

Sarah Wallis, Pioneer Woman of Santa Clara

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Preface

Sarah Wallis lived in Santa Clara County during the 1860's- 1880's. She had crossed a harrowing trip through the Sierra Mountains and suffered many domestic problems; however, she mostly is remembered by her efforts in the movement for women suffrage. Sarah was a very independent woman, who worked to encourage equality in jobs, land ownership and especially in marriages. Sarah Wallis helped to increase community awareness of sex and pregnancy. She helped to pass laws and to build more women's organizations. Sarah also supported prohibition and the temperance movement. During this period, most women were suppressed and docile. Sarah proved to others that women were equal to men and were able to survive without being dependent of their husbands. Sarah Wallis, a pioneer, helped to improve the lives of women today.

After researching about Sarah Wallis, I'm grateful for her courage to voice women's rights and helping women suffrage gain momentum. She certainly opened the door for young women's' opportunities to strive and excel in today's society. Before, I took for granted that I was able to receive a good education, work to be anything I desire, and not locked to being a housewife. Now I realize how much effort has been placed into allowing women to vote, go to colleges and most importantly, to be independent and equal. Their actions have resulted in allowing women to speak their minds as well as to dispel the feeling that women are inferior.

I am greatly appreciative of Sarah Wallis and all other suffragettes, who helped break through old traditions and helped to create a society where a woman can stand on her own two feet.

Historical Background

Sarah Armstrong Montgomery Green Wallis was a true pioneer woman whose local effort sought out and struggled for suffrage and equal women's rights. Although her personal life was extremely harsh, she was a devoted activist during the late 1800's while she lived in the Santa Clara Valley area. Sarah Wallis, a humble mother yet strong-minded, experienced injustice toward her rights as a human being throughout most of her lifetime and was one of the first women to improve the status of females in society. She demonstrated and encouraged independence from women in her community. Wallis was an influential and determined woman, and her perseverance helped to make women's suffrage become an important issue heard throughout the nation.

Sarah Wallis was born in Ohio in 1825 to a large farming family. When she was eighteen, Sarah married Allen Montgomery and moved near the American River in 1844. Unlike almost all other pioneer women, Wallis enjoyed the trek and was described by one of her companion as ,“ courageous and fearless.” Wallis chose to watch the scenery from horseback instead of a wagon. While crossing the Sierra Mountains, the Elisha Stephens' 1844 party was forced to spilt into two groups. Sarah was to go with the other women and children ahead, while her husband was left to tend to their wagon. because of the incoming snowstorm. However, not long after, their wagon was raided and they lost almost all of their possessions. Luckily, they had few possessions and were able to rebuild what they had lost.

Sarah continued on but was, along with her party, forced to stop near the Yuba River. Sarah played the role of the midwife when she

had to assist in the birth of a companion's child. The group was forced to leave their remaining possessions because they were unable to carry the items to the growing four feet of snow hardening on the ground. They quickly built a makeshift cabin and were reduced to eating boiled ox hides because their party was not rescued until late February, when the men finally went to Sutter's Fort to fetch supplies. During this perilous time, perseverance in Sarah kept her high-spirited and optimistic that she would soon see her husband again.

When arriving in Sutter's Fort, Sarah and her husband built a home next to the American River. Not long after, Allen Montgomery was recruited to fight in the revolution against the Spanish. While Sarah's husband was at war in South California, Sarah temporarily moved into Sutter's Fort during 1846-47. She was determined not to let her time in Sutter's Fort go to waste.

Sarah recognized that most elite and influential women of the nation were wives of the rich. However, because she lacked a high-class background, she realized that learning to read and write would help improve her social status. Sarah quickly learned to read books such as the Bible and write down her thoughts by a mother who was teaching her child. She also learned to speak Spanish so that she could communicate with some of the natives and Spaniards, unlike other wives who decided to isolate themselves from foreigners. Sarah also helped to domesticate the West by beginning the first quilting bee in California. Sarah enjoyed a social life, and while her husband was gone during the revolutions, she invited other wives to sewing parties. She frequently held gatherings at her house, where women as well as men came to socialize. Sarah was constantly

involved with the community and paid no expense in having successful parties. She was instrumental in bringing unity to the community.

The San Francisco Era

Later, after her husband returned from the revolutions, they moved to the San Francisco area. They continued to own the property near the American River, which was close to the site where gold was discovered by James Marshall in 1848. However, Sarah and Allen did not have a successful marriage. Sarah disapproved of Montgomery's habitual drinking. Later, Allen Montgomery on October 28, 1847, left Sarah in search of gold in Hawaii; however, she was determined to continue to live alone as a "widow" in the rough West. Along with a friend, she survived by renting rooms and doing laundry and sewing.

