Going to Jail for the Right to Vote

History Forgotten or History Ignored?

By Glenda C. Booth

COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Lucy Burns, co founder of the National Woman's Party, was imprisoned as much or more than anyone else.

The nation's fight for freedom was settled in Virginia at Yorktown. Union and Confederate forces battled over freedom from slavery on Virginia soil. Another, little-known fight for freedom climaxed in Virginia: the right of women to vote.

From 1917 to 1919, over 200 women from 26 states were arrested for the trumped up charges of "obstructing traffic" and "holding a meeting on public grounds." Known as the Silent Sentinels, these women, suffragists, were peacefully picketing on the White House sidewalk for the right to vote. As President Woodrow Wilson, a Virginian from Staunton, dawdled, cloistered inside, the persevering picketers held tall purple, white, and gold banners, with messages like, "Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty?" and "Democracy should begin at home." Given the choice of incarceration or paying a $25 fine, they chose jail. Firing back at authorities, Lucy Burns and Katherine More asserted, "Not a dollar of your fine shall we pay. To pay a fine would be an admission of guilt. We are innocent."

The police loaded up the demonstrators in wagons alongside prostitutes, thieves, and drunks and hauled the protestors 25 miles south of Washington, D.C., to the Occoquan Workhouse in Lorton, Virginia, an area described by one historian as a "deserted wilderness." Two Virginians were in the group, Pauline Adams and Maude Jamison, both from Norfolk. Guards beat the "miscreants"; forced them to wear bulky prison garb and shoes that fit any sized foot; fed them meals of hominy, cornmeal, rice, beans, cereal, hard bread, and putrid soup with worms afloat; and force fed some of the women.

The Turning Point Suffragist Memorial Association (TPSMA) is building a national memorial to honor these suffragists with "a memorial that will reflect the strength of the women and the significance of their struggle," near the site of the Occoquan Workhouse in Lorton in the Occoquan Regional Park. Historians consider the jailing of the suffragists the "turning point" in the crusade for women's suffrage. The Association hopes to raise $7 million and open the memorial by 2020, the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Emily McCoy, Board of Directors Chair, has been a key player since 2010. Her reason: "Our nation needs a suitable place to honor and celebrate the accomplishments of women who fought for and won the right to vote. They paid a huge price for something that should have come without question. Accomplishments of women are often buried and forgotten. This is my part in seeing that American suffragists are not forgotten." The League of Women Voters of the Fairfax Area started the project as a wall, but decided that the historic movement deserved a more impressive monument, so organizers formed the Turning Point Suffragist Memorial Association.

Virginians Involved

"Why should women leave the house, heaven forbid?," chuckled Dr. Sydney Bland, McGaheysville resident and professor emeritus at James Madison University (JMU), recalling that when the suffragists started agitating for the right to vote in the early 1900s, most men opposed this "drastic measure."

Dr. Bland, whose Ph.D. thesis was titled "The Militant Suffrage Techniques of the National Women's Party," taught women's history at JMU. The suffragists tactics included picketing, interrupting dialogue, burning President Wilson's speeches, and openly criticizing the recalcitrant president, he says. Detractors jeered at the protestors, slapping them with labels like "unwomanly," "unsexed," "pathological," and "shockingly shameless." Former U.S. League of Women Vot-

The original Occoquan Workhouse, where the suffragists were held in 1917 near Lorton, is now demolished.

COURTESY OF NOVA PARKS

Inez Milholland Boissevain on a white horse as the herald leading the 1913 suffrage parade in Washington, D.C.

COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

ers President Merilyn Reeves has said of the opponents, "They believed claims that the amendment would topple women's pedestals, end chivalry, and threaten the family." Dr. Bland, an honorary board member of the TPSMA, points out, "Even though the suffragists' White House banners were silent, their words spoke a great deal."

Debi Alexander, of Warrenton, is involved because the memorial is "a symbol for all people to look historically at what it has taken to give us our rights." She believes the memorial can also remind people of some contemporary struggles as she rhetorically muses, "What gave them the strength to buck the system?" She continues, "The Turning Point Memorial is a social symbol of how important one thing is in changing a broader array of laws. My personal hope is history will continue to repeat itself and move us closer to gender and racial equality and equality for people with intellectual and physical disabilities, something still lacking in our American system."

Sara Anderson of Manassas supports the cause because, she says, "When people vote, they don't realize what some women went through in the early 1900s to get the right to vote," adding that the Equal Rights Amendment still has not been added to the U.S. Constitution. Betty Dean, a former TPSMA Board member and Vice President of the Manassas firm Didlake, Inc., has similar sentiments. She offers, "This memorial not only recognizes the sacrifices, but it lets people know that right in Virginia we had a turning point in the battle. People don't know that story. With this memorial, we can reconnect people to what it means to live in a democracy and to have the right to vote."

The Memorial

Robert Beach, of Robert E. Beach Architects, LLC, has designed 19 interactive stations along a winding garden path to outline the suffrage movement's history and the women's story of empowerment. The memorial's entrance will replicate the White House gates where the Silent Sentinels picketed. Plaques along a memorial cascade will identify the prisoners and describe their experiences in the workhouse.

