O N JUNE 3, 1915, Alice Paul hurriedly wrote her Washington headquarters from the home of Jane Bliss Potter, 2849 Irving Avenue South, Minneapolis: “Have had conferences with nearly every Suffragist who has ever been heard of . . . in Minnesota. Have conferences tomorrow with two Presidents of Suffrage clubs . . . I do not know how it will come out.”

Indeed, the notion of Paul coming to town apparently raised suffrage hackles in the Twin Cities. Paul wrote from Minneapolis that the executive board of the only statewide suffrage group, the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA), had earlier declined to approve a Minnesota CU chapter; MWSA president Clara Ueland had personally written Paul to discourage a visit. Nonetheless, once Paul arrived in town, she reported that Ueland “has been very kind and has spoken at both of my meetings, which she previously announced she would not do. I have spent some hours with her.”

After Paul’s visit, Ueland and the MWSA decided to work cooperatively with the Minnesota CU; their collaboration would prove a marked contrast to the national scene. State suffrage history has largely erased the work of the Minnesota CU. Yet the Minnesota
chapter proved one of the more vigorous branches of the controversial organization, with numerous members who actively furthered the cause by organizing and demonstrating, in addition to contributing financially. The synergy between the MWSA and Minnesota CU would break down in 1917. Nonetheless, the Minnesota suffrage scene maintained a respect that was sorely lacking at the national level.

Alice Paul’s storied persuasiveness won the day in June 1915. She salved the frustration of local activists who had labored for years to pass a state suffrage amendment. Paul shone light in a new direction, urging direct lobbying of the Minnesota congressional delegation to win votes for the federal amendment.

Now convinced that the CU offered promise rather than threat, Clara Ueland and eight other members of the MWSA state board signed the call to convene a Minnesota CU chapter on June 28. As Paul noted, “Everyone signed whom we asked & we asked nearly everyone of importance.” Members included women in their 20s like Ueland’s daughter Elsa and seasoned, well-to-do suffragists like Potter and Emily Bright (both in their 50s). Paul left town with nearly $1,200 in pledges or cash, including $2 from Clara Ueland herself. 4

Minnesota reflected the success Paul had enjoyed elsewhere. She emerged on the American suffrage scene in early 1913 as the organizer of the first national suffrage parade, held in Washington, DC, on the eve of Woodrow Wilson’s inauguration. After unruly spectators harassed the marching women, Paul engineered a Senate hearing on the melee. The event and its aftermath gave heightened visibility to the suffrage cause. It also lent the 28-year-old Paul a national reputation as a woman who could get things done.

Many suffrage devotees longed for just such a leader. The movement to win the vote for American women had languished. Years of petitioning Congress to pass a constitutional amendment for woman suffrage, led by Susan B. Anthony, had proved fruitless. Women in a few sparsely populated western states won the vote prior to 1900; then state-based initiatives stalled. After Anthony’s death in 1906, the sole national suffrage group, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), chose to focus on state campaigns once a resurgent Jim Crow South made enfranchising Black women a political minefield. By 1910, however, the last state victory was 14 years in the past. 5

Alice Paul’s National Woman’s Party created a suffrage flag. A star would be added for each state that ratified the Nineteenth Amendment. On September 8, 1919, Minnesota added the fifteenth star. (Note: this depiction is not from Minnesota.)
After the successful Washington, DC, suffrage parade in March 1913, relations between Alice Paul and national suffrage leadership suffered.

