

Taking Responsibility: Ida B. Wells and the Anti-Lynching Campaign

- **Compelling Question**
 - How might you be responsible in order to protect freedom?
- **Virtue:** Responsibility
- **Definition** – Responsibility is accountability to myself and others.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about the anti-lynching campaign of Ida B. Wells and how she took her responsibility of teaching others about lynching seriously. They will also determine ways they can be responsible.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze Ida B. Wells' actions to stop lynchings.
 - Students will evaluate Wells taking responsibility to teach and inform others about lynching.
 - Students will apply their knowledge to determine ways to be responsible in their own lives.
- **Background**
 - After slavery ended with the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, African Americans were free, but that did not mean that they were treated equally or fairly. During Reconstruction following the Civil War, southern states began to pass Jim Crow laws. These laws allowed segregation of the races in public buildings, transportation, and services. Blacks and whites could not use the same drinking fountains, bathrooms, seats on buses or trains. African Americans were forced to pay poll taxes or take literacy tests in order to vote.

The consequences for breaking Jim Crow laws could be severe, and accusations of African Americans could be arbitrary. Rather than being “innocent until proven guilty” or having cases decided by a court of law, whites sometimes took matters in their own hands. Many African Americans were lynched by mobs before they were charged with a crime or a trial took place, and some were lynched simply to remind them they had no power. Between the end of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, nearly 3,500 African Americans were lynched.

- **Vocabulary**
 - Thirteenth Amendment
 - Reconstruction
 - Jim Crow laws
 - Segregation
 - Poll taxes
 - Literacy tests
 - Arbitrary
 - Lynched
 - Ratification
 - Freedman’s Aid Society
 - Forcibly
 - Verdict
 - Deplorable
 - Vandalized
 - Pamphlets
 - National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
 - What was Ida B. Wells' identity in relation to civil rights?
 - What was Ida B. Wells' purpose?
 - Why did Ida B. Wells take actions against discrimination and lynching?
- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - Bay, Mia. *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010.
 - Biography: Ida B. Wells <http://www.biography.com/people/ida-b-wells-9527635#later-career>
 - Giddings, Paula J. *Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching*. New York: Harper Paperbacks, 2009.
 - PBS: The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow: Ida B. Wells.
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_people_wells.html
 - Wells, Ida B. *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader*. Penguin Classics, 2014.

Handout A: Taking Responsibility: Ida B. Wells and the Anti-Lynching Campaign

Background

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The consequences for breaking Jim Crow laws could be severe, and accusations of African Americans could be arbitrary. Rather than being “innocent until proven guilty” or having cases decided by a court of law, whites sometimes took matters in their own hands. Many African Americans were lynched by mobs before they were charged with a crime or a trial took place, and some were lynched simply to remind them they had no power. Between the end of the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, nearly 3,500 African Americans were lynched.

Narrative

Ida B. Wells was born a slave in the height of the Civil War in 1862. After the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment officially ended slavery in the United States, Ida’s family became active in the Republican Party and the Freedman’s Aid Society. Tragedy struck the Wells family in 1878 when Ida’s parents and one of her brothers died from yellow fever. Ida dropped out of school and took a teaching job in Memphis, Tennessee to help keep her siblings together.

In May 1884, Ida boarded a train to Nashville with a first class ticket, but she was told that she had to sit in the car reserved for African Americans. Ida refused and was forcibly removed from the train. She took her case to court and won \$500 before the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the verdict.

After this harrowing ordeal, Ida began to write about discrimination and racism faced by African Americans every day. She also began to speak out against the deplorable conditions of the segregated school where she taught and was fired from her job.

In 1892, a friend of Ida’s and two partners opened a grocery store in Memphis that began to be more successful than the white owner’s store nearby. The two groups of store owners quarreled regularly, but one evening, the African American store was vandalized. The owners of the store shot the white vandals and were arrested. Before they could come to trial, a lynch mob forcefully removed the men from their cells and killed them.

Ida was infuriated by these senseless murders, and she believed it was her responsibility to make sure that more people knew about lynching. She began writing and lecturing against lynching across the country. She wrote pamphlets entitled *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* and *A Red Record* in which she examined lynching in depth. She traveled to Great Britain to drum up support for her campaign. In 1898, she went to Washington, D.C. to implore President William McKinley to make reforms against lynching and discrimination.

Later in her life, Ida continued to fight against unfair treatment of African Americans as well as for women’s rights. She was a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Afro-American Council. She also founded the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs.

Ida felt a great responsibility to make sure that the general public—white and black—knew more about lynching in order to end the barbaric practice. She was not afraid to stand up for what she believed despite her gender or race.