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Alice Paul and women's rights at Mount Laurel Library



Celebrating ratification of the women's suffrage amendment, Alice Paul, seated second from left, sews the 36th star on a banner, in August of 1920. The banner flew in front of headquarters of the Women's Party in Washington of which Miss Paul was national chairperson. The 36th star represented Tennessee, whose ratification completed the number of states needed to put the amendment in the Constitution. (AP Photo) (AP)



GALLERY: Taylor Williams of Philadelphia will portray women's movement leader Alice Paul at the Mount Laurel Library, as she has done around the country for decades.

By Sally Friedman, For The Inquirer

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It's Women's History Month, and here's a basic test:

Who was Alice Paul?

Well, she was feisty. She was brilliant. Some might even say that Alice Stokes Paul (1885-1977), our cover girl, was the true founder of the women's movement.

Yet, there are many to whom the name means nothing.

Which is why Philadelphia's Taylor Williams is bringing her stirring portrayal of Paul, in authentic period costume, to the Mount Laurel Library this weekend. The event is sponsored by the Alice Paul Institute, which is headquartered at Paul's Mount Laurel family homestead, and is now a center for leadership development for girls and women.

Williams, a practicing lawyer with a master's degree in theater arts from Villanova, happily juggles her profession with her passion.

"I used to use my lunch money to sneak into theaters when I was growing up," recalls Williams, who also was advised to marry a lawyer, not become one.

She did become one, but her acting chops were revived in the 1980s, when she became an actor for Philadelphia's American Historical Theatre. She reenacts the life of a woman born into a Mount Laurel Quaker family, educated at Swarthmore College, and so committed to the cause of suffrage and women's rights that it occupied her entire

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life.

"Alice Paul practiced such self-discipline that she even refused to heat her home for fear she might be tempted to take time off in comfort to read a novel," Williams says.

Paul disliked interviews and wondered why anyone would want to study her life. Yet, this was the woman who battled for passage of the 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote, and introduced the Equal Rights Amendment - which still awaits passage - way back in 1923.

Williams says Paul was so tunnel-visioned that biographers could find no love interest - man, woman, or dog - in her life. And despite taking the lead in sometimes violent picketing and demonstrations, she always considered herself a "shy Quaker woman."

Arrested, maligned, force-fed when she went on a hunger strike in prison, Paul inspires Williams, who for decades has brought the suffragist's story to campuses and events around the country. She takes her cue from Paul: "When you put your hand to the plow, you can't set it down until you get to the end of the row."

2 p.m. Saturday at the Mount Laurel Library, 100 Walt Whitman Ave., Mount Laurel. Free. 856-234-7319, Ext. 314. www.alicepaul.org.

Betsy/Becky

Betsy Ross' name is known the world over; not so much that of Rebecca Franks. Yet in colonial Philadelphia they were contemporaries whose lives reflected the two sides of the American Revolution and the class society in the city in the late 18th century.

The installation "Flags to Riches: The Stories of Rebecca Franks and Betsy Ross" at the Betsy Ross House illuminates the differences between a lady of privilege and a middle-class tradeswoman.

"While Rebecca lived a life of leisure and luxury, Betsy worked endless hours as an upholsterer for the wealthy," explains Lisa Acker Moulder, director of the Betsy Ross House. "She was totally blind by the time of her death, and it's believed that doing fine needlework by candlelight may have been to blame."

As Rebecca lived a gilded life, attending balls and supporting the British cause, twice-widowed Betsy may have designed Rebecca's umbrella, an important status symbol for a rich woman. (Betsy would not have been able to afford one.)

Objects in the show, presented in cooperation with the Naomi Wood Collection at Woodford Mansion, include a simple snuff box owned by the woman who created the American flag, Rebecca's elaborately enameled version and other indulgences, and Betsy's tools and implements.

"Flags to Riches" continues at the Betsy Ross House, 239 Arch St., through Dec. 31. Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission: \$5 for adults, \$4 for children and seniors. 215-686-1252. www.betsyrosshouse.org.

Looking out

"The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts has welcomed women students since 1811 - long before other American and European art schools accepted female students," notes Heike Rass, spokeswoman for the academy.

Through April 7, the academy is showing "The Female Gaze: Women Artists Making Their World."

The first-time exhibition of 244 works by contemporary female artists spans multiple artistic viewpoints, political perspectives, and media. They are from the Linda Lee Alter Collection of Art by Women, part of Alter's 500-piece gift to the academy in 2010.

Among the artists displayed are Louise Bourgeois, Viola Frey, Joan Brown, Kiki Smith, Gladys Nilsson, Alice Neel, Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro, Beatrice Wood, and Faith Ringgold.

"The Female Gaze" continues through April 7 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 118-128 N. Broad St. Adults, \$15; 60 and over, and students with ID, \$12; youth 10-18, \$10.

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