

Alice Paul: Feminist, Suffragist and Political Strategist



Alice Paul was the architect of some of the most outstanding political achievements on behalf of women in the 20th century. Born on January 11, 1885 to Quaker parents in Mt. Laurel, New Jersey, Alice Paul dedicated her life to the single cause of securing equal rights for all women.

Few individuals have had as much impact on American history as has Alice Paul. Her life symbolizes the long struggle for justice in the United States and around the world. Her vision was the ordinary notion that women and men should be equal partners in society.

***When you put your hand to the plow, you can't put it down
until you get to the end of the row.***

-Alice Paul recalling the advice of her mother

Growing up at *Paulsdale*

William and Tacie Paul married in 1881 and moved into *Paulsdale* in 1883. Two years later, their first child, Alice, was born, followed by William in 1886, Helen in 1889 and Parry in 1895. Alice's father was a successful businessman and, as the president of the Burlington County Trust Company in Moorestown, NJ, earned a comfortable living. His economic success allowed *Paulsdale* to become a gentleman's farm; family members may have had some farm chores, but hired hands actually provided a majority of the farm labor. Alice's life on the "home farm" (as she referred to her home) marked her early childhood and is reflected in her work as an adult. As Hicksite Quakers, Alice's parents raised her with a belief in gender equality, and the need to work for the betterment of society. Hicksite Quakers stressed separation from the burgeoning materialistic society and advocated the benefits of staying close to nature. *Paulsdale* reflected this ideal; the 265-acre farm was situated away from the town, isolated but not closed to society.



The most enduring legacy of *Paulsdale* was its role in the suffrage movement and the resulting influence it had upon Alice. Alice's suffrage ideas were planted early as Tacie, who as a member of the *National American Woman Suffrage Association* attended women suffrage meetings-- often with Alice in tow. Tacie may have also held meetings at *Paulsdale* or entertained members afterwards. It was at *Paulsdale*, Paul noted years later, that she was first introduced to the suffrage movement.

When a *Newsweek* interviewer asked Paul why she dedicated the whole of her life to women's equality, she credited her farm upbringing by quoting an adage she learned from her mother, "When you put your hand to the plow, you can't put it down until you get to the end of the row."

Quaker Education

Raised in an area founded by her Quaker ancestors, Alice and her family remained devoted observers of the faith. As Hicksite Friends, the Paul family adhered to Quaker traditions of simplicity and plain speech (replacing you and yours with "thee" and "thy" when talking with other Quakers). Alice attended a Hicksite school



Alice Paul with sorority at Swarthmore, c. 1905

in Moorestown, New Jersey, and graduated first in her class in 1901. Hicksite Friends endorsed the concept of gender equality as a central tenet of their religion and a societal norm of Quaker life. As Paul noted years later, "When the Quakers were founded...one of their principles was and is equality of the sexes. So I never had any other idea...the principle was always there." Growing up among Quakers, who believed men and women were equal, meant Alice's childhood environment was something of an anomaly for the time period. This upbringing undoubtedly accounts for the many Quaker suffragists including Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott, both whom Paul admired and considered role-models. Alice's faith not only established the foundation for her belief in equality but also provided a rich legacy of activism and service to country.

When the Quakers were founded...one of their principles was and is equality of the sexes. So I never had any other idea...the principle was always there."

-Alice Paul-interview, 1974

Unfortunately, Tacie Parry had to drop out in 1881, one year short of graduation, when she married William Paul (married women were not allowed to attend school. Tacie promised that her children would attend Swarthmore for at least one year to experience the value of a Quaker education. Though each of her four children took classes at the college, it was her eldest daughter Alice who stayed for four years graduating with a degree in Biology. At Swarthmore, Alice was taught by some of the leading female academics of the day, including mathematics professor Susan Cunningham, who was one of the first women to be admitted to the American Mathematics Associate. Cunningham, was noted on campus for her admonition, "Use thy gumption". These words may have emboldened Paul when she picketed the White House and went on hunger strike. While in college, she used her "gumption" to participate in a variety of sports including field hockey, tennis and basketball.

She was a member of the Executive Board of Student Government, was named Ivy Poetess and served as a commencement speaker. Alice's father, William Paul (who died unexpectedly during her second year at Swarthmore), once said of his eldest daughter, "Well, when there is a job to be done, I bank on Alice". He spoke these words while Paul was still in college and they provide a hint to Paul's character even before the age of 21. In the college's yearbook, *Halcyon*, she was dubbed, "An open-hearted maiden, true and pure". When this open hearted, open minded student graduated from Swarthmore in 1905, she may not have known what lay ahead, but she did expect to make a contribution to society.

