

The Ida B. Wells-Barnett marker and the Holocaust

By Jerry Klinger



I have dedicated scores of historical markers and memorials across America as President of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation (JASHP). Almost all the projects have a Jewish theme or background story.

Next month in Marietta, Georgia, JASHP initiated, funded and will dedicate the first ever antilynching memorial to all ~570 Georgians who were lynched. The memorial is located adjacent to the infamous Leo Frank lynching site. Until I began researching the background of American societal terrorism and lynching, I had never heard of Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

Ida wrote “The way to right wrongs is to shine the light of truth on them.” I wanted to find a way to honor her. Her story needed to be told even if my reasons for telling it had nothing to do with anything Jewish.

After the Wells-Barnett dedication was over, a totally unexpected, unplanned chilling understanding of horror and the Holocaust happened. For me, it was an absolute walking across your grave shudder.

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The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation came out of the mysterious ether to Holly Springs and the Ida B. Wells-Barnett Museum. We are a Jewish organization with seemingly no relationship to Wells or Holly Springs.

JASHP was willing to fund a historical, interpretive marker for one of the greatest Civil and Human rights crusaders in American history. Ida B. Wells-Barnett was born a slave in Holly Springs. Her memory is overshadowed by others today. Her life is rarely mentioned in public schools. But it was Ida B. Wells-Barnett whose life affected millions of lives today.

After a year and a half working towards our common goal, the Ida B. Wells-Barnett marker was dedicated July 13. It is located on the N.E. corner of Holly Springs' Courthouse Square.

The text of the marker reads:

Ida B. Wells-Barnett

(1862-1931)

— Famed African American journalist, educator, suffragette, and human rights activist. —

Born the eldest child to Elizabeth and James Wells, she grew up in Holly Springs, and attended Shaw University, now Rust College. She was a reformer who insisted on economic and political resistance to oppression. She became head of a household at age 16 and taught at rural schools. After leaving Holly Springs and moving to Memphis, Wells went on to challenge racial discrimination on railroad ladies' cars, at the age of 20. She then went on to become part owner of The Memphis Free Speech and Headlight newspaper and, through her journalism, spearheaded the anti-lynching movement, after several friends were unjustly murdered by a white mob in Memphis, Tennessee. Wells later co-founded the NAACP and was active in the National Association of Colored Women. Wells was honored with a U.S. postage stamp, inducted into the Mississippi Hall of Fame, and a local post office named in her honor.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett Museum and Cultural Center of African American History, Holly Springs
Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation

Later that evening, the annual Museum sponsored birthday celebration dinner for Ms. Wells was attended by 300 at Holly Springs' historically Black Rusk College.



As part of the marker dedication, a tour of Burton House in Holly Springs was organized. Burton House is a magnificent antebellum mansion built in 1848. The house was built by Mary Malvina Shields Burton who has the distinction of being the first woman granted a divorce and keeping her property in Mississippi. She built her brick mansion with two-foot-thick walls. She intended her forever home have durability as well as the still standing adjacent house slave quarters. The tour and lecture were centered on understanding urban slave life.

Mary Burton arrived in Holly Springs with her young children just 12 years after the Choctaw Indian session (1836) opened the lands of Mississippi to settlement. In 1850 she had 8 slaves. A large slaveholder had twenty slaves. By 1860, Burton owned extensive lands and 87 slaves. She understood, agriculture, she understood business, and she understood the economics of slavery. She had money, place in society and associated with the politically powerful.

The present owner of the house, David Person, has endeavored to restore and furnish the Burton House, at times eclectically, in period settings. He lives in the house when he is in town. One room on the tour was Mary's bedroom just to the right of the front first-floor staircase and across from the parlor.

There was a back staircase that was for the slaves doing their daily work to maintain the house and provide for the needs of the Mary and her guests. Mary's children were also restricted, the work is better said as forbidden, to use the front staircase. Slaves and her own children were not to be seen or seen as little as possible. Everyone had their place.

The room had appropriate bedroom furnishings and an enormous canopied four-poster bed. On the far wall is a large fireplace with a large painted picture of Sam Houston, one of the founding fathers of the State of Texas.

Houston was from Rockbridge County, Virginia. Mary was from Rockbridge County, Virginia too. Houston was 13 years her elder. No doubt, the two families knew each other. We were told the bedroom was known as the Houston bedroom.

Mary never remarried after her divorce. Houston was married a few times, legally and extra-legally. When he passed through Holly Springs, Houston, though a married man, visited Mary. She *entertained* him in the "Houston Bedroom".

Outside, adjacent to the house was a four room long building, the slave quarters. Mary's house slaves lived in the rooms. For societal reasons, Mary's house slave quarters were very modest and compared to the wooden shacks of her field slaves, were quite decent. Mary did not want Holly Springs society to think her poor by having bad housing for her house slaves.

The house slaves, as were the field slaves had no last names, only a first name. They were commodities, economic property to be worked for profit. The house slaves worked hard and diligently out of fear they would be sent to the seriously brutalized life as a field slave.

We toured the slave quarters. I stood listening to the lecture from the visiting Black Professor from Mississippi University with the Black descendants of plantation slaves who were also touring the house. The life of the slave was shuddering.

A Black fellow visitor told me his great-great-grandfather had been a slave on a plantation just sixteen miles away. He had heard family stories about the plantations.

The Professor told us about Mary Burton's economics of slavery, breeding. Mary Burton owned a slave they called Bull. He was a stud slave. His job on Mary's plantations was to impregnate all the young girls. Mary sold Bull's services to surrounding plantations. "Bull" Burton sired hundreds of children in Marshall County, Mississippi. Mary had increased her wealth, her slave holdings by breeding more and more slaves. She treated her slaves as cattle to be impregnated, to produce a product to be sold or to be kept for more labor. Pregnant slaves were valuable and were looked after.

I told him my father had been a slave. He was a Jew who escaped from Austria to France. French captured the unwanted Jew. They *sold* him to a French construction company in Southern France.

My father was worked until his body had just about given out. The French company gave my father to the Germans who gladly sent him to Auschwitz for extermination. He survived.

Jews were life unworthy of life. If a Jewish girl should be pregnant, she was exterminated, quite unlike the American slave experience. Jews were never to reproduce. My Uncle had been the chief physician in the Piotrkow Ghetto. His job was to abort every Jewish female before the Germans learned she was pregnant.

Under the American abomination of slavery, Blacks were animals. They were bred, to reproduce for future economic value. They were not human.

My blood ran cold. I shivered in the afternoon's heat with the realization that Jews, during the Holocaust, and in some contemporary hate filled views today, were lower than animals fit for breeding. Jews were fit for only one thing, complete extermination.

I kept my thoughts to myself as I left Burton House. I had no intention of comparing the Black and Jewish experiences.

The marker for Ida B. Wells-Barnett had been dedicated with honor and respect just a few hours earlier. I left Holly Springs for Memphis and an airplane with an understanding of the Holocaust I never appreciated as fully before.

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