



# selvedge THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE

THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE: IDENTITY





**STARS IN THEIR EYES**

*Alice Paul and the Ratification Flag*

Left: National Woman's Party activists watch Alice Paul sew a star onto the NWP Ratification Flag, representing another state's ratification of the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution.

Right: On August 18, 1920, Tennessee was the 36th state to ratify and finalize women's right to vote. Paul sewed the last star and stepped out to the balcony of the National Woman's Party headquarters in Washington D.C. to unfurl the flag to a cheering crowd.



**What do you see in the photograph on the left?** Let's try to break it down from the center out: the focal point of the photograph is an unassuming woman sewing a star onto a flag. She is surrounded by six, modestly dressed women who are watching her intently. A humble room encloses them in what seems like a blissful domestic scene. But the most interesting thing about the photograph is not what's in it, but what it leaves out. What's missing from the frame is the drama of one of the most successful political battles in United States history: the fight for American women's right to vote. The photograph was taken at the culmination of a century-long battle and includes only a handful of historical actors who relentlessly fought in its trenches. Significantly, the photograph is missing many women of colour who were written out from this history when it was cemented in public memory.

crowd. Although the suffrage movement focused on electoral politics, at the heart of the National Women's Party's activism was a more sweeping goal to redefine women's place in the public sphere. But how can women, who until that point did not have formal political influence, bring about such profound social and cultural change: to be seen as equal to men in the eyes of the law? In the decades leading up to the passage of the Amendment in 1920 the suffragists developed the playbook for women's political activism, a legacy evident in current movements such as #metoo and the Women's March. They left their homes and came out into the street in droves. They picketed, demonstrated, and marched at the time when the perceived respectability of every woman was determined by her ability to adhere to an ideology that saw her as belonging solely to the domestic sphere. The women of the movement also drew attention to their marches by uniformly wearing white, creating a kind of white mass that could not be ignored. Combined with purple banners and big bold signs, they drew a lexicon for twentieth century public activism. Even Paul's needlework, the painstaking process of sewing each star, is echoed in the knitting of twenty-first century pussy hats.

political aspirations or not. Perhaps it was this disarming image that made suffrage more palatable to most Americans. More importantly, the movement was composed of women from diverse backgrounds and social classes that did the work, fought the battle, but almost never got the credit outside of their communities. Black suffragists such as Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell were instrumental to the movement, yet when in 2018 the Central Park Conservancy commissioned a sculpture to commemorate women's suffrage, the initial design included only Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, two white middle-class women. Eventually, a public outcry led to a revision and the erected monument also features Sojourner Truth, who was born into slavery and is considered one of the most influential figures in the fight for racial and gender equality.

At the center is Alice Paul, chairwoman of the National Woman's Party and an activist for women's suffrage. After the passage of the 19th Amendment that guaranteed American women the right to participate in electoral politics, Paul started sewing onto a flag stars representing the states that voted to ratify the Amendment. An amendment to the US constitution requires its passage by two-thirds of each chamber of Congress, followed by a ratification by three-fourths of the states which, in 1919, before Hawaii and Alaska became states, was 36 out of 48. On August 18, 1920, Tennessee was the 36th state to ratify and finalise women's right to vote. Paul sewed the last star and stepped out to the balcony of the National Woman's Party headquarters in Washington D.C. to unfurl the flag to a cheering

Yet, the photograph of Paul and her party members unwillingly reveals the tangled history of the American suffrage movement. Led by white elite and middle-class women, the movement suffered from all the ills that plagued American society at that time. While the act of sewing onto the flag can be seen as subversive, it still relied on the notion that sewing and other domestic work is the appropriate realm of women, whether they have

Immediately after the passage of the 19th Amendment, Paul set down and drafted the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), a revision to the constitution that would guarantee gender equality in every aspect of American civil life. In the course of fifty-two years the ERA was brought in front of Congress every single year, until it was finally passed in 1972. However, unlike the 19th Amendment, the ERA was only ratified by 35 states, failing to meet the minimum requirement to be adopted. Our world now seems far removed from the battle for voting rights, but today American women are seeing their reproductive rights and other liberties diminished. More than ever, we need to enshrine equal rights in our constitution. ♦♦♦ **Keren Ben-Horin**