The 19 stations will tell the story. Examples:

Seneca Falls Convention, 1848 — Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott convened a meeting in New York, an event which some describe as the beginning of a 72-year civil rights movement, where around 300 attendees adopted the "Declaration of Sentiments" based on the Declaration of Independence. Legal inequalities women faced included no voice in passing laws, no independent rights after marriage, no custody of children after divorce, and no right to vote.

Minor v. Happersett, 1875 — A U.S. Supreme Court decision clarified that the 14th amendment to the Constitution did not guarantee women the right to vote. Susan B. Anthony argued that a Constitutional amendment was necessary. The Federal Suffrage Amendment read, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." The amendment was introduced for the first time in 1878, failed then and in subsequent Congresses until 1919.

Suffrage State by State — By 1900, women had the legal right to vote under state law in Colorado and Idaho and in the territories of Utah and Wyoming. By 1918, 15 states allowed women to vote, but not Virginia.

The Parade — In 1913, thousands of women marched down Pennsylvania Avenue to shoving and nasty insults, mostly from men, in a demonstration that upstaged President-elect Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. The Howard University Delta Sigma Theta sorority marched, their first public act. Parade leaders asked African-American women to march at the rear of the parade to avoid further inflaming southern resistance to suffrage. Ida B. Wells-Barnett refused, but others went along.

The National Women's Party — By 1916, Alice Paul had formed the National Women's Party to elect officials who favored a Constitutional amendment.

The Silent Sentinels — In 1917, the suffragists used a new picketing tactic, a "perpetual delegation," ongoing demonstrations on the White House's front sidewalk. Thousands of women took turns standing silently in all kinds of weather, holding banners posing questions like, "Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty?"

World War I — The suffragists saw World War I as a U.S. crusade for world democracy by a powerful country that was denying democracy at home. Mabel Vernon posited, "If the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government is so sacred a cause to foreign people as to constitute the reason for our entering the international war in its defense, will you not, Mr. President, give immediate aid to the measure before Congress demanding self-government for the women of this country?" The suffragists were called "unpatriotic" for challenging the President and the Congress during wartime.

The Night of Terror — On the night of November 15, 1917, prison officials moved some of the women out of the dorm-style quarters to jail cells, dragging, beating, and slamming them into cells. One woman had a heart attack and guards tied Lucy Burns' arms to bars over her head all night. The women remained defiant.

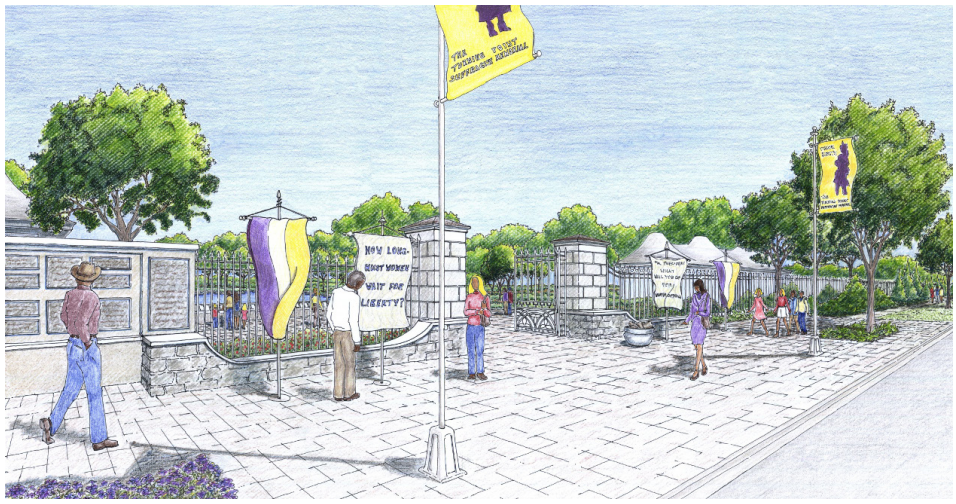
Wilson Relents — Finally, in 1918, President Wilson voiced support for women's suffrage and urged Congress to pass the Constitutional amendment, justifying his new position as "a necessary war measure." To intensify the pressure, suffragists built "watch fires" in Lafayette Park and burned Wilson's speeches in the fires.

Passage and Ratification — In 1919, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution on a 304 to 89 vote and the Senate approved it, 56 to 25. In 1920, the Tennessee legislature, the last one needed, ratified the amendment by one vote. In 1920, all women could vote for first time, 55 years after ratification of the Constitutional amendment abolishing slavery and ending one of the longest civil rights movements in U.S. history. Virginia did not ratify the amendment until 1952.

The amendment reads:

Section 1: The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

Section 2: Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation. ■



DRAWINGS BY ARCHITECT ROBERT E. BEACH

Top: **Front entrance of the memorial**

Above: **Memorial concept plan**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Supporting the memorial

The Turning Point Memorial Association is an all-volunteer group that is generating support for the Turning Point Suffragist Memorial.

The Turning Point Memorial Association
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