Alice's relationship to Swarthmore College began long before she entered as a student in 1901. Her grandfather, Judge William Parry, was one of the founders of the co-educational school in 1864. He believed in the idea that men and women should receive an equal, Quaker-inspired education and he sent his youngest and only daughter Tacie to Swarthmore in 1878.

Alice Paul's Educational Achievements

- B.A. in Biology from Swarthmore College, 1905
- M.A. in Sociology from University of Pennsylvania, 1907
- Ph.D. in Economics from University of Pennsylvania, 1912
- LL.B. from Washington College of Law, 1922
- LL.M. from American University, 1927
- D.C.L. from American University, 1928

Militant Suffragettes (Paul in England)

Though Alice's upbringing was steeped in suffrage ideals, it was during her stay in England that she was transformed from a reserved Quaker girl into a militant suffragist. After working in the settlement movement in New York, Paul left for Birmingham, England, in 1907 to study social work at the Woodbrooke Settlement. One day, she passed a crowd jeering a female speaker and stopped to observe the chaos. The woman, who had been speaking about women's suffrage, was jeered so loudly she couldn't be heard and was forced from the stage by an unruly crowd. Alice introduced herself to the speaker, who turned out to be Christabel Pankhurst, daughter of England's most radical suffragette, Emmeline Pankhurst. The Pankhurst women (mother and two daughters) were leaders of a militant faction of suffragettes whose motto was "Deeds not words." Believing that prayer, petitions, and patience was not enough to successfully enfranchise women, the Pankhursts engaged in direct and visible measures, such as heckling, window smashing, and rock throwing, to raise public aware about the suffrage issue. Their notoriety gained them front-page coverage on many London newspapers, where they were seen being carried away in handcuffs by the police. The Pankhursts also devised a political strategy to hold the party in power responsible, regardless of affiliation, for women's secondary status. Paul joined their movement, personally breaking more than forty-eight windows (according to one interview) and was arrested and imprisoned on several occasions. The suffragettes, including Alice, protested their confinement with hunger strikes, for which they were forcibly fed in a brutal fashion. During these dark days of imprisonment, Paul took strength from a quotation she often saw etched into the prison walls by her compatriots: "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God." This sentiment, first expressed by Thomas Jefferson, and later adopted by Susan B. Anthony, now inspired a new generation of revolutionaries in their quest for liberty. Paul noted the impact of the Pankhursts on the suffrage debate, rousing many in the country to their cause. Upon her return to America in 1910, she said: "The militant policy is bringing success. . . . the agitation has brought England out of her lethargy, and women of England are now talking of the time when they will vote, instead of the time when their children would vote, as was the custom a year or two back." Paul believed that English suffragettes had found the path to victory that continued to elude American suffragists.

Paul Meets NAWSA and the President



Paul returned to her home country in 1910 imbued with the radicalism of the English suffrage movement and a determination to reshape and re-energize the American campaign for women's enfranchisement. While a student at the University of Pennsylvania, she joined the *National American Women's Suffrage Association* (NAWSA). She was quickly appointed as head of the Congressional Committee in charge of working for a federal suffrage amendment, a secondary goal to the NAWSA leadership. In 1912, Alice Paul and two friends, Lucy Burns and Crystal Eastman, headed to Washington, D.C. to organize for suffrage. With little funding but in true Pankhurst style, Paul and Burns organized a publicity event to gain maximum national attention; an elaborate and massive parade by women to march up Pennsylvania Avenue and coincide with Woodrow Wilson's presidential inauguration. The parade began on March 3, 1913, with the beautiful lawyer, activist, and socialite Inez Milholland, leading the procession, dressed in Greek robes and astride a white horse. The scene turned ugly, however, when scores of male onlookers attacked the suffragists, first with insults and obscenities, and then with physical violence, while the police stood by and watched. The following day, Alice's group of suffragists made headlines across the nation and suffrage became a popular topic of discussion among politicians and the general public alike.

The National Woman's Party, Picketing, and Prison

Although both Carrie Chapman Catt, NAWSA president, and Alice Paul shared the goal of universal suffrage, their political strategies could not have been more different or incompatible. Where NAWSA concentrated a majority of its effort upon state campaigns, Paul wanted to focus all energy and

funding upon a national amendment. While NAWSA endorsed President Wilson and looked to members of the Democratic Party as allies, Alice Paul wanted to hold Wilson and his party responsible for women's continued disenfranchisement (a tactic of British Suffragettes). In 1914, after initially forming a semi-autonomous group called the Congressional Union, Paul and her followers severed all ties to NAWSA and, in 1916, formed the National Woman's Party (NWP). The NWP organized "Silent Sentinels" to stand outside the White House holding banners inscribed with incendiary phrases directed toward President Wilson. The president initially treated the picketers with bemused condescension, tipping his hat to them as he passed by; however, his attitude changed when the United States entered World War I in 1917. Few believed that suffragists would dare picket a wartime president, let alone use the war in their written censures, calling him "Kaiser Wilson." Many saw the suffragists' wartime protests as unpatriotic, and the sentinels, including Alice Paul, were attacked by angry mobs. The picketers began to be arrested on the trumped up charge of "obstructing traffic," and were jailed when they refused to pay the imposed fine. Despite the danger of bodily harm and imprisonment, the suffragists continued their demonstrations for freedom unabated.

