

“Women's Suffrage: The Long Journey to the Vote”

Part 4, Assault and Terror

When we see photos of Suffragists of the 1900's, often pictured are women marching dressed in white dresses carrying signs of “Votes for Women” or other slogans signifying their commitment to securing suffrage for women.

What is not often recounted is the mistreatment endured by suffragists, mostly by men, while pursuing their right to vote. Many viewed women's fight for the vote to be scandalous and neglectful of their wifely and motherly duties at home.

For instance, on March 3, 1913, one day prior to the Inauguration of President Woodrow Wilson, a pre-inauguration parade organized by women's groups was held on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC. Reportedly, there were 8,000 marchers, 4 bands, and many floats. Most spectators of the parade were men in town for the Inauguration. Along the parade route marchers were jostled, ridiculed, tripped and assaulted while policemen turned a blind eye to the mistreatment. Eventually, Army Calvary troops were dispatched to restore order. By the end of the parade, more than 100 marchers had been hospitalized.

In 1917, right before Wilson's second term, women began gathering outside the White House every day, regardless of the weather. They wore distinctive purple, white and gold sashes and held signs with slogans like “Mr. President, How Long Must We Wait for Liberty?”

The women had been picketing outside the White House for several months and police began arresting the suffragists for obstructing traffic. At first, they were released without penalty, but soon the courts began handing out prison time. But the women kept coming back. It was described as a “cat and mouse game”, with the arrests continuing, the prison terms getting longer, the stakes getting higher.

The most well known acts of violence occurred on November 14, 1917, when 33 women who had been arrested several days earlier for peacefully picketing the White House were imprisoned and tortured by prison guards at the Occoquan Workhouse during what is called the “Night of Terror”. These 33 women would endure the most harrowing night in the long history of the suffrage movement.

Dorothy Day, described as a “frail girl”, was witnessed to have “the two men handling her were twisting her arms above her head. Then suddenly they lifted her up and banged her down over the arm of an iron bench – twice.” Many of the imprisoned women endured brutal beatings. Women were dragged down the hall and thrown into dark, filthy cells; some had their hands shackled to the top of the cell, forced to stand all night; one woman lost consciousness after her head was smashed into an iron bed. The incident was recalled by the oldest prisoner, Mary Nolan, age 73. Mary Nolan wrote “never was there a sentence like ours for an offense such as ours, even in England.”

After the attack on this night of terror, many of the women began hunger strikes and through their counsel, conditions at Occoquan Workhouse came to light. In late November, under increasing public pressure, the women were released. More than a century later, the Night of Terror stands as a reminder of female solidarity and just how much some women were willing to sacrifice to win the right to vote.

Up next.....the 19th Amendment heads to Congress.

Answer to last issue's trivia question:

What did the night of November 14, 1917 become known as after suffragists were beaten and tortured at the Occoquan Workhouse?

Answer: Night of Terror