

The National Woman's Party and the Occoquan Workhouse Lesson

Written and arranged by Erica W. Benson

M.A. North American History, M.A. Secondary Education: Teaching, B.A. History, B.S. Journalism

Essential Historical Question

- Was the justice system fair and Constitutional in its treatment of the National Woman's Party picketers?
- What role did the Occoquan Workhouse play in the women's suffrage movement?

Recommended Time Frame:

- At least one 45/50-minute class period, if you plan it for a longer class period you have the opportunity to show clips of the HBO film *Iron Jawed Angels*.
- Question 13 can be assigned for homework and submitted online or written by hand.

Pre-requisites: It is helpful if students have studied WWI so they can understand the context of the final push for suffrage and the messaging and strategy used by the NWP to pressure President Wilson.

Materials:

- Primary Source Document sets for pair groupings (upload online if students have computers or print)
- Phased guided questions/position questions – one copy for each student
- A projector to play film clips (you can typically find *Iron Jawed Angels* for free online, or you can purchase the DVD – you won't regret it!)

Procedures:

Step-by-step plan of instruction:

1. Open the class with a 3-minute quick write: "What free speech rights do Americans have? Is it ever limited, if so, when?" After a few minutes post/reveal the 1st Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Students will have a variety of responses and examples to draw from; ask students to share what they wrote with a neighboring student.

2. Tell the students that they will be taking a closer look at the suffrage movement of the early 20th century to investigate and discuss whether the justice system was fair and Constitutional in its treatment of the National Woman's Party picketers.
 - Pair students together (ex. shoulder partners, assigned pairs, etc.) and explain they will work together to analyze the documents.
 - Pass out one document set to each pair. They should begin reading the background information while you pass out the "Phased guided/position questions" to each student. Each student needs to write their own responses on their own guided questions paper.

Walk around the room and make sure students are citing specific evidence to support their answers and that partners are talking and working together.

3. Depending on the time you are working with, you can discuss positions taken (*Was the justice system fair and Constitutional in its treatment of the National Woman's Party picketers?*) and how they changed over time as an exit discussion. Assign Question 13 for homework and post the document set where students can access them online.

In the next class session, divide the class into small group discussions or discuss as a class to share out their final positions regarding the question: ***Was the justice system fair and Constitutional in its treatment of the National Woman's Party (NWP) picketers?*** Students must provide their supporting evidence.

If time allows, share clips of the film *Iron Jawed Angels* (HBO 2004). The scenes of The Silent Sentinels picketing, their arrests, beatings, and the force feedings are powerful and accurate representations of history.

4. Finally, share/teach the class what happened after the NWP picketers treatment was exposed:
Source: Library of Congress, American Memory: "Historical Overview of the National Woman's Party"

Women of all classes risked their health, jobs, and reputations by continuing their protests. One historian estimated that approximately 2,000 women spent time on the picket lines between 1917 and 1919, and that 500 women were arrested, of whom 168 were actually jailed. The NWP made heroes of the suffrage prisoners, held ceremonies in their honor, and presented them with commemorative pins. Women went on publicity tours dressed in prison garb and talked about their experiences in prison in order to win public support for their cause.

Congressional Passage of 19th Amendment and Ratification Campaign Government officials found it increasingly difficult to refuse the vote to women who were contributing so much to the war effort. Anti-suffragist arguments about women's mental and physical inferiority were difficult to sustain as women took over jobs vacated by men drafted into military service. In addition, the NWP's militant tactics and the public support its members garnered from their imprisonment, combined with persistent, low-key lobbying by NAWSA, eventually forced President Wilson to endorse the 19th Amendment on January 9, 1918. The next day, it passed in the House of Representatives. Obstructionists from southern and eastern states delayed passage in the Senate until June 1919, during which time NWP members continued to lobby and protest. They established picket lines in front of the U.S. Capitol and the Senate Office Building in October 1918; started a watch fire campaign on January 1, 1919, in front of the White House to pressure President Wilson to lobby recalcitrant senators to pass the suffrage amendment; burned Wilson's words and image in effigy; and sent suffrage prisoners on a cross-country speaking tour aboard a train named "Democracy Limited" in February and March 1919. On May 21, 1919, the U.S. House of Representatives again passed the Susan B. Anthony federal suffrage amendment, and on June 4, the U.S. Senate followed suit. The enactment of the amendment initiated a 14-month campaign for ratification by 36 states. During this time the NWP sent national organizers into key states to help local NWP members coordinate ratification efforts. Finally, on August 18, 1920, Tennessee became the 36th state to ratify the 19th

