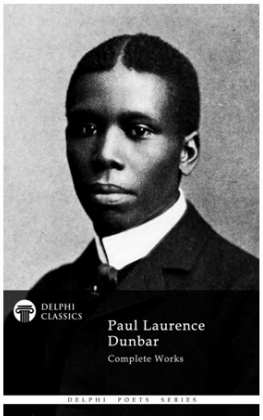

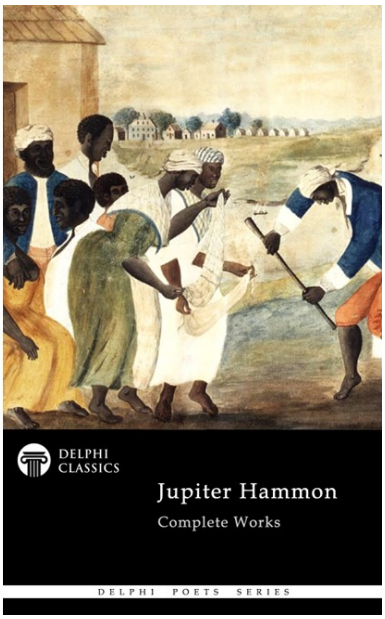

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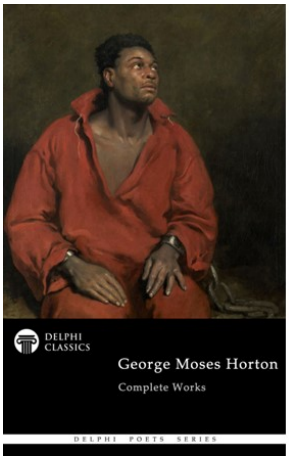

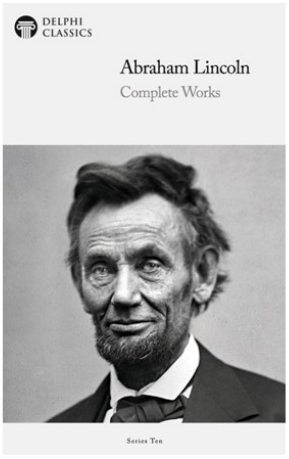

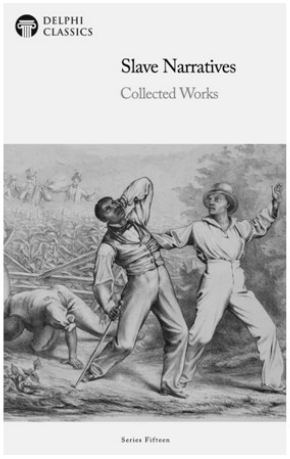

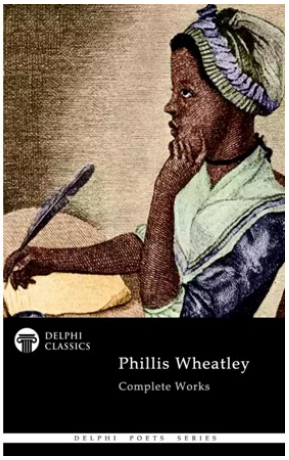

The Works

Holly Springs, Mississippi — Ida B. Wells' birthplace

The Bolling-Gatewood House. The Wells family lived in slave quarters located behind the house of Mr. Spires Boling. The house now functions as a museum dedicated to Wells.

Southern Horrors (1892)

LYNCH LAW IN ALL ITS PHASES

Ida Bell Wells was born on the Boling Farm near Holly Springs, Mississippi on 16 July 1862. She was the first child of James Madison Wells and Elizabeth "Lizzie" Warrenton. Before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, both of her parents were enslaved to the architect Spires Boling and so she had been born a slave. James Wells was a carpenter, who had built much of the Bolling-Gatewood house, which in March 2002 became the Ida B. Wells-Barnett Museum. The Wells family lived elsewhere on the property in shacks behind the house. After emancipation, James became a trustee of the newly established Shaw University (now Rust College) in Holly Springs. He refused to vote for Democratic candidates during the period of Reconstruction, became a member of the Loyal League and was known as a "race man" for his involvement in politics and his commitment to the Republican Party. He founded a successful carpentry business in Holly Springs in 1867 and his wife Lizzie became known as a "famous cook".

Wells was an intelligent youth and keen reader, so she enrolled in Shaw University. However, in September 1878 disaster was to strike when both of her parents died during a yellow fever epidemic, which also claimed one of her brothers. She had been visiting her grandmother's farm near Holly Springs at the time and was spared. Following the funerals of her parents and brother, friends and relatives decided that the five remaining Wells children should be separated and sent to foster homes, which Wells resisted. To keep her younger siblings together as a family, she found work as a teacher in a rural Black elementary school outside the town. Her paternal grandmother, Peggy Wells, along with other friends and relatives, stayed with her siblings and cared for them during the week, while Wells was teaching.

