

Women Activists

The 1890 Convention considered giving women the right to vote, but decided against it. However, this denial of political rights did not stop Mississippi women from being active citizens. Two such women were Eliza Jane Poitevent and Ida Wells, famous journalists.

When she was 27 years old, Eliza Jane Poitevent became the first woman owner-publisher of a major daily newspaper in the United States. Born in 1849 in Hancock County, she later expressed her love of nature in poetry written under the name of Pearl Rivers.

Her work captured the attention of A. M. Holbrook, owner of the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, who offered her the job of literary editor at \$25 a week. She married Holbrook in 1872 and inherited the paper when he died four years later. The paper was deep in debt, but Mrs. Holbrook saved it. Later she employed another woman, Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer, who started the Dorothy Dix advice column, similar to the columns that have become so popular today.

Ida B. Wells was born in Holly Springs in the summer of 1864. Both her parents had been slaves. When she was fourteen, her parents died in the yellow fever epidemic of 1878, and she took charge of her four younger brothers and sisters. She put herself through some years at Rust College and also attended Fisk.

After college, she taught in county schools in Mississippi and Tennessee. But she spoke out against injustices to her people, and she was relieved of her teaching position. She became editor and part-owner of the Memphis *Free Speech*, and wrote a pamphlet called *The Red Record* condemning lynching. When she was run out of Memphis, she spoke in Northern cities and in Europe. In 1898 she told President McKinley, "We refuse to believe this country, so powerful to defend its citizens abroad, is unable to protect its citizens at home."

Wells married a Chicago lawyer, and in 1908 she organized the Negro Fellowship League. She spent the rest of her life working for civil rights for women and blacks until her death in 1931.



Ida B. Wells (right).

Eliza Jane Poitevent (left).