The most engaging suffrage news in American newspapers was now coming from abroad. Long-time activists Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel had founded the UK’s Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1905. They brought the brash militancy of labor protests to the British suffrage movement, organizing spectacular parades and marches on Parliament; news correspondents—including Americans—ate it up. American women on tour soon made a point of attending WSPU rallies and came away energized. Alice Paul, in Britain for graduate work, became a “heart and soul convert.” Paul worked for the WSPU as an organizer, ultimately enduring several arrests, imprisonments, and hunger strikes. She returned to the United States in January 1910 determined to continue the work that had captivated her.6

She wasn’t the only one. A new spirit was invigorating the suffrage movement. Some Americans who had witnessed the Pankhurs in action injected the new assertive tactics into their hometown suffrage groups. Street rallies, parades, and automobile tours began to augment the closed-door meetings and conventions of years past. The first American suffrage parade took place in the spring of 1910. Women in five western states won the vote between 1910 and 1912.7

Many felt the movement’s leadership was not seizing the moment. NAWSA leaders feared the Pankhursts’ influence, remembering how American suffragists were once ridiculed for trying to take women where many felt they didn’t belong. They worried that marching, speaking out of doors, and other unwomanly activities would damage the movement’s reputation and lead, as in Britain, to arrests and worse. They believed a woman’s reputation was her most important asset 8

Paul returned to the United States a celebrity as a result of press coverage of the Pankhurs’ demonstrations. Studying the American movement, Paul became convinced that a constitutional amendment was the quickest way for American women to win the vote. Despite more practiced hands insisting that key states must be won first, she sought to lead NAWSA’s 1913 Congressional Committee, a role that took her to Washington. After the success of the parade in March 1913, however, relations quickly soured between the impatient young Paul and the battle-hardened NAWSA leadership. Their ideas about acceptable methods and overall strategy were poles apart.9

By early 1914, NAWSA had jettisoned Paul from their ranks. Paul responded by establishing the Congressional Union as the national alternative to NAWSA. NAWSA leaders were none too pleased to compete with Paul’s controversial attention-getting tactics. By the time Jane Bliss Potter contacted the CU leader in 1915 about starting a Minnesota chapter, Paul’s activities had thrilled some and horrified others. It was little wonder that Clara Ueland was at first wary of Paul.10
After being ousted by NAWSA, Alice Paul established the Congressional Union (later known as the National Woman’s Party) as an alternative.

Sarah Tarleton Colvin was an early member of the Minnesota Congressional Union, portrayed here in 1935.

MWSA leader Ueland had an open mind, but she also had clear notions about propriety for women engaging in politics. When Emmeline Pankhurst came to Minneapolis for a speech in November 1911, she gave Clara Ueland a new outlook on “militant tactics,” later writing “[They] may be as justifiable as the Battle of Lexington.” Nonetheless, when Ueland read in 1914 of CU organizers campaigning in western suffrage states against Democrats, encouraging those women voters to “hold the party in power responsible,” as the Pankhurts put it, she, like many others, decried what they saw as partisan activity. NAWSA had always been proudly nonpartisan. The fact that the Democratic Party controlled the White House and both houses of Congress did not alter her thinking.11

Early on, the memberships of MWSA and the Minnesota CU overlapped. It was common for large urban areas to have several suffrage groups, each with a different focus; some women joined multiple clubs. At the June 1915 founding convention, Jane Potter, already an officer in MWSA, was elected state chair of the Minnesota CU, with sister Minneapolis Emily Bright (a former MWSA president) as vice chair. Summit Avenue resident Sophie Kenyon (MWSA vice president) took charge of soliciting new subscriptions for the CU newspaper The Suffragist. Gertrude Hunter and Elsa Ueland were elected organizers.13

Clara Ueland was impressed with the flurry of activity that followed. She wrote: “With their usual vigor, the Congressional Union has sent some young women out into the State into places in which there has never been a suffrage meeting. . . . The girls are not in any way militant; they are Minnesota girls—one of them is my own daughter—and their work certainly reinforces our own. . . . I see no reason why we should not work together in this way, indefinitely.” Ueland wrote Paul that the CU campaign “is receiving more publicity and apparently making a deeper impression than anything that has been done in the state.” By December, the Minnesota CU boasted 533 members.14

