

Times Living

Alexandria

Celebrates Women

Honoring Alexandria's Kate Waller Barrett

BY GAYLE CONVERSE
AND PAT MILLER

Kate Waller Barrett was an Alexandria suffragist who helped the city and nation during the 1918 flu pandemic and was asked to run for governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia. After her death, the Winchester Star wrote, "If women had had equal rights 20 years ago, [Kate Waller Barrett] would have been elected president of the United States."

Katherine Waller was born in 1857 on her father's large plantation in Stafford County, Virginia. After attending the Arlington Institute for Girls in Alexandria, she married the Rev. Robert South Barrett and moved to Richmond, where one evening a young unwed mother appeared at their door – beginning Barrett's lifelong passion for empowering women and girls.

Barrett proved to be a dynamic woman – suffragist, social reformer, author and physician – in the days before women were considered equal at the ballot box. She earned an M.D., received an honorary Sc.D. degree and completed the nursing course at the Florence Nightingale Training School in London.

She became superintendent and eventually president of the National Florence Crittenton Mission, a progressive

organization established in 1883 to assist unmarried women and teenage girls, including girls and women of color, who either had children or were attempting to leave the prostitution profession. She also published several books.

In 1917, while suffragists were imprisoned at the nearby Occoquan Workhouse, she continued her support of state and national suffrage associations. She served as honorary vice president of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia and was a charter member of the League of Women Voters. Barrett served as president of the American Legion Auxiliary, state president of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and was active in the National Council of Women, the National Congress of Mothers and the National Prison Association.

During the 1918 flu pandemic and World War I, Barrett opened her own home in Alexandria to ill and disabled returning soldiers. She was asked by the U.S. War Department Commission on Training Camp Activities to speak to American soldiers regarding venereal disease.

Barrett's work became international in 1919, when she journeyed to France and Turkey as a special agent of the United States Immigration Bureau to examine the intended



PHOTO/ALEXANDRIA LIBRARY

A painting of Kate Waller Barrett.

U.S. deportation of women and girls on moral grounds. She partnered with John D. Rockefeller to create an anti-traffic-ficking film titled, "Traffic in Souls." In 1919, President Woodrow Wilson sent Barrett, via a U.S. battleship, to serve as one of 10 women observers at the Versailles Peace Conference, then as a delegate to the Zurich Peace Conference.

She was appointed as a

delegate to the 1924 Democratic National Convention in New York where she received a standing ovation for her speech. Barrett also sat on the board of the College of William and Mary.

Barrett died at her home in Alexandria in 1925. Upon her death, both state and national flags were flown at half-mast – an honor bestowed to no other woman before her.

REGISTER TO VOTE

To promote social distancing, the Office of Voter Registration and Elections is open by appointment only. Voters are encouraged to request absentee ballots online and to register to vote online through the Virginia Department of Elections.

For questions regarding registration, absentee voting or to request and appointment, email voters@alexandriava.gov, or call 703-746-4050. For information about upcoming elections, go to www.alexandriava.gov/Elections.

The Kate Waller Barrett Branch of the Alexandria Library was built in 1937 as a memorial to this pioneering local heroine. An elementary school in Stafford, Virginia also bears her name.

Alexandria's Kate Waller Barrett has an inspiring story to be remembered as Alexandria Celebrates Women during the centennial of women's suffrage.

The writers are founders of Alexandria Celebrates Women, a new nonprofit that is commemorating the centennial of women's suffrage and highlighting influential women throughout the city's history. Contact them at Alexandria-CelebratesWomen@gmail.com.