

Suffragist pin

**Q:** So, the first thing I want to ask you about is to just [00:00:07] describe the pin and any features that you think are significant?

**Response:** It's a silver jail door, jail room door. It's really very small. It's probably [00:00:17] only about the size of my finger. It has a heart-shaped padlock which is sort of sweet and it's actually based on the pin that was given [00:00:28] to the English suffragists who were imprisoned in Holloway and that— the pin that was given to them was shaped like the gate of the Holloway [00:00:41] Prison. Alice Paul and some of the other suffragist leaders worked with Mrs. Pankhurst in England and [00:00:46] brought back some of the more radical elements of the movement and then based this pin— this pin on that. Approximately a hundred little- I think a [00:00:53] little fewer over 150 were given to the women who protested in front of the White House and were jailed. I'm sorry, [it's] critical, that they [00:01:02] were— it's the women who were jailed.

**Q:** I probably interjected in the middle of your sentence [00:01:10] there, so can I ask you to go back and say that about the 150 and who—

**Response:** Sure. This was ... [chit-chat] These were given to the [00:01:23] women who were arrested and jailed for picketing in front of the White House in 1917 and 1919 and approximately 150 or so were given to these women.

**Q:** Great. [00:01:33] Can you tell us a little bit about the movement at this time, who these women are and what they're picketing for?

**Response:** It's women from a wide variety [00:01:41] of the American population. They're obviously the college-educated militant leaders of the movement like Alice Paul, Dora Stevens, but it's also immigrant [00:01:50] women who had been factory workers. It's women who [are] middle-class wives and mothers, not necessarily with a more liberal education, but who [00:02:02] are active in the cause, maybe had parents who were active in the cause. Harriet Stanton Blatch is, of course, a daughter of Elizabeth [00:02:09] Cady Stanton and grew up in the movement. It begins to attract more and more women as the need to vote, the need to have an impact [00:02:18] on American politics, American life, is becoming more and more critical to them.

**Q:** Can you tell us sort of as a curator, when you look at the [00:02:26] pin, what you sort of feel is sort of maybe the most symbolic thing about it or the most interesting thing about it?

**Response:** I think a jail [00:02:35] door is always an evocative image and it's used again and again to symbolize freedom, to symbolize struggle against oppression. I [00:02:44] think that this is significant— What speaks to me is always the idea, the immediate idea that these women were imprisoned for this, something that we [00:02:51] take now so for granted that women should want to vote, that women can vote, but that they were imprisoned for doing so, that they were imprisoned [00:03:00] for protesting in front of

the White House. Women were the first people to picket in front of the White House and now we think that's so normal that you can see pickets [00:03:10] at any time in Lafayette Park and this was— they were imprisoned for this, for obstructing traffic, of all things. Not for [00:03:19] protesting the president or for suffrage, but for obstructing traffic and that they were actually sentenced— The woman who received this pin received [00:03:27] a 60-day sentence in Occoquan Workhouse.

**Q:** Can you sort of summarize for us sort of the protests, sort of [00:03:39] the motivation for the protests in 1918, what sort of the day looked like or anything or sort of set the scene for the protests?

**Response:** Suffrage [00:03:51] had been picking up [steam]. After the 1870s, the doldrums period, the movement had been picking up steam again and the party has now— There're two [00:04:00] factions of the suffrage party now. There's the National American Woman's Suffrage Association led by Carrie Chapman Catt, the more conservative group [00:04:12] working for the federal amendment but also working state by state to get the states to allow women the vote and then there's the National Woman's [00:04:18] Party headed by Alice Paul. It's the more radical wing of the party, working solely for the federal amendment. They think they have a chance. [00:04:27] They held a huge parade and pageant the day before Woodrow Wilson's inauguration in 1913, but nothing's come of it. They— [00:04:36] The Congress is not seriously considering the amendment. They cannot get President Wilson to back the amendment in any real way. [00:04:47]

