



Truth
Telling
Frances Willard
& Ida B. Wells



Truth-Telling: Frances Willard and Ida B. Wells

Project Statement - November 12, 2018

Historical Background

In 1894 and 1895, Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) President Frances Willard (1839-1898) and journalist and anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) fought a war of words in the international press. Wells' anti-lynching campaign was well underway, but she was frustrated by the reluctance of influential white reformers like Willard to support her work. While on a speaking tour of England in 1894, Wells called Willard's moral leadership into question by re-publishing a newspaper interview from 1890 in which Willard had made racially charged statements.

In the interview, Willard had invoked what Wells described as "the old threadbare lie that negro men rape white women" and had used statements such as "The colored race multiplies like the locusts of Egypt," and "The grog [liquor] shop is its centre of power." Wells charged that Willard's position as an internationally known Christian reformer, and the leader of an organization with many African-American women members, entailed a special duty to speak out against the violence of lynching, rather than perpetuate the stereotype that drunken black men threatened "the safety of woman, of childhood, of the home."¹

Black women were strong supporters of temperance and many were WCTU members. However, white leaders of temperance and suffrage organizations, including Willard, often used stereotypes of black drunkenness and violence in order to build support for their causes among white women in the South. When Wells confronted Willard with the evidence of such moral compromises, Willard and her defenders insisted that she was not a racist, citing Willard's family's involvement in the abolition movement.

Wells' supporters continued to criticize Willard and the WCTU, and the conflict generated extensive coverage in the international press. In the face of mounting pressure, Willard took measures to address the issue and the WCTU passed anti-lynching resolutions in 1893, 1894 and in subsequent years through 1899.

Willard died in 1898 with the cloud of this conflict marring her legacy. Wells continued to work against racism and injustice until her death in 1931, not hesitating to criticize white women reformers when she felt they ignored or perpetuated racial discrimination.

Project Goals

The Frances Willard House Museum (FWHM) is located at Willard's family home in Evanston, Illinois. The house has been a museum since 1900 and was managed by the WCTU for most of those years. The WCTU also established the Willard Memorial Library at the site, which holds Willard's personal papers and the WCTU's organizational records. Both the museum and archives are now managed by a separate nonprofit organization, the Center for Women's History and Leadership, whose goals are to tell the full story of the woman's temperance movement and to expand the conversation to include women's wider work for social reform from the 19th century to today.

As part of this work, the CWHL Trustees, FWHM Council and staff, and the WCTU archives staff have made a commitment to uncover the full truth about the conflict between Willard and Wells,

¹ "The Race Problem: Miss Willard on the Political Puzzle of the South," *The Voice* (New York, NY), Oct. 23, 1890; Ida B. Wells, "Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases," 1892, in *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, ed. Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 17; Ida B. Wells, "A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894," in *Selected Works of Ida B. Wells-Barnett*, ed. Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 233.

and to present all sides of Willard's life and work - the good and the bad. We aim to honestly examine Willard's failure of leadership on this issue and invite the community (in Evanston and wider) to explore the story for themselves. More broadly, this project hopes to address the conflict between these two significant American women as just one part of the complex and ongoing story of racism in America and American women's movements.

Project Components

Digital resource. The centerpiece of the project will be a digital collection and online exhibit, titled *Truth-Telling: Frances Willard and Ida B. Wells, a Documentary Website*, that will include many of the primary sources that tell the story of the conflict, a timeline and contextual information, and interpretive essays from various sources.

Primary sources include newspaper articles, correspondence, speeches and other material (many of them held at the Willard Archives and previously unknown). Users will be able to follow links from the sources to short essays on topics that give context: temperance, suffrage, reconstruction, short biographies of Willard and Wells, lynching, and others. Users will also find interpretive essays written by scholars, museum staff, and community members offering their own reflections on the material. A bibliography will also be provided. The goal is to provide information that will help readers understand the conflict but also be open-ended enough to encourage them to draw their own conclusions.

The launch of the digital resource will take place on March 14, 2019, with a public program that will include panelists and community feedback opportunity.

Community conversations. A second part of the project is to hold small and large community conversations about the conflict, to tell the story, to discuss the issues it raises, and to listen and learn. To some extent, the entire project has arisen from community feedback, as the story of the conflict has become much more public in the last few years. We have had many informal conversations and are just now beginning more formal meetings with our community.

We strongly feel that while we are sharing what we know of the conflict from our research and resources, it is equally important that we let the community tell the story back to us from different perspectives. With the digital resource completed, we hope to hear how the story connects to our world today and learn its impact in a new way.

Public programs. Over the past few years, we have had several public programs that have addressed this issue indirectly. This past summer our visiting artist, Vanessa Filley, took on the issue of race more directly by creating photographs with diverse women inhabiting rooms of the house.

In addition to the launch of the website, Carole Stewart, the author of a new book on African-American women in the temperance movement, will give a talk in February 2019. We also plan to connect to the celebration of 150 years of co-education at Northwestern University that will take place in Fall of 2019. To some extent, the work of this project is meant to continue long after the public phase is completed, as we have ongoing conversations and discussions that our work might provoke.

Summary

We also hope that by allowing this conflict to be re-examined through the voices of Willard and Wells, we can begin to find the common ground they struggled to find long ago.

Frances Willard House Museum and Willard Memorial Library and WCTU Archives
1730 Chicago Avenue, Evanston, Illinois
847-328-7500
www.franceswillardhouse.org