Shortly after the Minnesota CU’s founding, Clara Ueland, Jane Potter, and others of the MWSA had even more reason to appreciate the organization. They attended a mid-year NAWSA meeting in Chicago, convened to reassure state officers about a rival constitutional amendment that NAWSA leaders had begun to push in Congress. NAWSA leaders resisted MWSA and other states’ contentions that competing amendments confused supporters and blunted momentum. NAWSA also seemed intent on attacking the CU. MWSA members openly expressed their dismay.18

“A splendid opportunity for constructive work it seems to us was entirely lost,” Clara Ueland wrote one NAWSA leader a few weeks later. She confirmed that many MWSA members were “much alienated” and considering withdrawal from NAWSA. These MWSA members opposed any rival suffrage amendment; after all, icon Susan B. Anthony had authored the original amendment language.
They did “not like the campaign of public criticism of the Congressional Union.” Based on the CU chapter’s energetic work in Minnesota, Ueland wrote, “it would be folly for us to say anything except ‘God bless you’ to them.”16

By 1916, the Minnesota CU was flourishing, and some members contributed on the national level. Large donors Jane Potter and Emily Bright joined the CU’s national advisory board. An April Suffragist article described Gertrude Hunter’s vigorous organizing in the Twin Cities and in smaller towns like Sandstone and Isanti. Hunter was also exerting pressure on newly elected congressman Thomas D. Schall to mirror colleagues in the Minnesota delegation who favored a suffrage amendment. Sarah Colvin represented Minnesota on the “Suffrage Special,” a whistle-stop train tour through states where women now voted. Paul was founding a new political party, the National Woman’s Party (NWP), to leverage chapter chair; she would remain so through 1920.18

Events in Washington, DC, took center stage as 1917 began. After years of tolerating CU delegations beseeching him to publicly endorse the suffrage amendment, President Wilson spurned further visits in January 1917, citing more pressing concerns. In response, Paul initiated the first-ever picket at the White House gates, after attorneys assured her that peaceful picketing was legal.

Though presidents have no role in the constitutional amendment process, Paul believed that Wilson, as head of a Democratic Party that controlled both houses of Congress, held the key to securing enough votes to pass the constitutional amendment for woman suffrage. Minnesota women joined in the picketing, both in the early months, when their efforts received little attention, and later in the year, when the highly charged atmosphere accompanying the US entry into World War I caused many Americans to view the pickets as disloyal.19

In 1917, the cooperative relationship between the MWSA and Minnesota NWP would be tested. (The CU was absorbed into the NWP in March 1917.) Daily picketing at the White House began on January 10; public reactions ranged from bemusement to sarcasm. Casting about for more press coverage, Paul designated special days for occupational and state groups. She declared February 28 “Minnesota Day” on the picket line, and CU members Potter, Colvin, and others traveled to Washington to brandish banners reading “Minnesota Branch/Congressional Union” and “Scandinavian Suffrage Association Minnesota” at the White House gates. (See photo on p. 124.) In Minnesota, national NWP organizer Sarah Grant persuaded groups such as the Mothers’ Council, the Monday Literary Club, and the Farmers Non-Partisan League to urge passage of the suffrage amendment. Each week in St. Paul, Grant ensured that the most recent issue of The Suffragist was “sold in front of the Capitol, as a kind of modified picket that has proved valuable to interest recruits for the work.”20

“The girls are not in any way militant; they are Minnesota girls—one of them is my own daughter—and their work certainly reinforces our own. . . . I see no reason why we should not work together in this way, indefinitely.”

Elsie Hill, a confidant of Alice Paul, speaking at a street meeting during a Prohibition Party convention in St. Paul that endorsed a plank advocating a suffrage amendment, July 1916.
The White House picketing turned into a flash point in spring 1917. In early April, the National Woman’s Party voted to remain neutral on US entrance into World War I (NAWSA publicly supported the US entry). The daily picket line increasingly drew the ire of angry civil service and military workers. By mid-June, the police made the decision to arrest the women for “obstructing traffic,” hoping to discourage them. Paul had deliberately provoked the arrests and instructed pickets to refuse assessed fines and choose jail to ramp up media attention.

