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MARCHING FOR THE VOTE: REMEMBERING THE WOMAN SUFFRAGE PARADE OF 1913

Sheridan Harvey*

MOB HURTS 300 SUFFRAGISTS AT CAPITAL PARADE ¹

“There would be nothing like this happen if you would stay at home.”²

On Monday, **March 3**, 1913, clad in a white cape astride a white horse, lawyer Inez Milholland led the great woman suffrage parade down Pennsylvania Avenue in the nation's capital. Behind her stretched a long line with nine bands, four mounted brigades, three heralds, about twenty-four floats, and more than 5,000 **marchers**.³

Women from countries that had enfranchised women held the place of honor in the first section of the procession [\[picture\]](#). Then came the “Pioneers” who had been struggling for so many decades to secure women's right to **vote**. The next sections celebrated working women, who were grouped by occupation and wearing appropriate garb—nurses in uniform [\[picture\]](#), women farmers, homemakers, women doctors and pharmacists, actresses, librarians, college women in academic gowns. Harriet Hifton of the Library of Congress Copyright Division led the librarians' contingent. The state delegations followed, and finally the separate section for male supporters of women's suffrage. All had come from around the country to “**march** in a spirit of protest against the present political organization of society, from which women are excluded.”⁴

The procession began late, but all went well for the first few blocks [\[picture\]](#). Soon, however, the crowds, mostly men in town for the following day's inauguration of Woodrow Wilson, surged into the street making it almost impossible for the **marchers** to pass [\[picture\]](#). Occasionally only a single file could move forward. Women were jeered, tripped, grabbed, shoved, and many heard “indecent epithets” and “barnyard conversation.”⁵ Instead of protecting the parade, the police “seemed to enjoy all the ribald jokes and laughter and part participated in them.”⁶ One policeman explained that they should stay at home where they belonged. The men in the procession heard shouts of “Henpecko” and “Where are your skirts?” As one witness explained, “There was a sort of spirit of levity connected with the crowd. They did not regard the affair very seriously.”⁷

But to the women, the event was very serious. Helen Keller [\[picture\]](#) “was so exhausted and unnerved by the experience in attempting to reach a grandstand . . . that she was unable to speak later at Continental hall [*sic*].”⁸ Two ambulances “came and went constantly for six hours, always impeded and at times actually opposed, so that doctor and driver literally had to fight their way to give succor to the injured”⁹ [\[picture\]](#). One hundred **marchers** were taken to the local Emergency Hospital. Before the afternoon was over, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, responding to a request from the chief of police, authorized the use of a



Suffrage Parade 3/3/13
[Inez Milholland Boissevain]. Photograph, **March 3**, 1913. George Grantham Bain Collection (LOT 11052-2). Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USZ62-77359.

[full caption](#) | [bibliographic record](#)



Woman's suffrage parade, Wash., D.C. Mar., 1913. G. V. Buck. Photograph, 1913 **March**. Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USZ61-1153.

[full caption](#) | [bibliographic record](#)



Hedwig Reicher as "Columbia" in the suffrage pageant. Photograph, March 3, 1913. George Grantham Bain Collection (LOT 11052-2). Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USZ62-70382.

[full caption](#) | [bibliographic record](#)

troop of cavalry from nearby Fort Myer to help control the crowd.¹⁰

Despite enormous difficulties, many of those in the parade completed the route. [Map the procession from near the Capitol to the Treasury Building.] When the procession reached the Treasury Building, one hundred women and children presented an allegorical tableau written especially for the event to show “those ideals toward which both men and women have been struggling through the ages and toward which, in co-operation and equality, they will continue to strive” [picture]. The pageant began with “The Star Spangled Banner” and the commanding figure of Columbia dressed in national colors, emerging from the great columns at the top of the Treasury Building steps. Charity entered, her path strewn with rose petals. Liberty followed to the “Triumphal **March**” from “Aida” and a dove of peace was released. In the final tableau, Columbia, surrounded by Justice, Charity, Liberty, Peace, and Hope, all in flowing robes and colorful scarves, with trumpets sounding [picture], stood to watch the oncoming procession.¹¹ The *New York Times* described the pageant as “one of the most impressively beautiful spectacles ever staged in this country”¹² [picture].

