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The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American's Contribution to Columbian Literature

[IDA B. WELLS, FREDERICK DOUGLASS, I.
GARLAND PENN, AND F. L. BARNETT] *
CHICAGO: MISS IDA B. WELLS, 1893

Toni Preckwinkle

Ida B. Wells (1862–1931) was born a slave in Holly Springs, Mississippi. She was educated at the Freedman's School and Rust College in her hometown and later at Fisk University, Nashville. Throughout her career, she combined investigative journalism with fearless personal activism. After the murder of several close friends, Wells began a crusade against lynching. In response to threats on her life, she moved to Chicago in the early 1890s.

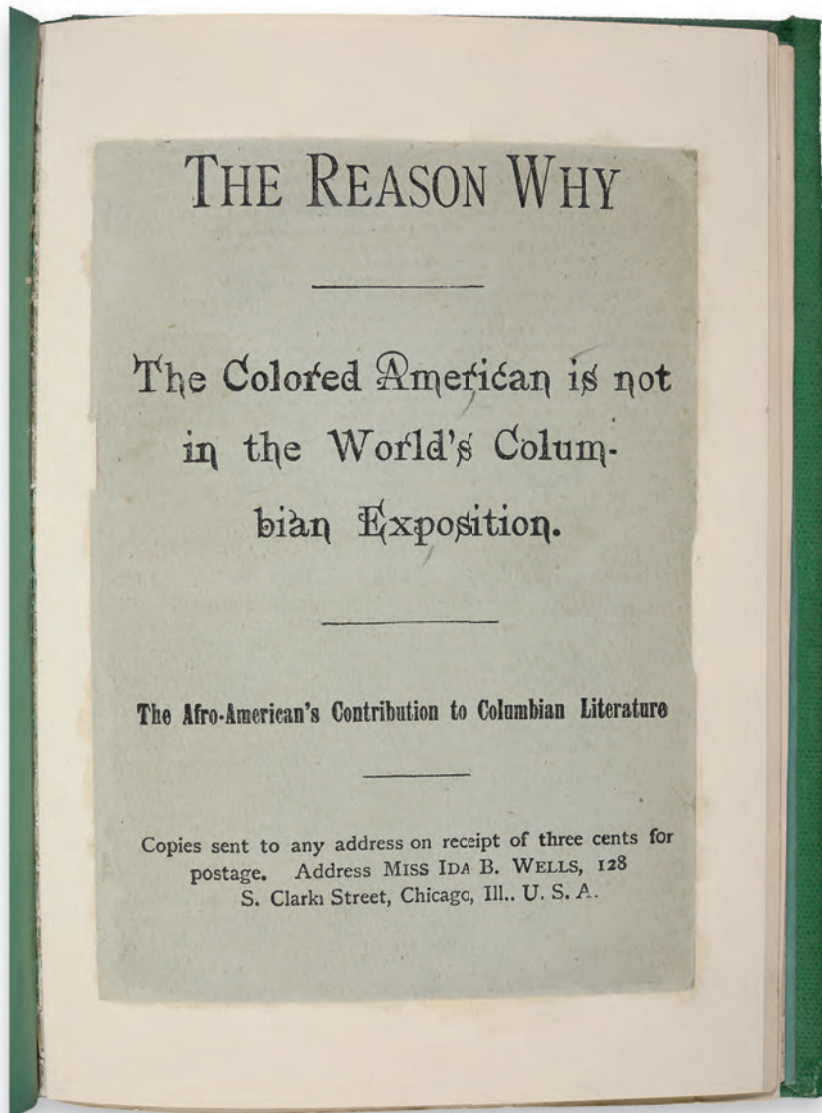
Wells became part of Chicago's story when she edited *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*. She assembled essays, data, and photographs to document the African American protest against the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. This salvo in the war against American racism was fired against the bulwarks of entrenched indifference, and it has never stopped affecting how we think and what we do.¹

When I reread the contributions to *The Reason Why* by Wells, Frederick Douglass, I. Garland Penn, and Frederick Lee Barnett, I see the struggles of my own life in politics and public service laid open on the page. The occasion for this book was the huge public project that was the fair and that shaped the neighborhoods I represented in the Chicago City Council for two decades. The Columbian Exposition is often remembered today for its modernity, with its dazzling display of the power of electric lights and the wonders of science. But the fair took place a mere twenty-eight years after the end of slavery in the United States, and we continue to fail to recognize the consequences of slavery within our modern world.

The Reason Why is best remembered as a collection of hard-hitting essays, but it does not rely on the power of eloquence alone. The section on lynching includes graphic photographs of victims. Today video images of young black men murdered by the police serve the same function, telling the objective, terrible truth.

Wells insightfully observed that for many whites the emancipation of slaves constituted “an act of unjust punishment to them.”² She focused on lynching, the prison system, and legalized injustice. My agenda as president of the Board of Commissioners of Cook County is often set by similar issues. Like most of the people Wells wrote about, a number of those I represent cannot vote because so many black men go to prison. The legal system created to right that wrong persists today in the unequal impact on African Americans of criminal law and restrictions on voting.

Unlike many other notable women crusaders, Wells also undertook the challenge of marriage and childrearing.³ Her support for women's rights set her at odds with other African American leaders, just as her work on behalf of the black community isolated her from other leaders of the women's movement.



Drawing parallels between race issues of the late nineteenth century and today, this entry considers the protest piece compiled by African American activist and journalist Ida B. Wells (seen here in a photograph of around 1892) regarding the absence of African Americans in the exhibits of the World's Columbian Exposition and their subservient role as workers in and around the fair.

Wells urged thorough investigation of what feels wrong. She advised looking for every source of data and making clear what supports one's conclusions, along with working for change openly, using the possibilities democracy bestows. There is a straight path from learning to elections, from books to voting and, if necessary, to the courthouse. The demand for the end of racial inequities raised powerfully by Wells and her coauthors continues today. When a book speaks as clearly as this one does, the authors' voices will be heard until the questions asked receive more satisfactory answers.