In response, Clara Ueland issued a MWSA press release that refrained from name-calling but criticized the NWP by noting that the MWSA “regrets that a body of suffragists should employ a policy tending to embarrass and discredit our government in the present difficult situation” and declaring, “We believe that the enfranchisement of women should be brought about by orderly and constructive methods.” The statement recorded controversy over the picketing within the chapter. Only NWP member Sophie Kenyon now remained among MWSA officers pulling double duty. However, the MWSA congressional liaison, young Bertha Moller, became angry about the chapter’s disavowal of the pickets and later joined the NWP.

Three Minnesota NWP members participated in the late 1917 picketing. On August 23, early convert Gertrude Hunter and Little Falls resident Clara Kinsley Fuller carried a banner to the White House quoting the president’s words, in part, “[W]e cannot postpone justice any longer in these United States . . . ” Hunter and Fuller were in the thick of a tumultuous two weeks of near riots over the pickets. They were arrested within 10 minutes. Fuller was a widow who had taken over the ownership of the Little Falls Transcript upon her husband’s death and now served as its editor-publisher. She made an impassioned speech before the magistrate: “I pay taxes to this government, yet I have nothing to say in the making of those laws which control me, either as an individual or as a businesswoman.” Hunter and Fuller were given 30 days in jail after refusing to pay their fines.

Shortly thereafter, Minnesota congressman Andrew Volstead defended the pickets in the US House. Volstead took issue with the “ruthless warfare” pursued against the pickets. He reminded the chamber of the “disgraceful attack” on the 1913 suffrage parade and declared it “high time something besides cheap politics be demanded.”

Later in the fall, Minnesota NWP officer Mary Short of Minneapolis joined the November 10 picket line alongside 40 other women. The unusually large vigil protested the harsh treatment of the jailed Paul, who was being subjected to psychological torture and forced feeding. Short was sentenced to 30 days in jail. All the women were arrested and chose jail over a fine. Short was sentenced to 30 days in jail, but after a week, the need for her at home prompted her to pay the fine and she was released. Suffragist and other news accounts spurred public outrage over the treatment of the jailed pickets and prompted the president to release all the suffrage prisoners in late November. Debate about the efficacy of the picketing campaign raged within NWP’s ranks as well as outside them. Members wrote Paul to protest and resign in anger; many more praised her, and NWP membership increased. It is unknown whether Minnesota NWP members disagreed about the picketing. Still, the chapter added members that fall and ended the year with more than 800.

In January 1918, President Wilson finally lent his support to the constitutional amendment for woman suffrage. Why? Historians debate how much credit the picketing campaign is due versus New York state women winning the vote in mid-November 1917.

The House of Representatives passed the suffrage amendment in January 1918, but the Senate was a much tougher sell. By August 1918, the NWP began new demonstrations at the White House gates or outside the Senate. These renewed protests, often featuring watch fires, continued into 1919.

Several Minnesota women took part in the watch fire demonstrations. A photographer captured Bertha Moller holding a banner outside the Senate Office Building in October 1918, one of several times she joined protests. The banner called out “thirty-four wilful [sic] senators” for delaying amendment passage. Moller also worked to corral Senate votes in New Jersey and New Hampshire. She was back in Washington in early 1919 to accompany fellow Minnesotans Rhoda Kellogg and Gertrude Murphy at a trial for NWP protesters.
Emily Grace Kay had the honor of sewing star number 15—Minnesota’s—on the National Woman’s Party suffrage flag. Sarah Colvin, whose husband was then stationed in Baltimore, joined similar watch fire protests and later wrote about her time in jail. Arrested in late January and again in early February 1919, Colvin ended up in jail for a total of ten days, an experience she reported as “indescribably revolting.” After her release, she and her husband discussed her arrest only once, briefly. Dr. Colvin, she wrote, was shocked “that I could possibly consider anything of more importance than his career.” Colvin soon joined the Prison Special, another multistate train journey, this time with some of the other former NWP prisoners. Dressed in faux prison garb, the women alarmed audiences with details of their jail time and urged listeners to pressure their senators to pass the suffrage amendment.