Two years later, the grandmother had a stroke and her sister Eugenia died. Therefore, Wells and her two youngest sisters moved to Memphis to live with an aunt, Fanny Butler. Soon after arriving in Tennessee, Wells was hired in Woodstock by the Shelby County school system. During her summer vacations, she attended summer sessions at Fisk University, a historically Black college in Nashville. She also attended LeMoyne-Owen College, a historically Black college in Memphis. She held strong political opinions and provoked many with her views on women's rights. At the age of 24, she wrote: "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."

On 15 September 1883 and again on 4 May 1884, a train conductor ordered Wells to give up her seat in the first-class ladies car and move to the smoking car, which was already crowded with other passengers. When Wells refused to give up her seat on the first occasion, the conductor and two men dragged her out of the car. Wells gained publicity in Memphis when she wrote a newspaper article for *The Living Way*, a Black church weekly, about her treatment on the train. In Memphis, she hired an African-American attorney to sue the railroad. When her lawyer was paid off by the railroad, she hired a white attorney. Wells won her case on 24 December 1884, when the local circuit court granted her an award of $500 — equivalent of $18,000 by today's standards. The railroad company appealed to the Tennessee Supreme Court, which reversed the lower court's ruling in 1887. It concluded: "We think it is evident

that the purpose of the defendant in error was to harass with a view to this suit, and that her persistence was not in good faith to obtain a comfortable seat for the short ride." Wells was ordered to pay court costs. Her reaction to the higher court's decision revealed her strong convictions on civil rights and religious faith, as she responded: "I felt so disappointed because I had hoped such great things from my suit for my people.... O God, is there no... justice in this land for us?"

While continuing to teach elementary school, she became increasingly active as a journalist and writer. She accepted an editorial position for a small Memphis journal, *The Evening Star* and she began submitting articles for *The Living Way* newspaper under the pen name "Iola", attacking Jim Crow policies. In 1889, she became editor and co-owner with J. L. Fleming of *The Free Speech and Headlight*, a black-owned newspaper established by the Reverend Taylor Nightingale (1844–1922) and based at the Beale Street Baptist Church in Memphis. In 1891, Wells was dismissed from her teaching post by the Memphis Board of Education due to her articles criticising conditions in the Black schools of the region. Devastated by this event, still she remained undaunted in her work and concentrated on writing articles for *The Living Way* and *The Free Speech and Headlight*.

Her articles in *The Free Speech* were winning widespread attention, particularly with respect to lynchings and imprisonment of black men suspected of raping white women. On 26 October 1892, she published her research on lynching in a pamphlet titled *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*. Having examined many accounts of lynchings due to the alleged "rape of white women", she concluded that Southerners accused black men of rape to hide their real reasons for lynchings: Black economic progress, which white Southerners saw as a threat to their own economic progress, and white ideas of enforcing black second-class status in the society. Black economic progress was a contemporary issue in the South and in many states whites worked to suppress black progress. At the turn of the century, the Southern states, starting with Mississippi in 1890, passed laws and new constitutions to disenfranchise African-Americans and many poor white people through the use of poll taxes, literacy tests and other devices. In the following pamphlet, Wells sought to expose the injustices of these acts.

She adopts the phrase "poor, blind Afro-American Sampsons" to denote black men as victims of "white Delilahs". The Biblical "Samson", in the vernacular of the day, came from Longfellow's 1865 poem, *The Warning*, which contains the line: "There is a poor, blind Samson in the land... " To explain the metaphor "Sampson", John Elliott Cairnes, an Irish political economist, in his 1865 article about Black suffrage, wrote that Longfellow was prophesising; to wit: in "the long-impending struggle for Americans following the Civil War, Longfellow could see in the Negro only an instrument of vengeance, and a cause of ruin".

Fisk University, a private historically black liberal arts college in Nashville, Tennessee, which was founded in 1866

SOUTHERN HORRORS.

LYNCH LAW

IN ALL

ITS PHASES

Miss IDA B. WELLS,

Price, - - - Fifteen Cents.

THE NEW YORK AGE PRINT,
1892.