Once suffrage was achieved, the NWP regrouped and focused its attention on passing a federal Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), drafted by Alice Paul and first introduced in Congress in December 1923. The party withstood attacks from women's groups who opposed the ERA as a threat to sex-based protective labor legislation and kept the issue alive for decades until the renewed ERA campaign in the 1970s.

Throughout the 20th century, the NWP remained a leading advocate of women's political, social, and economic equality. In the 1920s, the NWP drafted more than 600 pieces of legislation in support of equal rights for women on the state and local levels, including bills covering divorce and custody rights, jury service, property rights, ability to enter into contracts, and the reinstatement of one's maiden name after marriage.

Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.8

Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.5

Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

For tagging and search

- Grade Level 9-12
- Topics
 - Activism
 - Civil Rights
 - Conflict and Compromise (NHD topic)
 - Equal Rights
 - Government
 - Law and Crime
 - Politics
 - Progressive Era
 - Reform Movement
 - Suffrage
 - Voting Rights
 - Women's History Month
 - Women's Rights
 - World War I
 - National Woman's Party (NWP)
 - Alice Paul
 - Lucy Burns

- Woodrow Wilson
- Silent Sentinels
- Occoquan Workhouse
- Political prisoners
- Hunger Strike

DOCUMENT SET

for The National Woman's Party and the Occoquan Workhouse inquiry

BACKGROUND READING

Source: Excerpt from the article "The Woman Suffrage Movement: The Most Significant Achievement of Women in the Progressive Era" written by the National Women's History Museum

<https://www.womenshistory.org/resources/general/woman-suffrage-movement>

The woman suffrage movement actually began in 1848, when a women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. The Seneca Falls meeting was not the first in support of women's rights, but suffragists later viewed it as the meeting that launched the suffrage movement. For the next 50 years, woman suffrage supporters worked to educate the public about the validity of woman suffrage. Under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and other women's rights pioneers, suffragists circulated petitions and lobbied Congress to pass a constitutional amendment to enfranchise women.

At the turn of the century, women reformers in the club movement and in the settlement house movement wanted to pass reform legislation. However, many politicians were unwilling to listen to a disenfranchised group. This attitude contributed to the widespread realization that in order to achieve reform, women needed to win the right to vote. For these reasons, by the turn of the century, the woman suffrage movement became a mass movement with growing support in every state.

In the 20th century leadership of the suffrage movement passed to two organizations. The first, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), under the leadership of Carrie Chapman Catt, was a moderate organization. The NAWSA undertook campaigns to enfranchise women in individual states, and simultaneously lobbied President Wilson and Congress to pass a woman suffrage Constitutional Amendment. In the 1910s, NAWSA's membership numbered in the millions.

The second group, the National Woman's Party (NWP), under the leadership of Alice Paul, was a more militant organization. The NWP undertook radical actions, including picketing the White House, in order to convince Wilson and Congress to pass a woman suffrage amendment.

The NWP stated they would picket the U.S. President to support women's suffrage until a Constitutional amendment enfranchising women was ratified. They protested in front of the White House six days a week from sunrise to sunset during Woodrow Wilson's presidency. They became known as the Silent Sentinels because of their silent protesting.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Was the justice system fair and Constitutional in its treatment of the National Woman's Party (NWP) picketers?

PHASE 1

DOCUMENT A:

Excerpt from PRESIDENT WILSON'S JOINT ADDRESS TO CONGRESS, APRIL 2, 1917
It led to a Declaration of War Against Germany (U.S. entry into WW1)

...