In early June 1919, Colvin welcomed Paul to her home on Davern Avenue in St. Paul. Paul and suffragists across the nation felt confident that the new Republican-controlled US Senate would swiftly pass the suffrage amendment and send it on to the states. On June 4, their hopes were gratified. Sadly, the discord between the MWSA and the Minnesota NWP that had erupted over the picketing campaign now meant separate celebrations.

The NWP held a dinner for Paul at the St. Paul Athletic Club. Surrounded by acolytes including Jane Potter, Sophie Kenyon, Bertha Moller, Emily Bright, and Clara Fuller, Paul said, “Women who have taken part in the long struggle for freedom feel today the full relief of the victory.” She declared the ratification campaign open, and pledges totaling $1,500 quickly poured in.

The NWP leader later attended a Minneapolis luncheon and visited the University of Minnesota and Duluth before moving on, though not before securing a pledge from Governor J. A. A. Burnquist to call a special session of the legislature to ratify the amendment. The upsurge in support for woman suffrage at the close of World War I meant Paul was no longer an outlier. Indeed, Burnquist was a strong supporter of the federal amendment; he had enthusiastically signed a bill granting Minnesota women the right to vote for president.

Perhaps it was the strength of the Minnesota NWP chapter that prompted Alice Paul to loan her much-publicized suffrage flag to Emily Grace Kay, 44, of St. Paul, a member of the Macalester College music faculty. On September 8, 1919, Kay carried the NWP flag and climbed
the steps of the Minnesota State Capitol to attend the special session. She came prepared to sew star number 15 onto the suffrage flag, which indicated that Minnesota had become the fifteenth state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment. Fifteen minutes after the session opened, Emily Kay took up her needle and thread.29

Notes
1. Alice Paul to Webster, June 3 and 6 [1915], National Woman’s Party Papers (hereafter, NWPP), Group III, box 1, folder 5, Library of Congress.

2. Brief biographies of all Minnesota NWP activists mentioned, except for Sophie Kenyon, may be found at “Online Biographical Dictionary of Militant Woman Suffragists, 1913–2020,” https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/c/1006939749. Jane Bliss Potter (1861–1929) was a suffragist who would serve as Minnesota state chair of the Congressional Union and who picketed the White House as part of the “silent sentinel” protests.

3. Paul to Webster, June 3 and 6 [1915], NWPP.

4. Paul to Webster, June 3 and 6 [1915], NWPP; Barbara Stuhler, Gentle Warriors: Clara Ueland and the Minnesota Struggle for Woman Suffrage (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1995), 133. Emily Bright (c. 1856–1930), was a suffragist who served as president of the Political Equality Club of Minneapolis for two years prior to her election as president of Minnesota Woman Suffrage Association (MWSA) in 1913.


10. The Congressional Union began in 1913 as an independent fundraising arm when Paul ran NWASA’s congressional committee. It was then refashioned as a full-fledged suffrage group in early 1914.

11. Stuhler, Gentle Warriors, 70, 133.


24. Suffragist, Nov. 24, 1917, 4; “Forty-one Suffrage Pickets Answer the Attempt of the Democratic Administration to Crush Suffrage,” Suffragist, Nov. 17, 1917, 6–7; Zahniser and Fry, 292–95; Report of Membership Dept., Oct. 1917, NWPP II, Reel 26. There are no extant records for the Minnesota NWP, to my knowledge. Little is known of Short beyond her activism in the NWP.


Images on p. 155 (top), 159, MNHS Collections; all others, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division; p. 160, Duluth News Tribune, July 5, 1913, MNHS microfilm.
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