

THE WORKHOUSE ARTS CENTER— A RICH HISTORY AND AN EXCITING FUTURE

by Wendy Santantonio

The Workhouse Arts Center, a project of the Lorton Arts Foundation, provides a home for more than 150 of the region's professional and emerging artists as well as cooperative studios, performance and theater venues, dedicated gallery space, and event facilities. Thus it offers essential visual and performing arts studio and exhibition space along with engaging arts education programs for people of all ages and artistic abilities. The expansive complex, once a correctional facility, has a rich past and an exciting new presence.

A Noble Idea Gone Bad

The area was developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, when President Theodore Roosevelt commissioned the purchase of a large tract of land in Virginia for the creation of a workhouse for Washington, D.C.'s nonviolent criminals. Roosevelt's Progressive Era vision was to provide prisoners with fresh air, natural light, and structured, purposeful work as the basis for their rehabilitation. Agricultural operations began at the Workhouse in 1912, and the prisoners created a brick plant where they produced bricks to construct the permanent buildings that now make up the Workhouse Arts Center. At the same time, the Women's Division of the Workhouse was established west of the men's area and is known for having held approximately 168 women, most from the National Women's Party, for picketing in front of the White House for women's voting rights. Lucy Burns, who along with Alice Paul founded the National Women's Party, was one of the women incarcerated there.

The first women to be sentenced to the Women's Workhouse received a sentence of sixty days. After arriving at the Workhouse, all personal effects were taken from them and they were fed a bowl of dirty, sour soup. No one was allowed to speak, and sleeping quarters were a large dormitory with a double row of cots without partitions. The suffragists were assigned to work in the Workhouse sewing room.



As news of the sentences spread, telegrams came in from all over the country and the press printed headlines that aroused sympathy for the suffragists. Even the most hard-hearted did not believe that picketing deserved such a drastic sentence. One official went directly to President Wilson to protest. The president expressed shock and said he did not know what had been done.

Pardons and Pickets

After three days at the Workhouse, this first group of suffragists was pardoned by the president. The Workhouse experience, however, did not discourage the pickets, and they returned to the gates of the White House in increasing numbers. Further arrests led to more sentences at the Workhouse, only now there would be no pardons. The suffrage prisoners were not allowed to see relatives until they had been in the institution at least two weeks. They were allowed to write only one letter per month, and all mail, incoming and outgoing, was censored. Their diet consisted of half-cooked vegetables, sour bread, and rancid soup with worms in it. The women continued to picket, however, and sentences became more severe. Harsh punishments were suffered after protesting to a matron that work scrubbing floors on hands and knees was too severe for one who had been unable to eat prison food for days. This protest led to placement in a punishment cell on bread and water with only an open pail for toilet purposes and no change of clothing for eleven days.

The conditions at the Workhouse did not improve, and the state of the prisoners became alarming. Finally, a writ of habeas corpus was obtained to compel the government to bring the prisoners into court and to show cause why they should not be returned from the Women's Workhouse in Virginia to the D.C. Jail. It did not take the judge long to rule that sentencing papers would direct that all prisoners be committed to the D.C. Jail and that the transfer to the Workhouse was carried out without legal process. The prisoners were transferred to the D.C. Jail for the remainder of their sentences, and the horror and degradation experienced at the Women's Workhouse came to an end for the suffragists.





Finally Victorious

The struggle, of course, did not end there. When the women were taken to the D.C. Jail, they joined Alice Paul in a hunger strike that led to the commutation of the suffragists' sentences. Support for women's suffrage continued to grow across the nation and in Congress. The amendment that would allow women the right to vote passed in the House of Representatives in January 1918 but failed to pass in the Senate. Months of maneuvering and political persuasion resulted in further votes with the same outcome. It was then that the National Woman's Party began watch fires in front of the White House, the first one on New Year's Day, 1919. More arrests were made, and the debate continued into February, as those opposed to the amendment seemed as determined as ever that it should be defeated. Meanwhile the "Prison Special," a special car of women who had been arrested and served sentences, toured the country to keep public attention focused on the suffrage issue in the

Senate. Finally in May 1919, the Republican House of Representatives passed the amendment, and in June the measure passed the Senate and was submitted to the states for ratification on June 4, 1919. Fourteen months later, Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state to ratify the amendment, and in November 1920, all women of the United States were permitted to vote in a national election.

The Lorton Arts Foundation is thrilled to be able to offer within the walls of this historic space a multitude of experiences in the visual and performing arts for people of all age groups from youth to seniors. The Foundation can be reached at (743) 495-0001.