I think it was three more states have failed. In three states they failed to pass state-wide suffrage and I think that was South Dakota, West Virginia [00:04:54] and I'm not going to remember the third state, but South Dakota and West Virginia were heading into a war that's going to last no one knows how long and they're [00:05:07] becoming very frustrated, so they had met with President Wilson a few days prior. A delegation had gone to see the President, had gotten nowhere and the [00:05:18] decision was made to have a perpetual delegation in front of the White House. This is winter. It's January. It's cold and these women march out from [00:05:29] the Woman's Party headquarters, not far from the White House, down the street to the White House and they set up a daily, perpetual, silent delegation in [00:05:38] front of the White House that was greeted at first by Wilson with I think a little bit of amusement and courtesy. He invited them in for tea. Some [00:05:48] growing— Masked, but growing irritation and then as America enters the war, this becomes— the climate changes and this is not— this is starting to [00:05:59] be considered to be unpatriotic. You shouldn't— You need to support the President at a time of war. We have to put these differences aside and [00:06:08] work for the greater democracy, bringing democracy to Europe, not getting you the vote here and, of course, to the suffragists, this sounds absurd. [00:06:18] Why are we fighting for democracy? We're defending democracy abroad, but we don't have true democracy in this country and that gives some [00:06:28] impetus to their protests.

**Q:** As a curator, if you approached this pin with sort of a group of teenagers, what's sorts of the main thing that you [00:06:41] would want them to take away from their encounter with the object?

**Response:** I want them to remember that it's individuals who made a difference, individuals who— [00:06:49] They knew that they were potentially going to be arrested. They were informed beforehand that if the pickets continued, that they would [00:06:57] be arrested and had the bravery to continue, had the courage of their convictions and that it was all individuals coming together and that some of [00:07:08] the protestors were quite young. These were young women, 18 years old, 19 years old, who were protesting and being jailed for it, that you can never [00:07:18] be too or too committed.

**Q:** As a curator, if you were to put this on exhibit, what objects would you— What sort of contextual objects [00:07:27] would you put with it?

**Response:** It's normally exhibited with obviously the obvious pieces—suffrage material. It was recently in the exhibit Parlor [00:07:34] to Politics which was in a section on winning suffrage. It would also be interesting to display it with other, say, civil rights materials with pieces [00:07:47] from the 1960s civil rights movement, with pieces related to any voting rights movement to try and show a continuum that they all learn from each other and that the [00:07:56] protests made by the women were inspiration later for the protestors in the 1960s. It would also be interesting to place it, and I've never seen it [00:08:05] used this way, with other just protest materials, the idea that these were the first people to picket in front of the White House. It'd be sort of interesting [00:08:14] to juxtapose it with other causes that are on display outside the White House.

**Q:** These pins are a gift, right?

**Response:** They were given— Yes, they awarded [00:08:29] to women who were jailed. In this particular case, in 1917, it was after the— In December of 1917, there was a meeting of the Woman's Party [00:08:38] to great fanfare, a lot of public support and in a ceremony, they all marched down the aisle of the auditorium they were meeting in and were awarded [00:08:52] these pins.

**Q:** How did the pin end up in the Smithsonian's collection?

**Response:** I'm honestly not sure. The woman to whom it was— It was [00:09:01] collected— It was donated in 1959 and there's very little information in the files to tell us how Mrs. Walker contacted the Smithsonian, how it came here. [00:09:09] At the time she was living in Florida and the only information I have— I have no letters. It's just that it was donated, that she gave her background and what [00:09:21] she was doing when she, you know, the day she was arrested. She was actually arrested on Bastille Day and was carrying a banner that said [00:09:27] Liberty, Fraternity, Equality and was sent— was sentenced to Occoquan, but there's no information about why she decided to donate the [00:09:40] pin, but interestingly, the suffrage movement knew— the

leadership knew that it was important and wanted it in the Smithsonian very quickly after the amendment was sent out [00:09:52] to the states to be ratified.

