

Remembering the Women's Suffragists March on Washington, 1913

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The Woman Suffrage Procession of 1913 was the first large parade of suffragists in Washington organized for political purposes. The official program stated that the parade's purpose was to "march in a spirit of protest against the present political organization of society, from which women are excluded." The march was led by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns. Both women had been educated in non-violent militant activism in London and saw white, middle class women as the heart of the movement. This is a subtle shift from the 19th century, when the suffragist movement was led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Anthony and Stanton were close to the nucleus of the abolitionist movement and had goals of universal suffrage for all American citizens. But the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870, giving black men the right to vote, heightened racism in many cities and states. Paul and Burns took a different approach and the first Woman Suffrage Procession was a display of the 'Ideals and Virtues of American Womanhood'.

Alice Paul was strategic about choosing to emphasize beauty, femininity, and traditional female roles in the procession. The goal was to show that a woman could be all of these things and still be competent, intelligent, and capable of voting. The universal racism in America insisted that in order to be a woman, you had to be white. Paul and Burns just embraced that. One of the most striking things about the agenda was how narrowly it defined women's rights in terms of suffrage. Many of Paul's and Burns' peers -- young, self-supporting, highly educated, reform-minded women -- were joining radical groups like the Heterodoxy Club in New York City, where feminists were discussing the possibility of achieving 'free love' and sexual autonomy. And, like Stanton and Anthony, many other feminists were addressing problems of inequality, or other pressing social problems such as the need to regulate child labor, improve the work and living conditions of immigrants, or enact anti-lynching laws. Paul and Burns were narrowly focused on constitutional amendment as the quickest route to national suffrage. Their London-inspired strategy centered on holding national political parties responsible for failure to pass the amendment. In 1912, six states had given women the right to vote, meaning that parties were relying on 2 million voting women. Paul planned to hold out votes in the following election if any political party failed to ratify the amendment. It was a radical political strategy that included marches, speeches, and carefully planned public relations along with backdoor deals.

Many women felt that the slower, academic, states' rights method to suffrage was the best route. Oregon, Arizona, and Kansas gave women the right to vote in state referendums in 1912. Furthermore, many felt that the groups Paul and Burns associated with in London were militant. As such, they were hesitant to apply the same tactics in America. Many mainstream suffragists in the United States praised the dramatic pageantry and large demonstrations that drew public attention but drew a hearty line at lawbreaking and most civil disobedience. But, even though suffragist scored key wins in the expanded Western territory, they also suffered bitter losses in

state voting referendums in Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Paul's methods began to gain new allies.

In 1913, Paul and Burns quickly assembled a committee of over 130 women to organize this massive campaign. Paul's rationale was solid. By holding the parade on March 3, the eve of Woodrow Wilson's presidential inauguration, they would guarantee significant publicity. All of the nation's greatest press and reporters were there. In addition, Paul hoped to draw the attention of the soon-to-be President Wilson. She was convinced his support would be necessary for any federal amendment. She also wanted to place him on notice that woman's suffrage would be an issue from his first day in office. Paul, Burns, and the committee used a number of arguments to justify the need for suffrage. Among them, civic housekeeping, or the idea that women were needed to vote for legislation on household matters that only women would consider. Another nativist argument suggested that American women were called to vote to combat the large number of illiterate foreign men pouring into the country.

Many suffragists and supporters of the movement disagreed around these issues. Paul has a Quaker background and in her writings she clung to the belief that all humans have similar souls in the eyes of God. In an attempt to unify the movement, Paul supported action and attempted to avoid rhetoric and debate. Instead she organized the parade and placed the 'most beautiful suffragette in America' at the lead on a beautiful white horse. Inez Milholland was a suffragette from New York that garnered attention with her beauty everywhere she went. Paul asked Milholland to lead the procession atop the horse through a parade of elaborate tableau designed to associate the then-reigning ideals of beauty and womanly virtue with the suffrage cause. In addition to sections of homemakers and club women, Paul also arranged large sections of professional women and university students. Many of the southern suffragists would not march with black women. So, Paul places a minute number of black women in the black of the parade, mostly students from the nearby black college, Howard University. The goal was to provide an exciting spectacle while appealing to a variety of potential supporters. On March 3, over half a million people gathered along the Pennsylvania Avenue parade route. Paul and the leaders of the march were increasingly worried about safety. The parade was a massive spectacle with over 8,000 marchers divided into six sections, ten bands, twenty five floats, five cavalry squadrons, and six chariots. The crowd along the streets was bigger than it had been in almost 20 years and within an hour the crowd had pushed in on the marchers, causing the parade to nearly descend into chaos. The cavalry unit restored order but not before more than hundred people were taken by ambulance to the hospital for treatment of minor injuries. Journalists and members of congress reacted with dismay and anger. Both the NY Times and the Washington Post described the beauty of the parade. Paul took advantage of the publicity and leveraged a call of action from the government. The march was the beginning of many challenges to come and the beginning of hard-earned success for the national movement for women's suffrage.