Mary Walton, journalist and biographer of one of America’s most influential and impassioned suffragists, reveals the value of primary source documents in researching the history of the women’s movement.
Author Mary Walton recently told us how her book, *A Woman’s Crusade: Alice Paul and the Battle for the Ballot*, came to be:

In 2005 I was seated at a dinner party next to Gene Roberts, the editor of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* when I was a reporter there in the 1970s and ’80s. Since coauthoring a 1994 essay on press and protestors for a history of the White House, he had been urging writers at loose ends to undertake a book about a trailblazing suffragist, a pioneer in nonviolent resistance, who had carried on a David-and-Goliath battle against a president and Congress to win the vote for American women. She and her followers were the first people to picket the White House, he told me. And no one had written her story. Her name was Alice Paul, and I’d never heard of her. And as it happened I was between books.

‘Tell me about Alice Paul,’ I said to him.

Before long, I was spooling through the reels of microfilm records of her National Woman’s Party. My literary agent was not interested in the life of a little-known suffragist. But soon I had a book proposal, a new agent and, in time, a publisher.

When I set out to write this book I knew I had a powerful story to tell, one with a beginning, middle and satisfying ending, one that could move women. (I often asked myself whether I would have had the courage to do what Paul and her supporters did.) Although she never stopped working for women’s rights, Alice Paul’s later life would never be as dramatic as the years leading up to the suffrage victory.

The birth of a steadfast suffragist

Born in 1885 into a strict Quaker family, as a young girl Alice Paul attended suffrage meetings with her mother, Tacie. But it was not until she was a student in England that votes for women would become her calling. Attending a meeting where a suffrage speaker was hooted down by male students, Paul was appalled. When the university rescheduled the speech, she was in the audience. The struggle for the vote affected her deeply. She became a “heart and soul convert” to the suffrage cause.

In 1909 Paul joined the Women’s Social and Political Union founded in the U.K. by Emmeline Pankhurst. Pankhurst’s daughter Christabel was the speaker who had previously so moved her. The young American was jailed repeatedly for defying laws against political demonstrations. In protest of the way they’d been treated, Paul and her fellow suffragists went on hunger strikes. The authorities punished them with painful forced feedings.

She wrote her mother, “I never went through it without tears streaming down my face.” Back in America, reporters found Paul’s mother, Tacie, at a loss to explain her daughter’s behavior. “I cannot understand how all this came about,” she said. “Alice is such a mild-mannered girl.”

On her arrival in England, Paul was already highly educated, with an undergraduate degree from Swarthmore College, and a Master’s from the University of Pennsylvania. On her return to America, she reenrolled in Penn and earned her Ph.D. And then she gave up what had seemed to be a promising academic career to enter the fray of suffrage politics.

Her goal: an amendment to the U.S. Constitution allowing women to vote.

“No serious account of the cultural and political revolution that underlay the 19th amendment is complete without a reading of the National Woman’s Party Papers.”
The suffrage movement gains a formidable leader

From the moment she arrived in Washington in December, 1912, Paul proved a brilliant tactician, an exacting but charismatic leader, a public relations genius and a pioneer in non-violent resistance. The press followed her every move. It did not hurt that her physical appearance was striking. Slender, with a mop of dark brown hair tucked under a purple hat, she had violet blue eyes and the “quiet of a spinning top,” in the words of one follower.

Paul’s target for the next seven years was President Woodrow Wilson and his retinue of anti-suffrage Southern Congressional Democrats.

In less than three months, Paul pulled together an elaborate parade to confront Wilson on the day before his inauguration in 1913. Thousands of women clad in white lined the route from the Capitol to the White House. When marchers were attacked by male parade goers the ensuing melee drew sympathetic press coverage. But Wilson was not swayed.

Meanwhile Paul’s initial alliance with the mainstream National American Woman Suffrage Association proved uneasy. She founded her own organization, eventually to become the National Woman’s Party. Whereas British suffragettes were breaking windows, setting bombs and torching, in one case, a golf course, Paul was resolutely non-violent in her tactics. (At a memorial service after her death, one of her followers would say, “We were attacked by mobs. We were clubbed by the police. But Alice Paul never allowed anyone to retaliate.”)

In the years building to a climactic vote in Congress, Paul and her troops staged more parades, badgered congressmen, campaigned in national elections, and held petition drives that netted hundreds of thousands of signatures. In 1917 they were the first people to picket the White House. They brandished signs denouncing Wilson as a hypocrite for describing America as a democracy.

Their daily protests continued after the United States entered World War I, prompting accusations of treason and triggering physical attacks by onlookers. Alice and dozens of other women were arrested, jailed and even force-fed. Although NAWSA urged its members to put suffrage on a back burner while they did war work, Paul remained steadfast in her activism.

