

Alva Vanderbilt Belmont

1853–1933



Multi-millionaire Alva Vanderbilt Belmont devoted her later years, and generous funding, to the cause of women's suffrage.

High Society

Born in Mobile, Alabama Alva Eskine Smith became one of the world's wealthiest women upon marriage to William Kissam Vanderbilt. Socially ambitious as a young woman, she devoted her energy to raising the "new money" Vanderbilt family to prominence in New York Society.



Alva in costume. Upon opening a new Fifth Avenue mansion Alva Vanderbilt reportedly spent \$3 million in 1883 dollars on a costume ball for 1,000 guests. PSNC ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS



Marble House in Newport, Rhode Island (built at a cost of \$11 million dollars) was a birthday gift from her first husband, William K. Vanderbilt. In later years she hosted suffragist events there, including a "Conference of Great Women" in 1914 and offered public tours to raise money for the suffrage cause. DADEROT



Alva Vanderbilt Belmont in 1911. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Scandalous

In 1895 Alva scandalized society by divorcing William Kissam Vanderbilt on the grounds of adultery. Even if the accusation was true, divorce was not acceptable in New York's high society. Later she married Oliver H. P. Belmont, a wealthy summer neighbor in Newport, Rhode Island. After his death she turned to the cause of women's suffrage.

Suffragist Benefactor

Alva Belmont funded several suffragist organizations. She supported Anna Howard Shaw as President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and financed a national headquarters in New York City. Later, influenced by the more aggressive tactics of Emmeline Pankhurst in England, she supported Alice Paul and the more radical National Woman's Party including their campaign of picketing the White House. She served as President of the National Woman's Party after passage of the 19th Amendment when the organization continued advocacy on issues such as an Equal Rights Amendment.

Class Conscious

Perhaps surprisingly, she worked with Harriet Stanton Blatch, daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, to recruit working class women to the suffrage cause and advocated a boycott of non-union dress manufacturers. Although supporting southern women's suffragist organizations that excluded black women, she also encouraged black women leaders in the New York area to participate in suffragist activities.



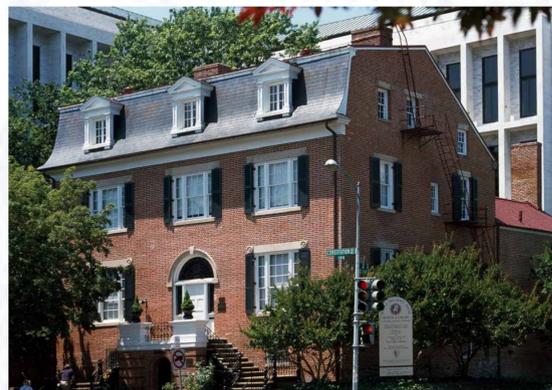
A bust of Alice Paul appears in the lobby of the Belmont-Paul house. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



The Chinese Tea House, on the grounds of Marble House, was the site of suffrage events. A miniature railroad that could be assembled and disassembled brought tea to guests. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Alva Belmont commissioned china with the "Votes for Women" slogan. EMELIA D. VAN BEUGAN



The Belmont-Paul House in Washington D. C (formerly the Sewall House) was donated by Alva Belmont to serve as headquarters of the National Woman's Party after passage of the 19th Amendment. It was designated as the "Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument" by President Obama in 2016. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

At her funeral in 1933 Alva Belmont had specified that all pall-bearers be women and that a banner bearing Susan B. Anthony's quotation "Failure is Impossible" be draped on her casket.

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