At the railway station a few blocks away, president-elect Wilson and the presidential party arrived to little fanfare. One of the incoming president's staff asked, “‘Where are all the people?’;—‘Watching the suffrage parade,’ the police told him.”¹³ The next day Wilson would be driven down the miraculously clear, police-lined Pennsylvania Avenue cheered on by a respectful crowd [picture].

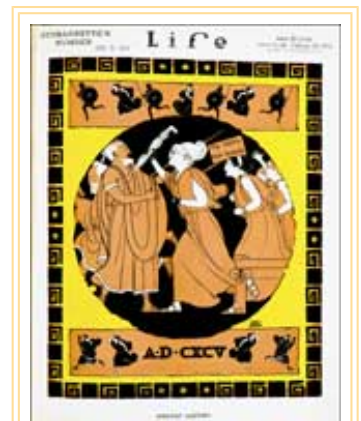
The Washington **march** came at a time when the suffrage movement badly needed an infusion of vigor, a new way to capture public and press interest. Women had been struggling for the right to **vote** for more than sixty years, and although progress had been made in recent years on the state level with six western states granting women suffrage, the movement had stalled on the national level. Delegates from the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA, and its predecessor associations) had arrived in the nation's capital every year since 1869 to present petitions asking that women be enfranchised. Despite this annual pilgrimage and the millions of signatures collected, debate on the issue had never even reached the floor of the House of Representatives.¹⁴ In 1912, Teddy Roosevelt's Progressive Party became the first major political party to pledge itself “to the task of securing equal suffrage to men and women alike.”¹⁵ But the Progressives lost the election.

In November 1912, as suffrage leaders were casting about for new means to ensure their victory, Alice Paul [picture] arrived at the NAWSA annual convention in Philadelphia. A twenty-eight-year-old Quaker from New Jersey, she had recently returned to the United States fresh from helping the militant branch of the British suffrage movement. She had been arrested repeatedly, been imprisoned, gone on a hunger strike, and been forcibly fed,¹⁶ an experience she described in an [interview](#) as “revolting.” Paul was full of ideas for the American movement. She asked to be allowed to organize a suffrage parade to be held in Washington at the time of the president's inauguration, thus ensuring maximum press attention. NAWSA accepted her offer when she promised to raise the necessary funds and gave her the title chairman of the Congressional Committee.¹⁷ In December 1912, she moved to Washington where she discovered that the committee she chaired had no headquarters and most of the members had moved away or died.¹⁸

Undaunted, Alice Paul convened the first meeting of her new committee on January 2, 1913, in the newly rented basement headquarters at 1420 F Street, NW [map]. She started raising funds; according to one friend, “it was very difficult to refuse Alice Paul.”¹⁹ She and the others she recruited worked nonstop for two months. By **March 3** this fledgling committee had organized and found the money for a major suffrage parade with floats, banners, speakers, and a twenty-page official program [full item]. The total cost of the event was \$14,906.08, a princely sum in 1913, when the average annual wage was \$621.²⁰ The programs and tableau each cost more than \$1,000.²¹

Suffrage groups across the nation contributed to the success of the procession. From its New York headquarters, NAWSA urged suffrage supporters to gather in Washington:

WHY YOU MUST MARCH



“Ancient History.” Rea Irvin. Cover illustration from Life, February 20, 1913; AP101.L6. General Collections.

[full caption](#) | [bibliographic record](#)



*Official Program—Woman Suffrage Procession. Cover illustration by Dale for the National American Woman Suffrage Association parade, Washington, D.C., **March 3, 1913.** LOT5541. Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USZC4-2996.*

[full caption](#) | [full item](#)

Because this is the most conspicuous and important demonstration that has ever been attempted by suffragists in this country.

