

Gertrude Lynde Crocker

By *Ciro Taddeo*

As the country celebrates the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution giving women the right to vote, much attention has been given to leaders of the suffragist movement such as Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Alice Paul, and other pioneers for women's equality. Somewhat obscure are the names of Gertrude Lynde Crocker and her sister Ruth of Arlington County, Virginia.

Gertrude Crocker is better known locally as the founder and proprietor of the "Little Tea House," which stood at the intersection of Arlington Ridge Road and South Lynn Street, from 1920 to 1963. Once a famous restaurant and meeting place for prominent Washingtonians such as Amelia Earhart and Eleanor Roosevelt, in 1948, it became one of the first restaurants to welcome mixed race couples.¹

Gertrude Lynde Crocker was born January 7, 1884, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and raised in Hinsdale, Illinois, a wealthy community near Chicago.² The Crocker's were an erudite, upper class family and Gertrude was the youngest of six. Her father, John T. Crocker came from Milwaukee and was the executive purchasing agent of the now defunct Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad.³ Also from Milwaukee, Gertrude's mother, Eliza Warner Lynde Crocker, was an early attendee of Vassar College (1867).⁴

Founded in 1861, Vassar College for Women, had a tradition of promoting women's issues. By the turn-of-the-century, many of its most prominent alumnae such as Inez Milholland were ardent supporters of women's voting rights. Most likely, Eliza Crocker, passed on this political belief to her daughters. Gertrude so admired her mother that she used her maiden name, Lynde, with her own.

Upon admission to Vassar College, Gertrude quickly embraced the student suffrage clubs and organizations. Women in these groups, like Crocker, resented gender inequality, specifically the exclusion of women in politics, the professions, business, and academia. They were also concerned about working-class women, who labored under



Fig. 1: Gertrude Crocker in 1916

dangerous conditions, with long hours, low pay, and little education. As an early member of Soroptimist International, Gertrude advocated for the improvement of conditions for women and girls worldwide.⁵

In 1907, Crocker graduated from Vassar, and in 1911, the University of Chicago with a degree in mathematics. Around 1914, she returned to Hinsdale to work for the Congressional Union for Women’s Suffrage (CU), the forerunner of the National Women’s Party (NWP). Sometime later, Gertrude and her sister Ruth moved to Washington, DC, to seek work with the federal government. Crocker was hired as a clerk by the US Army War Ordinance Office.⁶

In 1914, Gertrude and Ruth became ardent and active members of the NWP. Gertrude was elected treasurer in 1916, an important position in view of the large sums of money donated from across the nation (Fig. 1). Some of the wealthiest women in America helped fund the NWP.⁷

In 1917, the Crocker sisters joined forces with the “Silent Sentinels,” a group of women silently standing in front of the White House gate

Fig. 2: Silent Sentinels picketing in front of the White House, 1917



holding voting right's banners (Fig. 2). Public reaction to the Sentinels was at first muted and even amused. As time passed, attitudes changed, and the public and authorities began verbally and physically abusing them. On April 6, 1917, when the United States entered World War I, toleration for the protestors dramatically decreased. They were now seen as unpatriotic agitators and police tried to remove them by force.

Led by Alice Paul, the Sentinels began passively resisting the officer's attempts to break up the picketing. The police arrested the women for this civil disobedience. Gertrude and Ruth became embroiled in a series of arrests and trials that brought them national attention.⁸ On October 22, 1917, Gertrude was charged with "Obstructing a Sidewalk." She was found guilty and fined five dollars or thirty days in jail. She chose prison and was sent to the Occoquan Workhouse in Lorton, Virginia.⁹

Occoquan was a dreaded place for suffragists. Inmates were forced to eat rancid food and sleep on cold concrete floors. Basic sanitation and bathroom access were lacking. In a letter smuggled out to her mother, Gertrude described feeling like "a rat in a trap."¹⁰

Protesting the terrible conditions at the Workhouse, suffragists staged a hunger strike. Guards began to force feed the prisoners, a dangerous and painful procedure often resulting in fainting and severe vomiting. As the protests continued, prison personnel resorted to corporal punishment, sometimes shackling inmates suspended from a wall.

