

**KATE  
CHAPMAN  
STAFFORD  
1873-1934**



**SUFFRAGIST  
INMATE AT  
OCCOQUAN  
PRISON**

People often learn a sanitized version of women's suffrage. In 1917, a group of women became political prisoners in America. Kate Stafford was one of many suffragists arrested while picketing the White House who suffered unspeakable torture through the "Night of Terror" at the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia.

Kate Chapman was born in December 1873 in Missouri and raised in Coldwater, Kansas. She married local newspaper man Irvin Stafford in Wichita, Kansas in 1893. Irvin claimed property in the Cherokee Strip Land Run, and he moved the prospering family to Marshall in 1894 to open a drug store.

By the early 1900s the suffrage movement was at a crossroads. After Susan B. Anthony died in 1906, the radical wing of the movement was led by Alice Paul and Lucy Burns, who had previously worked with militant often violent British suffragettes. The Oklahoma movement started when the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) formed in 1890. At the 1906 Constitutional Convention, they were supported by future U. S. Senator Robert Owen and opposed by future governors Charles Haskell and William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray.

After statehood, Kate was appointed the Beaver County Notary Public but Irvin deserted the family due to infidelity. She received half of his property and relocated to Oklahoma City in 1912. Nationally, the Paul-led suffragists held their first major parade in 1913 in Washington DC with 8,000 women marching on the eve of President Wilson's inauguration to capitalize on the large media presence in the city. Angry mostly-male mobs violently attacked the marchers at several points on the parade route with the women having no police protection.

Stafford joined the WCTU in 1913, often winning medals in oratory competitions on prohibition. She also joined the Oklahoma Women's Suffrage Association. In 1916, Paul and Burns formed the radical National Women's Party (NWP). When an Oklahoma City branch formed in 1916, Stafford became its most vocal recruit.

In January 1917, women called Sentinels of Liberty started silently picketing outside the White House, holding large suffrage signs. For next two months, the women stood in rain, sleet and snow. On March 4<sup>th</sup>, more than a thousand women marched around the White House on the eve of Wilson's second inauguration. Even when World War I broke out in April, suffragists remained at their positions. When Burns unfurled a sign declaring "America was not a democracy", she was attacked and the banner destroyed. Again, the police did nothing.

On June 22<sup>nd</sup>, the arrests began. When they weren't charged, the women returned to the picket line. Then more women were charged daily for obstructing traffic and sentenced to jail after refusing to pay their fines. Stafford joined the protest and was arrested on November 10<sup>th</sup>, given thirty days at Occoquan Prison in Virginia, a despicable place. President Wilson offered them pardons but they refused because they had committed no crime.

November 15<sup>th</sup> became known as the "Night of Terror" when Superintendent Whittaker watched as guards dragged, choked, kicked women, and slammed them into iron beds or handcuffed their arms to the cell bars above their heads. Stafford was one of many women on a hunger strike who were force-fed until they became ill. Soon news got out about what happened. On November 27<sup>th</sup>, government authorities ordered the unconditional release of all suffrage prisoners. In January 1918, all charges were dropped. Stafford had served fourteen days.

At the NWP National Convention in December, Stafford and 96 other prisoners received a commemorative silver "Jailed for Freedom" pin from Paul. Upon returning to Oklahoma City, Stafford warned Governor Robert L. Williams that the same siege of picketing would happen at the State Capitol. An eloquent orator, Stafford spoke across Oklahoma about her experiences and why she picketed the White House. In November 1918, Oklahoma voters ratified an amendment to the state constitution. On February 1920 they ratified the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

Stafford worked at Southwestern Bell Telephone Company until 1930, continuing her reform work for women and children until her death in March 1934 at age 62. Perhaps if we talked more about leaders like Kate Stafford and other suffragists, women would be more enthusiastic about voting.