The National American Woman's Suffrage Association contacted the Smithsonian to inquire about donating materials and that [00:10:05] material came in in 1919, 1919-20, that donation year, and they wanted it here. They knew that it was important and should be recorded in the [00:10:16] national museum and that donation included the Declaration of Sentiments Table.

**Q:** Can you tell sort of us what other stuff came in that time?

**Response:** Mostly material [00:10:24] that— I said the Declaration of Sentiments material, the Table, sorry. The Declaration of Sentiments Table, mostly material related to the [00:10:32] national— the National American Woman's Suffrage Association and to Susan B. Anthony. That's when we obtained the Susan B. Anthony shawl, the red [00:10:41] silk shawl that she's so known for. Other sort of iconic pieces related to her life which are interesting because the collection is so— was so much more about [00:10:52] great men and their things that now we have great women and their things and it's sort of the beginning of the great woman collection here.

**Q:** Is this [00:11:02] pin unique?

**Response:** Well, it's unique in that it was given to a particular woman for a particular action. As I said, there're probably about 150 drifting [00:11:09] around some place. We have three in the collection, one that belonged to Alice Paul herself, this one which was given to Amelia Walker and one that was [00:11:20] given to a woman named Lucille Calmes for the 1919 demonstrations. It's interesting that it carries over in time, though, the idea behind it and the feeling [00:11:29] behind it because it was used in the 1970s as inspiration for feminist jewelry and it was re-issued as necklaces, as pins, this imagery working for the [00:11:41] feminist movement and the ERA.

**Q:** In the 1970s were those sort of also awards? Were they—

**Response:** It was something that you could buy. [00:11:52]

**Q:** Has your interpretation— How has your sort of knowledge of the object and interpretation of the object changed over time?

**Response:** This is one of the [00:12:05] first— Not this particular pin, but a Jailed for Freedom pin is one of the first pieces I ever worked with in this collection, so I think it has a [00:12:11] special significance to me. When I started working with the political history collection, I was the cataloging the Alice Paul Collection and I didn't [00:12:20] know what the piece was, so I went to read more about it, found out more about it. Didn't know at the time that there were two more in the collection [00:12:30], so it's been an interesting thing for me to, as time and leisure has allowed, to be able to read more about it, [00:12:37] to find out more about the piece and to start to interpret it in

different ways, think of other things I'd use it with. For me, I think [00:12:46] it's very closely linked to my work as I've become the Curator of Women's History here.

**Q:** That was my sort of other question for you as sort of how [00:12:58] you got into these collections generally.

**Response:** I worked for the department . . . [chit-chat] . . . [00:14:01]

**Q:** So I was asking how you sort of got into the political history stuff and then ended up as Curator of Women's History.

**Response:** I was very interested when I came [00:14:10] in in the political history collection. It's my true love and I was assigned out of the department to work in the political history collection. One of the first things [00:14:18] I worked on was processing the Alice Paul

Collection, cataloging the materials. Because I was interested, I worked closely with [00:14:28] Edie Mayo who was then the Curator of Women's History and became more and more enmeshed in the division and my interest in women's history— in these materials [00:14:37] grew and when Edie retired, I was moved into the division full time to work and to continued to work with these materials and a couple of years ago, took [00:14:49] over full responsibility for the collection, so I suppose the pin is near and dear to me because it seems like my touchstone for being in the [00:15:00] collection.

**Q:** When you approach an object like this, something small, something that doesn't— Does it say Jailed for Freedom?

**Response:** No.

**Q:** No, okay. [00:15:10] So we've got this small object that is not immediately apparent what it's related to, so when you approach an object like that, what kinds of questions [00:15:19] questions does it raise for you?