November 15, 1917, a night of intense violence against the suffragists, is remembered in the chronicles of the women's rights movement as "The Night of Terror."¹¹ Six weeks later, an emaciated Gertrude Crocker, left the Occoquan Workhouse. She needed assistance walking to a waiting car (Fig. 3). Soon after,

Fig. 3: Gertrude Crocker after her imprisonment at the Occoquan Workhouse, 1917



Courtesy of NWP at Belmont

undeterred, Gertrude returned to her position as Treasurer of the NWP and to picketing in front of the White House.

As news of conditions at Occoquan Workhouse filtered into the newspapers, the public became appalled at the treatment of the suffragists, some of whom were well-known socialites and celebrities. Public opinion began to shift and support and sympathy with the voting movement increased. The Wilson administration sensed the change in the public mood. They realized the suffragist movement was becoming a distraction to the war effort and a political liability. Wilson needed America's women. They were vital workers in the defense industries and boosted morale at home.

On January 9, 1918, President Wilson endorsed a constitutional amendment granting women the right to vote. In response, the NWP began an intense lobbying campaign in Congress for its passage and in state legislatures for ratification. As National Treasurer of the NWP, Gertrude Crocker was instrumental in facilitating and funding these efforts. Congress passed the Nineteenth Amendment on June 4, 1919, and the states ratified it on August 18, 1920.¹²

At a conference of the NWP held at the Belasco Theatre on December 6–9, 1917, Gertrude, Ruth, and all the suffragists who were

Fig. 4: The Little Tea House, 1924



Courtesy of Arlington Historical Society

either arrested or imprisoned, were honored with a special award of recognition. They were presented a “Jailed for Freedom” sterling silver pin of a prison gate with a heart hanging on a chain.¹³

With their work done, the Crocker sisters left the movement and returned to private life. They moved to Arlington where they bought a parcel of land from the old Prospect Hill estate on Arlington Ridge Road and South Lynn Street. In 1920, they opened the “Little Tea House” restaurant (Fig. 4). In 1925, the sisters purchased a home at 407 North Bryan Street, in the Lyon Park neighborhood of Arlington. Gertrude adopted a daughter, Ellen, in 1928. Ruth passed away in 1932, but Gertrude lived in Lyon Park the remainder of her life.

Gertrude remained active in women’s civil rights and welfare movements. She was President of the Arlington Soroptimist Club and Chairperson of The American Federation of Soroptimist Clubs and the People’s Mandate Legislature Committee, a forerunner of the Equal Rights Amendment movement. Crocker was also involved in the civic affairs of Arlington and offered her restaurant as a venue for various women’s and progressive organizations. Admired nationally for her work in women’s issues, she now became a well-known local personality. In 1947, the *Washington Post* ran an article about her life in a series introducing club presidents of Washington and vicinity.¹⁴

In 1947, Gertrude leased “The Little Tea House” to Allison Brewster, a master chef and former owner of the Olney Inn in Maryland.¹⁵ Brewster bought the restaurant in 1952 and renamed it Allison’s Little Tea House. It was demolished in 1963 to make way for the Ridge House Condominium Apartments. The stone tower on Arlington Ridge Road, constructed in the French Renaissance Style, is all that remains of “The Little Tea House.”

Gertrude Lynde Crocker passed away in September 1969 in Alexandria, Virginia. Gertrude and Ruth Crocker’s names are inscribed on the Turning Point Suffragist Memorial and The Workhouse Prison Museum in Lorton.¹⁶

About the Author

Ciro Taddeo recently retired from Georgetown University Hospital. He's a long-time volunteer docent at the Arlington Historical Museum and a collector of Little Tea House artifacts and history.

Endnotes

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