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Out of the Attic

A woman ahead of her time

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Her name is on Alexandria's most historic library, but who was Dr. Kate Waller Barrett? The short answer is a medical doctor and a social reformer. A deeper look tells the story of an extraordinary woman who spent a large portion of her life here in Alexandria. During a time when few women went to university, Waller Barrett completed both a medical degree and a nursing program. Her work with the progressive Florence Crittenton Mission, an organization with a mission to help unwed mothers, women trying to leave prostitution and women who had recently immigrated to the United States, left an enduring legacy nationally.

Waller Barrett was a fierce proponent of a woman's right to vote and served as an honorary president of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia. Her work in social reform in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which combined compassion and vision, was ahead of her time.

Kate Waller was born in Falmouth, Virginia in the late 1850s, though there is some disagreement about the year. She attended the Arlington Institute for Girls in Alexandria. In 1876, she married Robert Barrett, an Episcopal minister who encouraged her to continue her education while they raised their six children. Waller earned her medical degree from the Women's College of Georgia in 1892 and completed a nursing program at the Florence Nightingale Training School in London in 1894.

While working on her medical degree, Waller Barrett tried to open a shelter for unwed mothers in Atlanta but found opposition from city and church officials. In the process, she connected her mission with that of Charles Nelson Crittenton, a wealthy druggist who had started a similar shelter in New York City a decade earlier. Crittenton funded her shelter in Atlanta, and the two worked to establish centers under the Florence Crittenton Mission name across the country.

Waller Barrett's husband died in 1896, and she took on more responsibility with the Florence Crittenton Mission. In 1909, Charles Crittenton died, and Waller Barrett rose to the presidency of the Mission. Waller Barrett wrote several books on her philosophy of social reform, including "Fourteen Years Work Among Erring Girls" (1901), and "Some Practical Suggestions on the Conduct of a Rescue Home" (1903).

Unlike other contemporaries, Waller Barrett recommended that mothers keep their babies with them and nurse them for six months or longer. She also established vocational training in Crittenton Mission shelters to encourage residents' independence and ability to care for themselves and their children.

Waller Barrett died in her Alexandria home in 1925. The Virginia State Capitol lowered its flag for the first time for a woman in honor of her death. Twelve years later, Alexandria's new public library was named after her. It opened in 1939 and still operates today. While the sit-in of 1939 created its own historical significance at the Kate Waller Barrett Branch Library, we remember the woman the library is named after.



Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

Historic Alexandria celebrates Women's History Month throughout the month of March. For a listing of virtual events and celebrations, please visit alexandriava.gov/historic.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.