It is a war against all nations. American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, but the ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way. There has been no discrimination. The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it. The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgment befitting our character and our motives as a nation. We must put excited feeling away. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion.

...

Our object now, as then, is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power and to set up amongst the really free and self-governed peoples of the world such a concert of purpose and of action as will henceforth insure the observance of those principles. Neutrality is no longer feasible or desirable where the peace of the world is involved and the freedom of its peoples, and the menace to that peace and freedom lies in the existence of autocratic governments backed by organized force which is controlled wholly by their will, not by the will of their people. We have seen the last of neutrality in such circumstances. We are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and of responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states.

...

But the right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts,-for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.

DOCUMENT B:

THE SEDITION ACT (1918)

Sec. 3. Whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully make or convey false reports or false statements with intent to interfere with the operation or success of the military or naval forces of the United States, or to promote the success of its enemies, or shall willfully make or convey false reports or false statements, or say or do anything except by way of bona fide and not disloyal advice to an investor or investors, with intent to obstruct the sale by the United States of bonds or other securities of the United States or the making of loans by or to the United States, and whoever when the United States is at war, shall willfully cause or attempt to cause, or incite or attempt to incite, insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty, in the military or naval forces of the United States, or shall willfully obstruct or attempt to obstruct the recruiting or enlistment services of the United States, and whoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully utter, print, write or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States or the Constitution of the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States, or the flag of the

United States, or the uniform of the Army or Navy of the United States into contempt, scorn, contumely, or disrepute, or shall willfully utter, print, write, or publish any language intended to incite, provoke, or encourage resistance to the United States, or to promote the cause of its enemies, or shall willfully display the flag of any foreign enemy, or shall willfully by utterance, writing, printing, publication, or language spoken, urge, incite, or advocate any curtailment of production in this country of any thing or things, product or products, necessary or essential to the prosecution of the war in which the United States may be engaged, with intent by such curtailment to cripple or hinder the United States in the prosecution of war, and whoever shall willfully advocate, teach, defend, or suggest the doing of any of the acts or things in this section enumerated, and whoever shall by word or act support or favor the cause of any country with which the United States is at war or by word or act oppose the cause of the United States therein, shall be punished by a fine of not more than \$10,000 or the imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both ...

DOCUMENT C:



SUFFRAGISTS FROM NATIONAL WOMAN'S PARTY (NWP) PICKETING THE WHITE HOUSE
c. 1917 Barnard Archives and Special Collections Barnard College and Columbia University

STOP AND ANSWER GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR PHASE 1.

PHASE 2

DOCUMENT D:

The Trials of Alice Paul and Other National Woman's Party Members: 1917

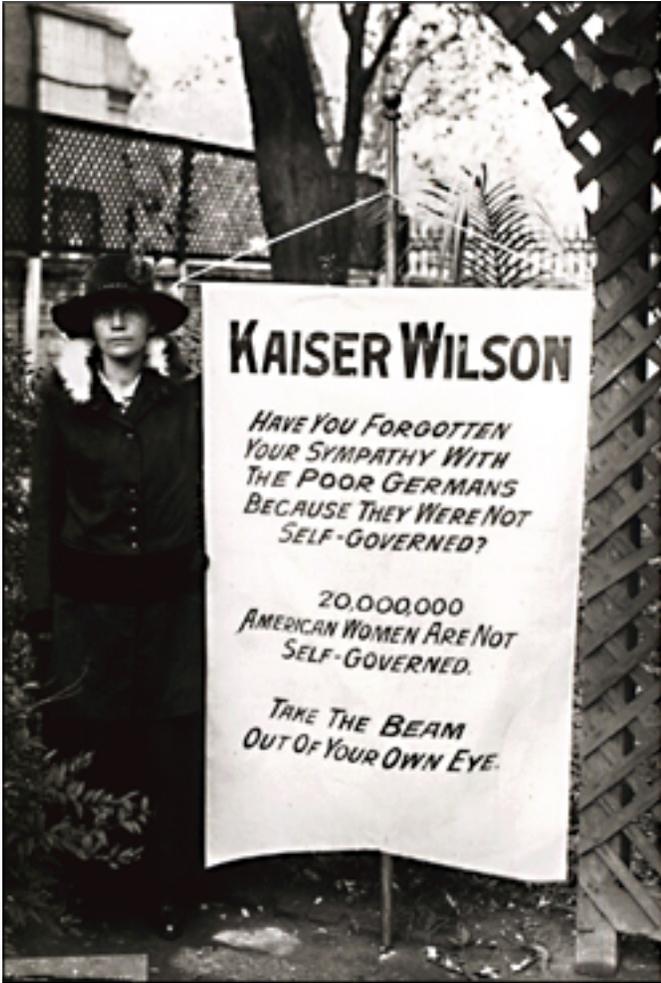
Legal Case Brief by Kathryn Cullen-DuPont – excerpts from <http://law.jrank.org/pages/2806/Trials-Alice-Paul-Other-National-Woman-s-Party-Members-1917.html#ixzz5LXjkXRn>