When at last the suffrage amendment was signed into law on August 26, 1920, and all American women were able to vote, Paul enrolled in law school, intent on overturning state and national laws that discriminated against women. She wrote the Equal Rights Amendment, first introduced in Congress in 1923 and in every year thereafter.

Swept up by the Depression and the Second World War, the nation forgot the suffragists. History books skimmed over their struggle for voting rights. For her part Paul never stopped campaigning for the ERA. In the 1970s a new generation of feminists breathed life into the legislation. They tracked Alice Paul down to the nursing home where she lived following a devastating stroke, and went there to pay homage.

Paul lived to see the measure pass Congress, but not to fail ratification by three votes. She died in 1977 at the age of 92, supported by the Quaker community in her final years.
The value of the National Woman's Party Papers in writing about Alice Paul

When I set out to write *A Woman’s Crusade: Alice Paul and the Battle for the Ballot* in 2006, I benefitted, as realtors like to say, from “location-location-location.”

I lived in New Jersey, some 60 miles from Mt. Laurel, where Alice Paul was born. Her childhood home is owned by the Alice Paul Institute, founded to provide leadership training for young women. The small staff was eager to help a writer produce a book that would satisfy their many requests for information. In addition, they were well versed in the history of their namesake. Moorestown, just a mile away, where Paul had attended the Friends School, was home to an historical society that housed background on the original Quaker settlement. The Moorestown Friends Meeting provided a few helpful records about the Paul family.

But the most important resource was the main campus of Rutgers University, only an hour’s drive in another direction, where the Alexander Library owned the complete microfilm edition of *The National Woman’s Party Papers* (NWPP). Because Rutgers was the state’s public university, I was able to view the microfilm on state-of-the-art readers at no charge. Retrieving the next reel was as simple as walking to a filing cabinet and plucking it out.

From 1901, when Paul entered Swarthmore College, to 1910, when she returned from a three–year sojourn in England, she wrote frequently to her mother, Tacie Paul, and occasionally to others. These were colorful letters detailing her life and studies as a student at a Quaker Institute, and, later, graphic descriptions of her experience in the militant Women’s Social and Political Union, whose members the press christened “suffragettes.” In just a week at the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, I was able to read them all.

After Paul returned to America, the letters stopped. Personal information about Paul became hard to come by. Without the NWPP, I would have had no way of knowing how she managed, for example, to stage an elaborate procession of floats, bands, mounted brigades, heralds with trumpets and upwards of 5,000 women divided according to their professions, with caps and capes in distinctive colors. Her quest for a permit, which pitted her against the Washington police superintendent, was a saga in itself.

And this was just the first of the demonstrations, protests, stunts and schemes over the next seven years that the National Woman’s Party Papers document in minute detail, along with the day-to-day business of raising money, wooing supporters and snuffing out fires. Here, too, are riveting accounts from the National Woman’s Party youthful organizers who fanned out across the country. They penned detailed descriptions of the obstacles they faced, from travel on primitive roads to ridicule from male politicians to snowstorms and withering heat.

Although I am grateful that I had access to the Rutgers collection, it was not a cakewalk. Because the university’s Alexander Library offered no parking aside from metered street spaces, I developed an alternative. Toting notebooks, a purse and a laptop day after day, I parked in the lot of a Sears, walked to a nearby shelter and took a campus bus multiple stops to the library.

“Had it not been for such easy access to the NWPP, my book would not exist.”
How is studying Alice Paul’s career relevant to 21st century students and researchers?

Over the past decade, I have seen interest grow in Alice Paul. Many people have viewed “Iron-Jawed Angels,” an engaging but not entirely accurate 2004 film which stars Hillary Swank in the lead role of Paul. Every spring I receive as many as a dozen requests from students writing papers on Alice Paul for National History Day, who have taken the initiative to track me down through my website. The Alice Paul Institute receives scores more. And the number swells each year. The upcoming 2020 Centennial of the 19th Amendment has spawned an outpouring of books that mine the history of suffrage. I should think the NWPP will be much in demand by a new generation of scholars.

For years, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton dominated the history of women’s quest for the vote. This is doubtless because they had the foresight to launch the six-volume History of Woman Suffrage. Stanton died in 1902, Anthony in 1906. From the little that was written following the deaths of these two pioneers for women’s rights, one could assume that the Nineteenth Amendment came quickly and easily.

The NWPP offer, however, extensive documentation of the hard-fought battle that lay ahead. Many were the setbacks. At times a desperate effort to replenish the party’s empty treasury took precedence over all other activities, and only Paul’s perseverance kept her party alive. To be sure the National Woman’s Party was not alone in the quest for the vote. But no serious account of the cultural and political revolution that underlay the amendment is complete without a reading of the National Woman’s Party Papers.