The first edition

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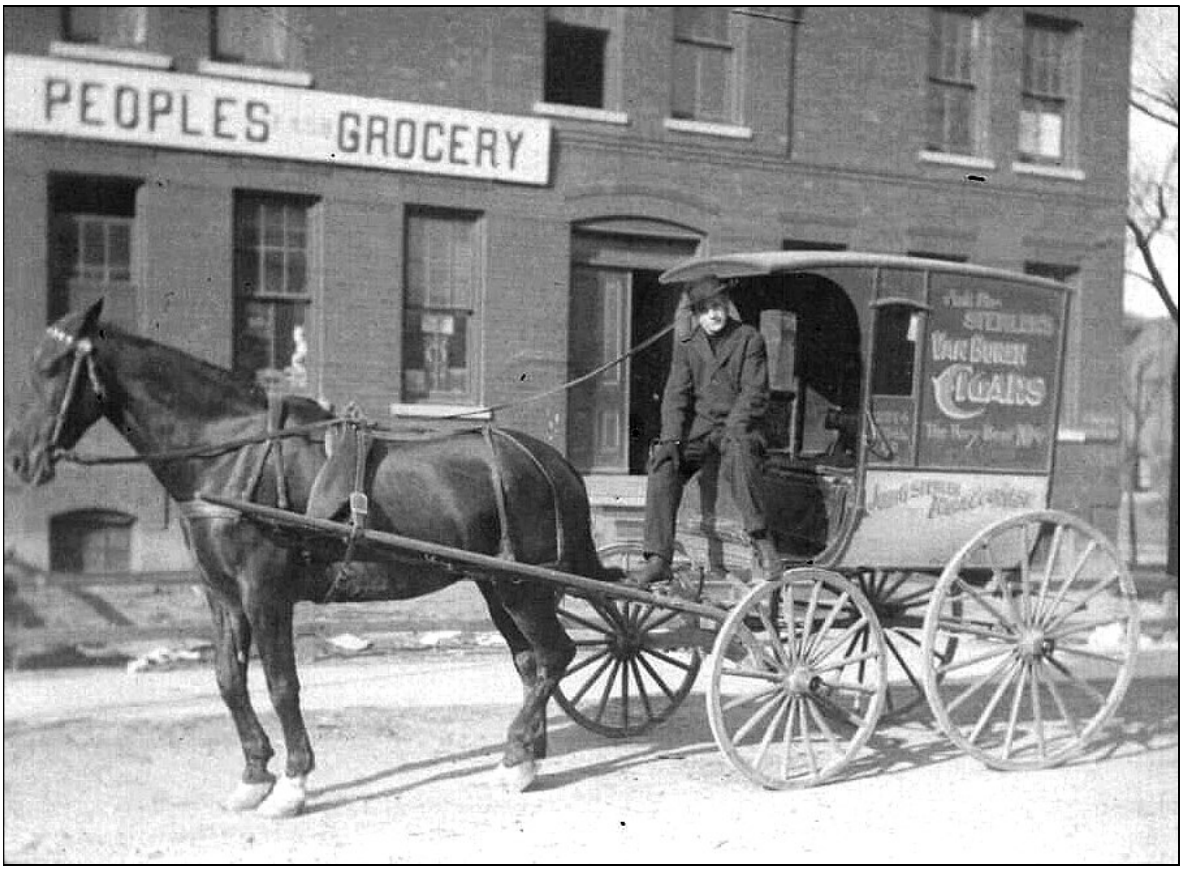
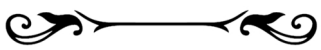
Wells, close to the time of publication



The People's Grocery near Memphis, Tennessee, was a successful African-American cooperative. The 1892 lynchings of its owners inspired Wells to begin her investigations into lynching.

PREFACE



THE GREATER PART of what is contained in these pages was published in the *New York Age* June 25, 1892, in explanation of the editorial which the Memphis whites considered sufficiently infamous to justify the destruction of my paper, the *Free Speech*.

Since the appearance of that statement, requests have come from all parts of the country that "Exiled" (the name under which it then appeared) be issued in pamphlet form. Some donations were made, but not enough for that purpose. The noble effort of the ladies of New York and Brooklyn Oct. 5 have enabled me to comply with this request and give the world a true, unvarnished account of the causes of lynch law in the South.

This statement is not a shield for the despoiler of virtue, nor altogether a defense for the poor blind Afro-American Sampsons who suffer themselves to be betrayed by white Delilahs. It is a contribution to truth, an array of facts, the perusal of which it is hoped will stimulate this great American Republic to demand that justice be done though the heavens fall.

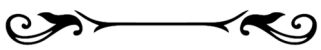
It is with no pleasure I have dipped my hands in the corruption here exposed. Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning, and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so. The awful death-roll that Judge Lynch is calling every week is appalling, not only because of the lives it takes, the rank cruelty and outrage to the victims, but because of the prejudice it fosters and the stain it places against the good name of a weak race.

The Afro-American is not a bestial race. If this work can contribute in any way toward proving 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. Other considerations are of minor importance.

IDA B. WELLS
New York City, Oct. 26, 1892

To the Afro-American women of New York and Brooklyn, whose race love, earnest zeal and unselfish effort at Lyric Hall, in the City of New York, on the night of October 5, 1892 — made possible its publication, this pamphlet is gratefully dedicated by the author.

HON. FRED. DOUGLASS'S LETTER



DEAR MISS WELLS:

Let me give you thanks for your faithful paper on the lynch abomination now generally practiced against colored people in the South. There has been no word equal to it in convincing power. I have spoken, but my word is feeble in comparison. You give us what you know and testify from actual knowledge. You have dealt with the facts with cool, painstaking fidelity and left those naked and uncontradicted facts to speak for themselves.

Brave woman! you have done your people and mine a service which can neither be weighed nor measured. If American conscience were only half alive, if the American church and clergy were only half christianized, if American moral sensibility were not hardened by persistent infliction of outrage and crime against colored people, a scream of horror, shame and indignation would rise to Heaven wherever your pamphlet shall be read.

But alas! even crime has power to reproduce itself and create conditions favorable to its own existence. It sometimes seems we are deserted by earth and Heaven yet we must still think, speak and work, and trust in the power of a merciful God for final deliverance.

Very truly and gratefully yours,
FREDERICK DOUGLASS
Cedar Hill, Anacostia, D.C. Oct. 25, 1892

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