**Response:** I think the first— I mean, knowing how I looked at it, I thought why— what is this, why is— Okay. [00:15:28] She's a suffrage leader. Why is this pin shaped like a jail door? There's a symbolism to this. What is it? And it leads [00:15:38] you to answer the question. You want to start digging around to find out the answer to the question and so you immediately start going to biography, what happened [00:15:47] to this woman that this might relate to. You find out about the picketing, the protests, that they were jailed. What's interesting is that the [00:15:58] pin itself is only really mentioned in two books that I've run across. That's material culture doesn't always equate to history for people who are [00:16:08] writing, you know, histories of the suffrage movement. They're not necessarily going to take a little digression and tell you that they were awarded these pins. [00:16:14] Material culture is still somewhat separate from academic history, but if you start digging around in the other materials, say, the suffrage— copies [00:16:25] of the suffragists, the suffragists' journal that came in with this collection and you start reading through those, you find the article [00:16:30] where

they talk about the— as they continued to talk about the jailings, they talk about the reception that was held, the meeting that was held and [00:16:39] how these women were awarded these pins and you learn to find the materials in other ways and I think that's interesting. I think that's something [00:16:45] that students need to learn, that it isn't all in the textbooks and they can have much more fun sometimes going through primary—the primary— nothing [00:16:53] beats primary source materials. It's the most interesting way to learn history and it's definitely the most creative way to learn history. It feels [00:17:00] like a treasure hunt.

**Q:** That's wonderful. So, we've talked a little bit about historical themes and you sort of talked about the protest and women's suffrage. [00:17:16] The other objects that we've looked at, the full list contains the Jefferson desk, the 1890 voting machine, the [00:17:25] lunch counter, the short-handled hoe. I was wondering if you had any thoughts about the pin in relation to other objects in the collection that sometimes it's not [00:17:33] normally associated with or exhibited with, just the sort of larger themes in connections with \_\_\_\_\_

**Response:** You know, when you were talking— I was thinking— [00:17:40] When you were talking to Faith, this was running through my head and now, of course, I've lost the answer. I think just the idea of freedom in [00:17:52] its varying forms in America and the continual striving for it, be it to free the country from the England, to free yourself [00:18:01] from the tyranny of non-unionized labor, of working in the fields. to gain the vote, to gain equal rights. That every object [00:18:09] you've picked has something to do with American's continuing struggle for freedom which I didn't think about when I first ran through the list, [00:18:17] even the Mary Lincoln dress. It's sort of tangentially related, but is related the struggle for freedom or the struggle for self-actualization, [00:18:27] be it Mary Lincoln's or Elizabeth Keckley's self-actualization, these women's struggle for self-actualization.

**Q:** Did I already [00:18:36] ask you if you if approached this pin with a group of teenagers—

**Response:** Yeah—

**Q:** I asked that question. The other sort of question we've sort [00:18:46] of been thinking about is what kinds of things these objects conceal, what things you might not normally get from them that we might need, associated [00:19:01] documents and sort of supports to reveal. Are there things— We've sort of talked generally about the suffrage struggle, but in building a context around [00:19:14] a pin like that, what sort of pieces you— in addition to material culture and suffrage stuff, sort of narrative pieces you feel like you have [00:19:20] to put around it as a curator.

**Response:** I think people need to understand the context. If you were explaining it, you'd have to explain the time period that this [00:19:31] is all happening in a heightened emotional time. We've got a country that may or may not be heading to war. We have continuing emotional [00:19:43] frustration amongst the women who are working for this

reform. This has been going on since 1840 and it's beginning to feel as if it's never going [00:19:55] to happen. They feel like they're so— as if they're so close but so far from achieving their goal and I think the frustration that begins to build which [00:20:03] explains why it moves to a more militant— to more militant tactics, the two parts of the party are— the two different parties are now disagreeing with each other and going [00:20:15] head to head about the best way to achieve their goal. It's what happens to anyone during— after a long period [00:20:21] of time with the same cause. You want an answer and you want it now and the frustration I think that comes from [that] and the creativity that that [00:20:30] spawns because in the end, it took both sides of the suffrage parties to bring this about. It took the militance of the Woman's Party [00:20:39] and it took the reason and the diplomacy of Carrie Chapman Catt.