About Mary Walton
Mary Walton is a journalist and book author. Her most recent book is A Woman’s Crusade: Alice Paul and the Battle for the Ballot. She is also the author of a play, The Trial of Susan B. Anthony. At the Philadelphia Inquirer, where she worked for 22 years, she was a staff writer for the Sunday Magazine. One of her stories, on the noted statistician and quality expert, W. Edwards Deming, led to a business best seller, The Deming Management Method, which has sold more than 750,000 copies. Her book Car: A Drama of the American Workplace was cited as an outstanding work of non-fiction by the Athenaeum of Philadelphia. The New York Times called it “the rare business book that is a page turner.” She is a graduate of Harvard University. Her articles have appeared in Harper’s, Washington Monthly, Washingtonian, American Journalism Review, New York Times, Chicago Tribune, and the Los Angeles Times, among others. For more info, visit: marywaltonwriter.com

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**THE SUFFRAGE AMENDMENT**

Proposing an amendment to the Constitution of the United States extending the right of suffrage to women.

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled (two-thirds of each House concurring therein), That the following article be proposed to the legislatures of the several States as an amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which, when ratified by three-fourths of the said legislatures, shall be valid as part of said Constitution, namely: 

"ARTICLE—SEC. 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

"SEC. 2. Congress shall have power, by appropriate legislation, to enforce the provisions of this article."

**THE AMENDMENT IN THE SIXTIETH CONGRESS**

Introduced

In the Senate, April 4, 1917, by Senators Thompson, Owen, Jones and Smith.

In the House, April 2, 1917, by Representatives Raker, Rankin, Mouillard, Keating and Lyman.

Referred

In the Senate, to the Committee on Woman Suffrage.

In the House, to the Judiciary Committee.

Present Status

In the Senate

Before the Committee on Woman Suffrage

In the House

Before the Judiciary Committee.

**HISTORY OF THE AMENDMENT**

Drafted

In its present form, by Susan B. Anthony in 1851.

First introduced

January 11, 1878, in the Congress of the United States.

Reported from Committee

In the Senate

1878, Adverse major, Favorable minor

1879, Favorable minor

1882, Favorable major

1883, Favorable major

1886, Favorable major

1890, Favorable major

1894, Adverse major

1913, Adverse major

1914, Favorable minor

1916, Favorable minor

In the House

1883, Favorable major

1884, Adverse major

1885, Favorable minor

1889, Favorable major

1894, Adverse major

1914, Without record

1916, Without record

Voted upon

In the Senate

January 29, 1887, (4 votes for, 4 against).

May 31, 1914, of the necessity.

In the House

January 25, 1913, by 78 of the members.

By order of:

By order of:

DANIEL WEBSTER

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**Why We Keep on Picketing**

FOR nearly seventy years women have worked for enfranchisement. They have held numerous mass meetings in large cities, and have addressed small groups in the remotest towns; they have held innumerable street meetings and many great processions; they have rolled up huge petitions to Congress, aggregating millions of names; they have sent to the President deputations of women representing every walk of life. The question of woman suffrage is probably better known and more widely approved than any political question which Congress has acted on favorably, even for the past five years. Last January a deputation of women waited upon President Wilson, urging him to stop the waste of energy and life that was being expended in the long struggle to establish democracy for women. His reply was that women must "conduct public opinion" in favor of their freedom.

Since that date women have realized that they needed to make a more constant, direct, and public appeal to the President, as head of the government, for justice. Every day since January 10, 1917, through the cold of winter and the heat of summer, women have stood at the gates of the White House, holding in their hands their suffrage banners of purple, white, and gold.

For five months they were allowed to stand there in peace. But last month the district police began to arrest them for holding the same banners in the same place.

This afternoon, a woman was arrested holding a banner at the gate of the White House. The police officer in charge is technical

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**WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM**

RECEIVED AT

JUNE 67 NL

SOUTHWARK, CORN 16

MISS ALICE PAUL

2101

14 JACKSON PLACE, WASHINGTON, D.C.

WE WHO HAVE FOLLOWED YOUR UNSTOPPED LEADERSHIP THROUGH THESE PAST SEVEN YEARS REALIZE THAT IT WAS ONLY YOUR SPIRITUAL DEVOTION AND FEARLESS COURAGE THAT WON FOR US ALL THE VICTORY OF TODAY. I AM GRATEFUL THAT IT WAS MY PRIVILEGE TO HAVE HAD YOU FOR MY FRIEND AS WELL AS MY BOSS LOVE AND WARMEST CONGRATULATIONS AND WAITING YOU A CHECK TONIGHT TO KEEP UP THE BILL.

HELENA HELDENBERG.