Prior to the United States' entrance into World War I, the women [NWP picketers] received no attention from the government. Shortly after the declaration of war, however, Alice Paul was warned by the chief of police for the District of Columbia that picketers would now have to be arrested. Paul replied that her lawyers had "assured us all along that picketing was legal," and she maintained that it was "certainly. ... as legal in June as in January." The first two picketers were nonetheless arrested on June 22, 1917. They were charged with obstructing a sidewalk but released and never tried, as were 27 other women within the next four days. This process failed to put an end to the picketing, and on June 27 six women stood trial for obstructing traffic. They were found guilty and fined \$25.00. Because they refused to pay their fine, they were sentenced to three days in jail.

The picketing continued. On July 14, 16 women were arrested. They stood trial the same day before district court Judge Alexander Mallowney. Mallowney had earlier consulted the U.S. Attorney about the possibility of trying the women under the new national law because their banners contained "words ... [that] are treasonous and seditious." Since the president's own words could not feasibly be brought up under the Sedition or Espionage Act, and because—as Alice Paul had earlier insisted—picketing was perfectly legal in the United States, the women were charged with the crime of obstructing traffic. All 16 women were sentenced to 60 days in the Occoquan Workhouse.

On October 4, Alice Paul herself was arrested along with 10 other women. In court October 8, the women refused to be sworn or to recognize the legitimacy of the court. Paul said: "We do not consider ourselves subject to this Court since, as an unenfranchised class, we have nothing to do with the making of the laws which have put us in this position." Although the charge was not dismissed, the women were released without sentence.

DOCUMENT E:



NWP Suffragist with Kaiser Wilson Banner/sign
Record Group 165 Records of the War Department
General and Special Staff National Archives and
Records Administration

Document F: *The Story of Alice Paul and the National Woman's Party* by Inez Haynes Irwin, 1920; reprint 1977.

Suffragist Inez Haynes Irwin wrote of the “slow growth of the crowds; the circle of little boys who gathered about . . . first, spitting at them, calling them names, making personal comments; then the gathering of gangs of young hoodlums who encourage the boys to further insults; then more and more crowds; more and more insults. . . . Sometimes the crowd would edge nearer and nearer, until there was but a foot of smothering, terror-fraught space between them and the pickets.”

DOCUMENT G:



Alice Paul at the NWP Headquarters The day after the police announced that future pickets would be given limit of six months in prison, Alice Paul led picket line with banner reading **"The time has come to conquer or submit for there is but one choice - we have made it."** She is followed by Dora Lewis. Harris & Ewing, Washington, D.C. (Photographer) Created / Published [1917 Oct. 20] Library of Congress

Alice Paul was arrested again the day this photo was taken on October 20, this time in the company of Dr. Caroline Spencer, Gladys Greiner, and Gertrude Crocker. The four were tried on October 22 before Judge Mallowney. Paul and Spencer, who had been carrying banners, were sentenced to seven months imprisonment. Greiner and Crocker, given the choice between \$5.00 fines or 30 days imprisonment, elected to go to jail.

