

Times Living

Alexandria

Celebrates Women Suffragists struggle against brutality in fight for voting rights

Upcoming local event aims to honor tortured American suffragists

BY GAYLE CONVERSE
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When American suffragists were arrested outside the White House 104 years ago and sentenced for imprisonment in nearby Occoquan, little could they know of the savage treatment that awaited them.

In November 1917, Washington, D.C. was in the midst of wartime procedures and paranoia. Housing and coal shortages and price hikes had become the norm. The city was becoming noisy and crowded and was a mere six months away from the first phase of the Great Influenza Pandemic, which would kill almost 675,000 Americans. Prohibition had recently been introduced. And, in an attempt to save manpower, sheep grazed on the White House lawn, which was surrounded by an increasing number of uniformed guards and dubious volunteer security men.

A few feet away, on the sidewalks outside the White House, the increasing presence of another group was noted. Women stood on the pavement in silence – a con-

trast to the raucous wartime environment of the nation's capital. They stood in rain and shine, brandishing signs demanding passage of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution. With passage, would come the right to vote for American women.

Even though many American women had stepped up to fill deployed men's jobs during World War I and most suffragist protests were peaceful, some American citizens began viewing the "Silent Sentinels" as unpatriotic. The suffragists had also become a nuisance to President Woodrow Wilson, who had been reelected the year before and who objected to the 19th Amendment. Wilson had written to his daughter the previous summer to claim the suffragists "seem bent on making their cause as obnoxious as possible."

Police began arresting suffragists for "obstructing traffic." When the first wave of arrests began, the women were promptly liberated. This system was short-lived. Judges began to order prison sentences, but jail time didn't stop these women. Upon release, most suffragists returned to their quiet picket lines.

The traffic obstruction charge was used in mid-November 1917, when 32 suffragists were arrested in front of the White House. Many were over the age of 60. They were ordered to be imprisoned at the District of Columbia (Occoquan) Workhouse in Lorton, Virginia.

Along with unwashed bedding, putrid food and fetid water, the women were subjected to undue hardships and torture, resulting in the infamous Nov. 14, 1917 "Night of Terror."

A number of women prisoners were threatened, chained to their cells, beaten and hurled against walls, floors and metal furniture. One woman suffered a heart attack and was denied prompt medical attention. A few days later, force feedings began for suffragists who had initiated a hunger strike in retaliation against the brutality. One of the prisoners, 73-year-old Mary Nolan, later wrote, "Never was there a sentence like ours for an offense such as ours, even in England." Women fighting for equality in England were referred to as suffragettes and often protested violently, as compared to their American suffragist counterparts.



PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
Suffragist Lucy Burns at the Occoquan Workhouse, November 1917

Bruised and broken, the suffragist prisoners were brought to Alexandria on Nov. 27, 1917 for a hearing at the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. Judge Edmund Waddill, Jr., agreeing the women's treatment had been unduly harsh, ordered the release of the suffragists from Occoquan.

Within months, Wilson began publicly calling on Congress to support women's equality at the ballot box. The 19th Amendment was ratified Aug. 18, 1920, with certification of the amendment occurring a few days later, on Aug. 26 – now known as Women's Equality Day.

This Women's Equality Day, Mayor Justin Wilson, the Office of Historic Alexandria and Alexandria Celebrates

FREE OUTDOOR DEDICATION OF SUFFRAGIST MARKER, AUG. 26

Event: Women's historic marker dedication
Date: Aug. 26, 2021 (rain or shine)
Time: 9 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.
Location: Corner of South Saint Asaph and Prince streets, Alexandria, Va.
RSVP online: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/quiet-sentinels-historic-marker-dedication-tickets-166454575115>
Additional information: <https://www.alexandriava.gov/.../historic/info/wayfaring/TrailSignSuffragists.pdf>

Women will dedicate an historic marker to honor the women who bravely endured imprisonment and torture in their efforts to gain the vote for all American women and to recognize the site of the landmark hearing that took place right here in Alexandria.

The writers are founders of Alexandria Celebrates Women, a nonprofit that highlights influential women throughout the city's history. Contact them at AlexandriaCelebratesWomen@gmail.com.