Because this parade will be taken to indicate the importance of the suffrage movement by the press of the country and the thousands of spectators from all over the United States gathered in Washington for the Inauguration.²²

This call was answered. On February 12, with cameras clicking, sixteen “suffrage pilgrims” left New York City to walk to Washington for the parade [[picture](#)]. Many other people joined the original **marchers** at various stages, and the New York State Woman Suffrage Association's journal crowed that “no propaganda work undertaken by the State Association and the Party has ever achieved such publicity.”²³ One of the New York group, Elizabeth Freeman, dressed as a gypsy and drove a yellow, horse-drawn wagon decorated with **Votes** for Women symbols and filled with suffrage literature, a sure way to attract publicity.²⁴ Two weeks after the procession, five New York suffragists, including Elizabeth Freeman, reported to the Bronx motion picture studio of the Thomas A. Edison Company to make a talking picture known as a Kinetophone, which included a cylinder recording of one-minute speeches by each of the women. This film with synchronized sound was shown in vaudeville houses

where it was “hooted, jeered and hissed” by audiences.²⁵

NAWSA officers prepared a strong letter to the president-elect for the “New York hikers” to carry to Washington. This letter urged that women's suffrage be achieved during his presidency and warned that the women of the United States “will watch your administration with an intense interest such as has never before been focused upon the administration of any of your predecessors.”²⁶ Despite the tone of the letter, when the group reached Princeton, where Woodrow Wilson lived, they requested only “an audience for not more than two minutes in Washington as soon after your arrival as possible.”²⁷ Less than two weeks after his inauguration, Wilson received a suffrage delegation led by Alice Paul, who chose to make the case for suffrage verbally and apparently did not deliver the hikers' letter. In response to the women's impassioned plea, he replied that he had never given the subject any thought, but that it “will receive my most careful consideration.”²⁸ Hardly the whole-hearted endorsement sought by the women.



Eliz. Freeman enroute to Wash'n. Photograph, February 17, 1913. George Grantham Bain Collection (LOT 11052-2). Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USZ62-53218.

[full caption](#) | [bibliographic record](#)

The mistreatment of the **marchers** by the crowd and the police roused great indignation and led to congressional hearings where more than 150 witnesses recounted their experiences; some complained about the lack of police protection, and others defended the police. Before the inquiries were over, the superintendent of police of the District of Columbia had lost his job.



*Woman's Journal and Suffrage News, **March 8, 1913.** Front page. JK1881. N357, sec. 1, no. 50 NAWSA. Rare Book and*

The public outcry and its accompanying press coverage proved a windfall for the suffragists. The *Woman's Journal* proclaimed, “Parade Struggles to Victory Despite Disgraceful Scenes, Nation Aroused by Open Insults to Women—Cause Wins Popular Sympathy.”²⁹ The *New York Tribune* announced, “Capital Mobs Made Converts to Suffrage.”³⁰ At its next convention, in November 1913, NAWSA praised the “amazing and most creditable year's work” of Alice Paul's Congressional Committee, stating that “their single-mindedness and devotion has been remarkable and the whole movement in the country has been wonderfully furthered by the series of important events which have taken place in Washington, beginning with the great parade the day before the inauguration of the president.”³¹

Not one to mince words, famous reporter Nellie Bly [[picture](#)], who rode as one of the heralds in the parade, bluntly stated in the headline to her article on the **march**—“Suffragists Are Men's Superiors.” With uncanny prescience, she added that it would take at least until 1920 for all states to grant woman suffrage.³² Despite the pageantry of 1913, Nellie Bly was right. It was to take seven more years before the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which gave women full rights to **vote**, finally passed both houses of Congress and was ratified by the required thirty-six states. (To read the full text of the Nineteenth Amendment and a short discussion of its history, follow the link to the National Archives

Special Collections
Division.[full caption](#) | [bibliographic record](#)

and Records Administration Web site under “**Marching for the Vote**” on the [Topical Essays External Sites](#) page.)