Between June and November of 1917, 218 protesters from 26 states were arrested and charged with "obstructing sidewalk traffic."

STOP AND ANSWER GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR PHASE 2.

PHASE 3: THE OCCOQUAN WORKHOUSE

The workhouse was intended to be an experiment in prison reform and an alternative to the terrible conditions of the D.C. jail where the prisoners would work and learn how to legally contribute to society.

Document H: Excerpt from an article published by *The Washington Post*, “**Night of terror’: The suffragists who were beaten and tortured for seeking the vote**” by Terence McArdle, November 10, 2017

The male guards at the Northern Virginia prison manacled the party’s co-founder Lucy Burns by her hands to the bars above her cell and forced her to stand all night. Dorothy Day, who would later establish the Catholic Worker houses, had her arm twisted behind her back and was slammed twice over the back of an iron bench.

The guards threw suffragist Dora Lewis into a dark cell and smashed her head against an iron bed, knocking her out. Lewis’s cellmate, Alice Cosu, believing Lewis dead, suffered a heart attack and was denied medical care until the next morning.

The suffragists dubbed their treatment Nov. 14, 1917, as the “Night of Terror.”

...

At Occoquan, rats ran in and out of the unlit cells. The prisoners held contests to count the number of maggots in their food. And the prison denied the women a most basic human dignity – their privacy.

“In the morning we were taken one by one to a washroom at the end of the hall,” Day recalled in her memoir, “The Long Loneliness.” “There was a toilet in each cell, open, and paper and flushing were supplied by the guard. It was as though one were in a zoo with the open bars leading into the corridor.”

Prison officials denied the protesters counsel. Many began hunger strikes. And Occoquan superintendent W.H. Whittaker, who had ordered the beatings, called for Marines to guard the compound.

...

The suffragists demanded to be considered political prisoners, a distinction that could possibly mean better treatment at the D.C. Jail instead of Occoquan.

Paul had been arrested in October and taken to the D.C. Jail, where she went on a hunger strike. Doctors force-fed her twice a day with a tube down her throat – a process that caused her to vomit repeatedly. William Alanson White, the superintendent of St. Elizabeths Hospital, interviewed her in a vain attempt to have her committed. White found Paul to be sane and “perfectly calm, yet determined.”

DOCUMENT I: Excerpt from *JAILED FOR FREEDOM* BY DORIS STEVENS, an NWP activist who was jailed at the Occoquan Workhouse and kept a diary of their experiences. She published her memoir in 1920.

Alice Paul is in the psychopathic ward. She dreaded forcible feeding frightfully, and I hate to think how she must be feeling, I had a nervous time of it, gasping a long time afterward, and my stomach rejecting during the process. I spent a bad, restless night, but otherwise I am all right. The poor soul who fed me got liberally besprinkled during the process. I heard myself making the most hideous sounds.... One feels so forsaken when one lies prone and people shove a pipe down one's stomach.

This morning but for an astounding tiredness, I am all right. I am waiting to see what happens when the President realizes that brutal bullying isn't quite a statesmanlike method for settling a demand for justice at home. At least, if men are supine enough to endure, women? to their eternal glory? are not....

... Don't let them tell you we take this well. Miss Paul vomits much. I do, too We think of the coming feeding all day. It is horrible. The doctor thinks I take it well. I hate the thought of Alice Paul and the others if I take it well....

All the officers here know we are making this hunger strike that women fighting for liberty may be considered political prisoners; we have told them. God knows we don't want other women ever to have to do this over again.

