

Marking History

Daughters of the American Revolution unveil a historical marker at the Lorton Workhouse.

By **Justin Fanizzi**

Wednesday, November 18, 2009

On Nov. 15, 1917, Alice Paul and dozens of other suffragists withstood a night of abuse at the Occoquan Workhouse in Lorton in what ultimately proved to be a turning point in the women's voting rights movement.

Ninety-two years to the day later, the Fairfax County Chapter of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) gathered on the same grounds to honor those sacrifices and to honor the accomplishments that were spawned from that terrible night with a dedication of a historical marker.

"The marker is a permanent, poignant reminder that will enrich the lives of the visitors by educating them," said Deborah Robinson, chairman of the Fairfax County History Commission. "Because of this marker, people will remember what happened here."

The marker was unveiled at a ceremony at the Workhouse on Sunday, Nov. 15 that was attended by nearly every member of the Fairfax Chapter of DAR, members of the Lorton Arts Foundation and local elected officials. At the ceremony, Jennifer Krafchik of the Sewell-Belmont House and Museum and Irma Clifton of the Lorton Arts Foundation each gave presentations describing the 1917 "Night of Terror," and how that brutal event shaped the future of the women's suffrage movement.

According to Krafchik and Clifton, Paul and other suffragists were imprisoned on trumped up charges at the Occoquan Workhouse in 1917 for protesting at the White House for women's voting rights. While there, Krafchik and Clifton said, the women were subjected to horrendous treatment, including beatings and forced feedings, culminating in the "Night of Terror."

During that night, guards attacked Paul and 33 other women under orders from the prison superintendent while the National Guard was called in to surround the prison so that no reports of what was happening inside could get out. While the night's events resulted in many injuries and even a heart attack, it actually pushed women's suffrage closer to fruition, as Paul and the others spread word about their treatment. According to Clifton, once the nation found out, the call for equal voting rights picked up significant momentum.

"These women gave so much up to silently picket for the right to vote," said Chapter Regent Ellen vanHully-Bronson. "When I think about how my vote doesn't mean anything today, I think about what those women gave up and the years that they fought and the days they spent held here."

The idea for the marker was conceived about a year ago, according to DAR's Holly Lynne Schmidt, when she and fellow DAR members decided that such a significant event in the nation's history that occurred in the area could not go unrecognized. Schmidt said after the idea was discussed and supported by the chapter, per national DAR rules, the national headquarters had to sign off on the marker and have the information on it be validated by historians. So, DAR approached Krafchik and Clifton to read over the information and make sure that it was completely accurate.

After academic approval, Schmidt said that DAR asked the Lorton Arts Foundation, which operates the Lorton Workhouse, if they could get the marker attached to the building only to find out that the county owned the property. The DAR then got approval from the county to place the marker, and finally, the marker was affixed.



Photo by Justin Fanizzi/The Connection
The SAR color guard stands next to the marker.



Photo by Justin Fanizzi/The Connection
The Virginia Sons of the American Revolution Color Guard, dressed in Revolutionary-era garb, kicked the ceremony off with a presentation of the colors.



Photo by Justin Fanizzi/The Connection
All of the Fairfax Chapter's members and invited guests stand in front of Building 9, the site of the future National American Women's Suffrage Museum.

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"We felt that this [event] was incredibly important, and with it being in our backyard, it was an opportunity that we could not pass up," Schmidt said. "It was the biggest turning point in the suffrage movement."

The marker is permanently affixed to Building Nine at the Workhouse, where, in time, it will welcome visitors to the future National American Women's Suffrage Museum that will be opening in the building after a series of renovations. In the meantime, however, DAR and Workhouse officials are more than pleased that something to honor and remember Paul and the other imprisoned women is finally in place.

"This will be a cornerstone for our future museum," said Sharon Mason, Lorton Arts Foundation executive director. "It is my hope that visitors, particularly young women, will recognize the freedom won for them by the women imprisoned here."

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