The arrested suffragists were sent to Occoquan Workhouse, a prison in Virginia. Paul and her compatriots followed the English suffragette model and demanded to be treated as political prisoners and staged hunger strikes. Their demands were met with brutality as suffragists, including frail, older women, were beaten, pushed and thrown into cold, unsanitary, and rat-infested cells. Arrests continued and conditions at the prison deteriorated. For staging hunger strikes, Paul and several other suffragists were forcibly fed in a tortuous method. Prison officials removed Paul to a sanitarium in hopes of getting her declared insane. When news of the prison conditions and hunger strikes became known, the press, some politicians, and the public began demanding the women's release; sympathy for the prisoners brought many to support the cause of women's suffrage. Upon her release from prison, Paul hoped to ride this surge of goodwill into victory.

The Nineteenth Amendment

In 1917, in response to public outcry about the prison abuse of suffragists, President Wilson reversed his position and announced his support for a suffrage amendment, calling it a "war measure." In 1919, both the House and Senate passed the 19th Amendment and the battle for state ratification commenced. Three-fourths of the states were needed to ratify the amendment. The battle for ratification came down to the state of Tennessee in the summer of 1920; if a majority of the state legislature voted for the amendment, it would become law. The deciding vote was cast twenty-four year-old Harry Burn, the youngest member of the Tennessee assembly. Originally intending to vote "no," Burn changed his vote after receiving a telegram from his mother asking him to support women's suffrage. On August 18, 1920, Tennessee ratified the 19th Amendment. Six days later, Secretary of State Colby certified the ratification, and, with the stroke of his pen, American women gained the right to vote after a seventy-two year battle. August 26th is now celebrated as Women's Equality Day in the United States.



The Equal Rights Amendment

While many suffragists left public life and activism after the 19th Amendment was enacted, Alice Paul believed the true battle for equality had yet to be won. In 1923, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the

Seneca Falls Convention, Paul announced that she

"Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

-Equal Rights Amendment

would be working for a new constitutional amendment, one she authored and called the "Lucretia Mott Amendment." This amendment called for absolute equality stating, "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction." The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was introduced in every session of Congress from 1923 until it passed in 1972. During the 1940s, both the Republicans and Democrats added the ERA to their party platforms. In 1943, the ERA was rewritten and dubbed the "Alice Paul Amendment." The new amendment read, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."

Alice Paul worked tirelessly for the Equal Rights Amendment in the United States and for women's rights internationally. Following the passage of the 19th Amendment, Paul earned three law degrees (LL.B., LL.M. and D.C.L.). She also traveled to South America and Europe during the 20's through the 50's. She began the World Woman's Party (WWP), headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1938. The WWP worked closely with the League of Nations for the inclusion of gender equality into the United Nations Charter and the establishment of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Alice Paul moved back to the United States in 1941 and became active in American women's issues. She led a coalition that was successful in adding a sexual discrimination clause to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The re-emergence of the women's movement in the late sixties led to renewed interest in the ERA; in 1972, the Senate and the House of Representatives passed the amendment and it went to the states for ratification. Congress placed a deadline of seven years on the ratification process; the amendment needed 38 states to become law. Though the deadline was extended until 1982, the amendment fell short of ratification by three states. Since 1982, the ERA has come before every session of Congress and current efforts are underway to ratify the amendment. If Congress repeals the time limit of the original bill and three states vote for ratification, the ERA could become law. (For more information on the Equal Rights Amendment, visit <http://www.equalrightsamendment.org>).

Alice Paul died on July 9, 1977, in Moorestown, New Jersey, just a few miles from her birthplace and family home of *Paulsdale*. Her life demonstrates that one person can make a difference. Her legacy lives on, bearing witness to the significance of her life and inspiring others who struggle for social justice. The Alice Paul Institute was founded in 1985 and is dedicated to creating a heritage and leadership development center at *Paulsdale*. The Institute works to educate and encourage women and girls to take leadership roles in their communities and to continue the long struggle for women's equality. In her name, the API works to fulfill its mission to honor her legacy, preserve her home, and develop future leaders.



Alice Paul biography written and edited by Rebecca Carol (API Intern, 04), Kristina Myers (Program Associate), Dr. Janet Lindman (Chair, API Board).

For more information on the Alice Paul Institute, please visit our website at www.alicepaul.org.