DOCUMENT J:

**The Library of Congress, American Memory, Women of Protest:
Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party**

The next day, 16 of the women began a hunger strike, including Lewis and Burns. They followed the example set the previous month by Alice Paul and Rose Winslow. During her protest, Paul was subjected to psychiatric evaluation, threatened with transfer to an institution for the insane, and force-fed. News of her treatment was leaked outside the facility. When Burns and Lewis grew weak from refusing food, they, too, were force-fed. Burns had a tube forced up her nose rather than through her mouth, resulting in bleeding and injury. The assaultive nature of the force-feeding process was by all accounts a torturous experience for the women, one that they withstood repeatedly. Verbal techniques of psychological duress also were used to weaken the women's resolve. Isolated from one another, some prisoners were told falsely during their force-feedings that they were the only person still maintaining the hunger strike—claims that they knew not to believe.

DOCUMENT K: LETTER BY UNKNOWN SENT TO THE OCCOQUAN WORKHOUSE IN 1917

“Why not let this miserable creature starve. The country would be much better off without her and the balance of her gang of pickets. They are a rotten lot, and are crazy, and should be locked up for life. If they would starve it would save the expense of keeping them. Let them starve.”

Document L: Excerpt from *The Woman’s Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote* by Elaine Weiss, published in 2018

The Occoquan Workhouse was a decrepit, foul-smelling, vermin-infested jail, closed down a decade before as unfit to hold humans. The women entered dark, damp cells, each equipped with what Havemeyer described as “a disgusting closet, an iron support for a straw bed, one chair, and no light.” The bed straw was dirty, the sewage vapors nauseating, the cells bitter cold. Rats and cockroaches scurried on every surface. The women, hunger striking, didn’t touch the tins of soup or wormy bread set before them. Still, the conditions were better, and the sentences much shorter, than the six- and seven-month ordeals, often in solitary confinement, suffered by Alice Paul and other party women.

STOP AND ANSWER THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION USING THE SOURCES FROM ALL THREE PHASES OF ANALYSIS.

Name _____ Hour _____

STUDENT GUIDED QUESTIONS

FOR THE NATIONAL WOMAN'S PARTY AND THE OCCOQUAN WORKHOUSE INQUIRY

Directions: Read the documents in phases and answer the corresponding questions for each phase. Responses must be written in complete sentences and cite specific evidence and examples to support your answers and to defend of your position.

BACKGROUND READING QUESTION: 1. Who is the NWP and why were they formed?

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Was the justice system fair and Constitutional in its treatment of the National Woman's Party (NWP) picketers?

PHASE 1

Read the phase one documents and answer the following questions after an open discussion with your partner.

2. What do you think were the benefits of picketing the White House? What were the risks?

3. Why do you think the NWP chose that quote to display at their White House picketing? How do you think the NWP's picketing was received by the public? By the President and Congress? By foreign countries?

4. Do you think the banner is a violation of the Sedition Act, Sec. 3, explain? Do you think the Sedition Act violates the First Amendment? Explain.

PHASE 2

Read the phase one documents and answer the following questions after an open discussion with your partner.

5. Why were NWP picketers arrested, what was the charge?

6. Why do you think the women refused to pay the fine? What were the benefits and risks of this strategy?

7. What kind of reactions do you think the NWP is earning? Did people consider them traitors or heroes? What do you think the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) thought of their tactics?

8. TAKE A POSITION: Was the legal system fair and Constitutional in its treatment of the National Woman's Party (NWP) picketers? Defend your position with evidence and examples from Phase 1 & 2.

PHASE 3

Read the phase one documents and answer the following questions after an open discussion with your partner.

9. What were the experiences/treatment of the NWP picketers at the Occoquan Workhouse and were their experience unique? Explain.

10. Did the punishment fit the crime? Should they have been considered political prisoners? Why do you think the District Commissioner wouldn't agree to those demands?

11. What was the purpose of the hunger strike? When it made headlines across the globe, what do you think the reaction was by the public, Congress, the President? What would have happened to their movement if they had just been continuously jailed?

12. Do you think the NWP's civil disobedience was radical or militant? Explain. Did they hurt the suffrage movement?

13. TAKE A POSITION (10 – 12 sentences): Was the justice system fair and Constitutional in its treatment of the National Woman's Party (NWP) picketers? Defend your position with evidence and examples from Phase 1, 2 & 3.