

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 590

By Staples

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory and many
accomplishments of Ida Bell Wells-Barnett.

WHEREAS, it is fitting that the members of this General Assembly should honor the memory of those renowned civil rights leaders who dedicated themselves to improving the quality of life for their fellow citizens; and

WHEREAS, Ida Bell Wells-Barnett was one such venerable person, who distinguished herself as a public-spirited citizen of the highest order and as an exceptional asset to the Civil Rights Movement and the State of Tennessee; and

WHEREAS, the daughter of former slaves, Ms. Wells was an early leader in the Civil Rights Movement, documenting lynching in the United States in the 1890s. She was an African-American journalist, newspaper editor, author, orator, and one of the founders of the NAACP; in addition, she was active in women's rights and the women's suffrage movement, establishing numerous women's organizations; and

WHEREAS, one of eight children, Ida B. Wells was born on July 16, 1862, in Holly Springs, Mississippi, to James Wells and Elizabeth Warrenton Wells. James Wells was involved with the Freedman's Aid Society and helped start Shaw University, now Rust College, which was originally a school for newly freed slaves; and

WHEREAS, Ida B. Wells attended Shaw University for a short time. After the death of her parents and a sibling in the 1878 yellow fever epidemic, she began her teaching career in an African-American elementary school to keep the rest of her family intact with the help of her grandmother; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Wells resented the segregated school system in Mississippi because white teachers were paid \$80 each month, and she was paid only \$30 each month. She took

three of her siblings and moved to Memphis, where Ms. Wells found there was better pay for teachers; and

WHEREAS, however, the disparity in pay was still evident, and Ida B. Wells became a vocal critic of the conditions of African-American schools in Memphis; the discrimination she faced sparked her interest in the politics of race and improving the education of African Americans; and

WHEREAS, Ms. Wells was hired in Woodstock to work for the Shelby County school system, and during summers, she attended Fisk University in Nashville and Lemoyne-Owen College in Memphis; and

WHEREAS, on May 4, 1884, Ida B. Wells reached a personal turning point during a fateful train ride from Memphis to Nashville. Having purchased a first-class train ticket, she was outraged when the train crew ordered her to move to the car for African Americans, and she refused on principle; and

WHEREAS, forcibly removed from the train, she later sued the railroad company. She won her case on December 24, 1884, and the local circuit court granted her a \$500 award; the decision was later reversed by the Tennessee Supreme Court, and she was ordered to pay court costs, wondering, "O God, is there no...justice in this land for us?"; and

WHEREAS, while teaching at an elementary school, Ms. Wells was offered an editorial position for the *Evening Star* in Washington, D.C.; she also wrote weekly articles for *The Living Way* under the pen name "Iola," and she gained a reputation for writing about racial issues. In 1889, she became co-owner and editor of *Free Speech and Headlight*, an anti-segregation newspaper that was founded by the Reverend Taylor Nightingale and based at the Beale Street Baptist Church in Memphis; and

WHEREAS, in 1889, Thomas Moss, a friend of Ms. Wells, opened the People's Grocery Company in the "Curve," an African-American neighborhood outside of Memphis. Three years later, a white mob invaded his store, and three white men were shot and injured; Mr. Moss and two other African-American men were arrested and jailed pending trial, but a large white mob stormed the jail, lynching the three men; and

WHEREAS, the murder of her friends motivated Ida B. Wells to research and document lynchings and their causes. She began investigative journalism by looking at the charges for the murders, discovering that lynching was often used in the South as a way to control or punish African Americans and was not based on criminal acts committed by African Americans; her findings sparked her anti-lynching campaign; and

WHEREAS, in 1891, Ms. Wells was dismissed from her teaching post by the Memphis Board of Education due to her criticism of the condition of African-American schools in the region. Undaunted, she concentrated her energy on writing articles for *The Living Way* and *Free Speech and Headlight*; and

WHEREAS, the consequences of raising awareness were great, and Ms. Wells received many threats to her life; as a result, she left Memphis and moved to Chicago, Illinois, where she continued to wage her anti-lynching campaign and write columns attacking Southern injustices; and

WHEREAS, in 1893, Ida B. Wells met Ferdinand L. Barnett, an assistant state attorney and the editor of the *Chicago Conservator*, who agreed to represent her *pro bono* in a libel suit; two years later, they were married, and their blessed union produced four children, Charles, Herman, Ida, and Alfreda; and

WHEREAS, a skilled and persuasive rhetorician, Ms. Wells traveled internationally on lecture tours to rally a moral crusade against racial injustice in the United States. While traveling in Great Britain, she wrote about her experiences for a Republican newspaper in Chicago, the *Daily Inter-Ocean*, and became the first African-American woman to be a paid correspondent for a mainstream white newspaper; and

WHEREAS, in 1894, Ms. Wells helped form a Republican Women's Club in Illinois in response to women being granted the right to vote for a state elective office and the right to hold elective office as Trustee of the University of Illinois; and

WHEREAS, committed to fighting social injustice, she founded the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs and the National Afro-American Council in 1896; in addition, she was a founding member of the NAACP, which was established on February 12, 1909; and

WHEREAS, Ida B. Wells became a tireless worker for women's suffrage, and she marched in the famous 1913 march for universal suffrage in Washington, D.C.; and

WHEREAS, in addition, she was determined to pursue equal opportunities for all and, with the help of Jane Addams, successfully blocked the establishment of segregated schools in Chicago. Ms. Wells continued to work on urban reform in Chicago during the last thirty years of her life; and

WHEREAS, not only instrumental in the fight for justice, Ida B. Wells was also a devoted wife and loving mother. While living in Chicago, she raised her children and began to write her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, which she was unable to complete before her death in 1931; and

WHEREAS, in recognition of her contributions to social and economic justice, Ida B. Wells received numerous honors posthumously. The Ida B. Wells-Barnett House is a Chicago landmark and a National Historic Landmark; many organizations have named awards after Ms. Wells to honor her legacy, including the National Association of Black Journalists, the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, the Coordinating Council for Women in History, the Investigative Fund, the University of Louisville, and the New York County Lawyers Association, among many others; and

WHEREAS, on February 1, 1990, the United States Postal Service issued a twenty-five-cent postage stamp in her honor, and in 2002, Ida B. Wells was listed as one of the 100 Greatest African Americans. She has also been the subject of many books, movies, and plays; and

WHEREAS, it is most appropriate that the members of this General Assembly should honor the memory of Ida B. Wells, a catalyst for positive change and a trailblazer who continued to bring awareness to social and economic injustice. She was a true American hero; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED TENTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE CONCURRING, that we honor the memory of Ida Bell Wells-Barnett and express our deepest

gratitude for her selfless dedication and her innumerable contributions to civil rights and economic and social justice.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.