Behind this description of the 1913 Washington Suffrage Procession—one event in the long history of women's campaign for suffrage in the United States—see [One Hundred Years toward Suffrage: An Overview](#)—lies a wealth of telling detail and the human stories that make history interesting and meaningful. A rich variety of suffrage materials in many formats lie scattered throughout the collections of the Library of Congress awaiting the curious reader in search of further details and other stories, of the sounds and sights of the fight for the **vote**.

The organizers of the parade intended its floats and pageant to have visual appeal for the media and thus to attract publicity for the movement [[picture](#)]. Photographers recorded the women's activities for newspaper readers and these images live on in newspapers and photo archives. Easily the single most heavily represented suffrage event in the Prints and Photographs Division's holdings, the **march** appears in more than forty images, including news photographs of the hike from New York to Washington, the **marchers** and crowds on Pennsylvania Avenue, and the pageant performed at the Treasury Building. A surviving stereograph of the parade suggests that publishers of these images, which appeared in three dimensions when seen through a special viewer, expected that the public would be willing to pay for a permanent memento of the event [[picture](#)].

The women's **march** also inspired cartoonists, some of whom likened the suffrage movement to colonial America's fight for independence. James Harrison Donahey, for example, substituted women for men in a cartoon based on the famous painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware.” In another such cartoon, women play the fife and drums in an imitation of Archibald Willard's painting “Spirit of '76” [[picture](#)].³³ Suffrage and anti-suffrage cartoons appeared frequently in magazines and newspapers of the day.³⁴



Gen. Rosalie Jones crossing the Delaware. James Donahey. Cartoon drawing for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, February 15, 1913. Prints and Photographs Division. LC-USZ62-55985.

[full caption](#) | [bibliographic record](#)

Vivid details about the **march** also turn up in a seemingly unlikely source. The *Yidishes Tageblatt* (Jewish daily news), a Yiddish-language publication from New York City with a circulation of seventy thousand, devoted two columns to the women's parade. The article claimed that twenty-five lost children stayed in police stations overnight and eighteen men asked the police to find their wives.³⁵

A 1974 magazine interview with eighty-nine-year-old Alice Paul reveals the problems for the historian of hindsight and memory. In two major respects Miss Paul's recollections of the event, sixty-one years after it occurred, differ from those of contemporary sources. She remembers a fairly peaceable parade in which the police did as well as could be expected: “Of course, we did hear a lot of shouted insults, which we always expected. You know the usual things about why aren't you home in the kitchen where you belong. But it wasn't anything violent.”³⁶ The Senate hearings, on the other hand, show that many people felt the crowd was hostile and the police inept.

The other major point in which Paul's memory differs from contemporary accounts is on the question of the place of African American women in the procession. In her view, the “greatest hurdle” in planning the parade came when Mary Church Terrell [[picture](#)] wanted to bring a group from the National Association of Colored Women. NAWSA had stated firmly that all women were welcome, but Paul knew “members from the South said they wouldn't **march**.” She recalls that the compromise was to have white women **march** first, then the men's section, and finally the Negro women's section.³⁷ A different picture appears in the *Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. After initial difficulties and attempts to segregate the African American women, “telegrams and protests poured in and eventually the colored women **marched** according to their State and occupation without let or hindrance.”³⁸ Ida B. Wells-Barnett was among those who objected strongly to a segregated parade; she walked with the Illinois delegation.

Moving beyond sources related to a single event to examine other aspects of the history of women's suffrage, researchers visiting the Library of Congress will discover collections of major significance in many different reading rooms. Most of these materials are discussed in greater detail elsewhere on this site—just follow the links.

photograph, or hearing the voice of a person you are studying. At the Library of Congress you can hold a letter written by Alice Paul, follow the path of the suffrage parade on a map of Washington, watch a film of suffragists, or scan old newspapers for Nellie Bly's forthright words. If you listen carefully, our foremothers will speak to you. If you tell their story, they will live again.

*Authored the original essay in *American Women: A Library of Congress Guide for the Study of Women's History and Culture in the United States* (Library of Congress, 2001), from which this online version is derived. Others who contributed to this effort are identified in the [Acknowledgments](#).

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