**Q:** . . . [chit-chat] . . .

**Q:** I'm interested to hear you talk about \_\_\_\_\_ I think students especially [00:21:01] tend to think of women's history as women's history or \_\_\_\_\_ history, so what would you say to teenagers who're just like, oh, that's women's history and not really [00:21:13] take it seriously.

**Response:** We're the majority of the population, so I'd say our history is history. Women's history is a very— I don't want to say specific discipline. [00:21:28] It's almost more a way of learning to look at something and to evaluate it than an alternate history. It's learning to bring other issues into [00:21:37] play and other points of view into play, that different things affect women and how women operate, how women feel things, the needs that women have, and that there's a [00:21:51] different perspective just because of the role— the place women have occupied in society. Over time, there's simply a different overlay on all of it. It's not [00:22:01] a separate history. It's not a different history, but it's a different way of looking at it which is not really any different from trying to interpret civil rights from an [00:22:09] African American viewpoint. That viewpoint is going to be different than a white, middle-class man's viewpoint. It just doesn't always have a special name [00:22:19] in the department at the college although it frequently does. The African American Studies Department is there and those classes are there. It's ways of looking at history [00:22:27] from different perspectives and that's something to you have to have. Everything isn't from one dominant viewpoint.

**Q:** Do you find that there are particular [00:22:36] challenges to presenting women's history here at the Museum?

**Response:** Trying to explain that the First Ladies Gallery does not constitute all of women's history and frequently— [00:22:43] Although everyone knows that, it's hard when you're allotting real estate and we sometimes hear women's history's covered because the First Ladies [00:22:51] Gowns are here and there's a continuing— Not that the administration believes that, but there's— when you're looking at floor space, there's a continuing [00:23:00] fight over more floor space.

**Q:** Other things on your list back there, Stephanie?

**Q:** Yes. . . . [chit-chat] . . . I don't think we asked \_\_\_\_\_ but [00:23:41] does the object mean different things to different people?

**Q:** I didn't ask that question. I think that might be a good question.

**Response:** I honestly don't know. I've never [00:23:52] asked any— I've never asked anyone. The group of people I use the object most— with most frequently are Girl Scouts, so you're talking [00:24:03] about a very specific age bracket and we've used this material on Girl— We did a program called Girl Scout Day for years and I would always [00:24:13] link my program to the Parlor to Politics Exhibit and the idea of women taking a stand and women's clubs and women's organizations, how woman can make a difference, [00:24:21] just like Girl Scouts make a difference, other groups have made differences, and with them you always have to explain just because of their age, what [00:24:30] this pin is and what it's about and the movement itself, but I've never worked with a group of adults [00:24:39] in a casual enough setting with this object to discuss that, so that's an interesting question.

I would think that maybe for women who were active or coming [00:24:51] of age in the '70s, that they probably relate it to the other pieces that were made then and it has a second layer of meaning.

**Q:** It's a [00:25:06] good question and I think sort of one of the other questions that is similar and related to that is historical meaning. Would this pin have meant different [00:25:13] things to different people in the historical setting in which it was made and awarded and those sorts of things?

**Response:** I always think in the time it [00:25:20] was made that this resonated for those women as a Purple Heart would resonate to someone who was awarded— As a medal would resonate to anyone [00:25:31] who's been awarded one for battle because I'm sure they saw themselves as warriors for this cause, so it would've had an emotional, very [00:25:41] intense emotional meaning for them. I think for us it's symbolic. It's become a symbolic piece and an inspirational piece, but we're not going [00:25:49] to have the visceral connection that they would have to it.

**Q:** Can you imagine for a second what sort of the opposition to women's suffrage might, [00:25:58] their reaction to the pin might be?

**Response:** Oh, the door sort of stayed— the jail door sort of stayed shut.

**Q:** Or who or why people [00:26:06] would oppose women's suffrage?

**Response:** Yeah, there's always when we do— when we objects out of storage and I do suffrage material, there's [00:26:14] always a older gentleman who wants to tease and will come by and kind of wink at you and say the dumbest thing we ever did, give women the vote and [00:26:23] then laugh because [end of recording]