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# Alexandria and the Silent Sentinels

You might have noticed the yellow, white and purple flags flying in front of city hall this month. They honor the Women's Suffragist Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and those who fought for the right of women to vote.

In particular, the flags honor the 32 women released from the Occoquan Workhouse on Nov. 27, 1917, at the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia here in Alexandria. The former courthouse stood on the corner of South St. Asaph and Prince Streets. In 2021, the city installed a sign at the site of the former courthouse, commemorating the women's courage and suffering in their fight against injustice.

The women were members of the National Women's Party, which sought to give women the right to vote nationally. Nicknamed "The Silent Sentinels," the protesters picketed regularly outside the White House, urging President Woodrow Wilson to convince members of his Democratic Party to support their cause.

Their use of picket signs and refusal to speak earned them their nickname. Wilson's vague and tepid support for a woman's right to vote led them to take more aggressive

but peaceful measures. Led by Alice Paul, members of the National Women's Party instead used Wilson's words, often spoken in support of the American involvement in World War I, against him. For instance, Alice Paul was arrested on Oct. 20, 1917, for picketing with a sign quoting Wilson:

"The time has come to conquer or submit. For us there is but one choice. We have made it."

Paul was sentenced to seven months in jail at the Washington District Jail. Other women arrested with her were sent to Occoquan Workhouse, which was considered a more lenient punishment. Paul led a hunger strike in the District Jail, and more Silent Sentinels were arrested on Nov. 10, 1917, for protesting the treatment she and others received in prison.

On Nov. 14, the women endured the infamous "Night of Terror" at the Occoquan Workhouse. The guards threatened, beat and hurled many of the women against walls and floors. Prison guards forced suffragist Lucy Burns to stand all night with her arms shackled to the ceiling of her cell.

Some women refused to eat the worm-laden food they were given, including suffragists Lucy Burns and Dora



PHOTO/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Dora Lewis, circa 1917.

Lewis. On day seven, the prison officials force-fed them. Lewis wrote that five people seized her and held her down. The doctor forced a tube down her throat. "I (was) gasping and suffocating with the agony of it," she chronicled.

On Nov. 17, 1917, Judge Edmund Waddill, Jr. issued a writ of habeas corpus seeking to free the women in the District Court here in Alexandria, and 10 days later, he ordered them released.

News of the Night of Terror sparked protests across the country. In March 1918, four months after the Night of Terror, a judge ruled the suffragists had been illegally arrested,

convicted and detained in the Occoquan Workhouse.

*In honor of Women's History Month, we invite you to read our series on women's history in Alexandria throughout the month of March. For more on Women's History in Alexandria, please visit <https://www.alexandriava.gov/historic-alexandria/womens-history-in-alexandria>.*

*Out of the Attic is provided by The Office of Historic Alexandria.*

*Correction: Last week's column misspelled former City Archaeologist Pam Cressey's name as Pam Cresse. It has been corrected in the online version of the article.*