

Home of suffragist movement

FIELD TRIP

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The Sewall-Belmont House and Museum on Capitol Hill is more than 200 years old and is one of the oldest homes in the neighborhood. But it's not just any old house.

During the early 20th century, it served as a major headquarters for the suffragist movement, and its museum is devoted to telling the story of women's fight for the right to vote.

"We teach a bit of history that's not really taught in schools," says Amy Conroy, executive director at the Sewall-Belmont House and Museum. "We talk about the length of the struggle -- 70 years -- and what women went through, including jail time, to win the right to vote."

Women started organizing and working actively on voting rights in the mid-1800s, and the constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote was ratified in 1920.

The rooms of the old house are full of artifacts from the movement, including photographs, sculptures of the most prominent suffragists, period furniture, paintings, political cartoons, the desk where Susan B. Anthony wrote the 19th Amendment (Anthony, who died in 1906, never cast a legal ballot), and banners used in demonstrations.

One purple, gold and white banner on display reads: "Forward out of darkness, leave behind the night, forward out of error, forward into light."

"You will see these colors throughout," says Barbara Bates, a docent at the museum. "Purple represents the glory of women, white stands for purity in home and politics, and gold represents victory."

Several of the photographs highlight women's right-to-vote protests outside the White House and the arrests of 16 suffragists who were sent to do jail time at the Occoquan Workhouse. One of these women was Alice Paul (who in the HBO production "Iron Jawed Angels" was played by Oscar winner Hilary Swank), the founder of the National Woman's Party.

Miss Paul and her group made the Sewall-Belmont House their home for several decades, starting in 1929.

The history of the house is much older, however. The house was built in 1800 by Robert Sewall. The Belmont part of the house's name comes from Alva Belmont, a 20th-century philanthropist who became wealthy from her marriages to William Kissam Vanderbilt and Oliver Belmont.

Sewall, the first owner, rented the house to Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin for about a dozen years, and Ms. Bates says it's said that Gallatin negotiated the financial aspects of the Louisiana Purchase in the parlor.

The house also played a role during the War of 1812, when Americans hiding in the home fired at British troops.

"It was just about the only resistance the British got in this town," Ms. Bates says and laughs.

The British retaliated by burning the house, which was rebuilt by Sewall a few years later.

The house continued to be in the line of fire in a more symbolic way in years to come as the U.S. Capitol campus grew.

"It almost became a parking lot for one of the House office buildings," Ms. Bates says.

It survived, though, and in 1974, it was designated a National Historic Site. In recent years, it has been used for educational purposes rather than activism, although the latter is still evident. One of the upstairs rooms, for example, is where Alice Paul lived. Her Federal-style four-post bed and her Mission-style desk still are in the room.

Also upstairs are political cartoons by Nina Allender. One shows President Wilson in a horse-drawn carriage. He's in the process of embracing one baby and throwing another out of the carriage. The title of the cartoon is "Mr. Wilson Holds the Reins," and the text inside the strip says, "Democracy Abroad" (referring to the baby in his arms) and "Democracy at Home" (referring to the baby being thrown out).

Downstairs are portraits, posters and sculptures of trailblazing suffragists such as Inez Milholland Boissevain (played by Julia Ormond in "Iron Jawed Angels"), Sojourner Truth and Jeanette Rankin, who was the first woman elected to the House of Representatives. She started serving in 1917, three years before women could vote.

"I think we have something for all ages and levels," says Becki Fogerty, program manager at the museum. "A 10-year-old -- the visuals make an impact with them -- they see that women weren't considered whole people. They connect with that because they battle their parents about their own rights."

Younger children enjoy the hands-on activities, such as making their own banners, and teenagers can talk about burgeoning women's rights in Afghanistan and Iraq and how they compare to American women's rights, she says.

Ms. Conroy says young visitors often are surprised to find out how hard women fought for voting and other rights that many take for granted. She adds:

"Their grandmothers were not even able to get credit cards."

When you go:

Location: The Sewall-Belmont House and Museum is at 144 Constitution Ave. NE in the District.

Directions: The house is located a block northeast of the U.S. Capitol.

Hours: The house is open from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and noon to 4 p.m. Saturday. Tours are given on the hour.

Parking: Limited street parking is available. The museum, however, is close to several Metro stops, including Union Station on the Red Line and Capitol South on the Orange and Blue lines.

Admission: Free, but \$5 donation is suggested.

Information: 202/546-1210 or www.sewallbelmont.org

Notes:

- The Sewall-Belmont House and Museum features frequent family events, including

"Young Suffragists: Learn How Women Won the Right to Vote," a hands-on event that takes place 9:45 a.m. to noon the third Saturday of every month. Activities include making protest banners and talks about how women won the right to vote. Refreshments are provided. Fee: \$5 per child. Call 202/546-1210, Ext. 11, to reserve a space.

- The museum will celebrate Black History Month with several events, including "Black Women in America: Contributors to Our Heritage," 1 to 3 p.m., Feb. 26. The event is open to children ages 5 to 15. It will include re-enactments and talks about black women's suffrage. Free. Call 202/546-1210, Ext. 17, to reserve a space.