Fifteen months later, in October 1849, Sarah married Talbot H. Green, who was a wealthy physician and merchant and was a former party member of the 1841 Bartleson-Bidwell Party. They lived in a small house in Happy Valley. However, while campaigning for mayor of San Francisco, Green was exposed as a fugitive bank clerk from Pennsylvania who had hidden the gold in lead balls. Green had also deserted his "insane and later deceased" wife and four children. Green left Sarah who was already six months pregnant with his son. She filed for a divorce in 1854. Green paid only \$400 for the welfare of their child but overall disregarded the illegal marriage to Sarah. To support herself and her child, Sarah decided not to give up and began taking in boarders again.

At 29 years of age, Sarah married her third husband, Joseph Sawyer Wallis, a lawyer, politician and later, a judge and State Senator. Together, they made a petition in 1855 to have Green's child's name

changed to Talbot H. Green Wallis. With Wallis, she had four other children, Eva, Josephine, Joseph and William.

Moving to Mayfield

On April 10, 1853, Sarah acquired Elisha Crosby's property of the Mayfield Ranch. Crosby, due to financial problems, owed Sarah over \$10,000, and was forced to sell his flat bayland plains, rich and fertile from the El Arroyo and Del Materdero Rivers that flowed through the 250 acres. Today, that area is currently called Barron Park in Palo Alto. The property was placed under Sarah's name, unusual for a woman during this time. Sarah demanded that a married woman be legally allowed to possess land under her name. However, although she was persistent, the land was still placed under her third husband's name. The Wallises built a stylish Victorian house. The house was decorated and contained many imported materials such as marble from Italy. The Wallises were regarded as "the leading family in the Mayfield area." Although they held many parties including ones for President Ulysses S Grant and the Stanford family, Sarah regarded those who were also less fortunate. All five children attended Mayfield public schools and they went to the Methodist Church, which was the first Protestant church in the area.

Sarah also became an investor in the San Francisco and San Jose Railroad. She demanded that a new station be made closer to Mayfield. Eventually, a new station was placed at its current position on California Avenue in Palo Alto because it was more convenient for its residents. She frequently helped with charity projects such as the Red Cross. Sarah was always concerned for her neighbors and their well-being.

Early Efforts for Women's Rights

Before and during the 1800's women had no legal or political rights. A married woman was expected to be faithful, take care of the children and house. Once women were married, society felt that the wife's rights would be protected by her husband and therefore did not need to vote nor own property. Apparently, the majority of the population, including many women believed that "the women's minds were inferior to men's because God willed it so." The movement for women suffrage did not initially become an important issue until the mid 1800's, when women began to feel that they were entitled to their own rights. Many reformers knew that change would be long and did not expect any miracles soon; however they persevered for the future of their daughters and others.

Sarah Wallis fought for equal rights such as changing the law so that women could make contracts. She participated in the movement for voting rights for women as well as issues concerned with temperance and new social ideas. Sarah also helped pass a bill that allowed women to practice law in California courts as well as to create a law that stated that a person could not be denied entrance into a state college because of their sex. Although Sarah was not as radical as the other well-known women suffragists, she worked locally to help more women realize that they were more than just "second-class" citizens.

Perhaps because her first two marriages were failures, Sarah supported equality and recognition for women. Encouraged by her husband Joseph to voice her rights she became a strong force for discrimination for women who were married or desired to own property. Sarah subscribed to

The Revolution, a radical women's newspaper written by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She encouraged other women to read new ideas about temperance and women's suffrage.

On January 26, 1870, representing Mayfield, Sarah joined the Committee on Credentials, which held the first state-wide women's suffrage meeting. She was honored as being nominated as president of the meeting by the Committee on Permanent Organization. Later, Sarah became president of the Mayfield Women Suffrage Association in 1870. Along with these other reformists, Sarah supported allowing women to vote, but also to help married women be more independent of their dominant husbands. Sarah became president of the California State Women Suffrage Educational Association in 1870. She supported more community awareness about coition, pregnancy, and prostitution as well as boost women's morals and confidence about who they were. It was the first step in improving the perspective of women.

As more organizations formed for women's suffrage, newspapers, such as the San Francisco Post, Sacramento Bee and San Jose Daily Mercury defended suffrage, while others such as the Alta and the Chronicle criticized and lightly harassed many of the women reformists. Sarah experienced hostility from some of her male neighbors who felt that a woman's life was to be always at home, but Sarah continued to be persistent and hold weekly and monthly meetings and parties. Women suffrage in the San Francisco area gained support when African American suffrage suggested an American Equal Rights Association. During this period, many parallels were made between the Blacks and the women of America, and although the two groups had different viewpoints, they all had a similar goal-- equality.

Sarah also worked for equality in the work force in hopes that women would receive equal wages. When the Senate refused to do this, she signed a petition ~~along~~ along with 3,100 others asking the State Constitution to include women's suffrage into the Legislature. She also eagerly attended meetings held by radicals Anna Dickenson and Laura DeForce Gordan who attempted to urge more women to look and compare their rights to men. Sarah helped arouse public attention by starting the Women's Social Club in 1896, who it not only worked to improve the female status but also held lots of community and charity events.

Along with her husband, who was a judge, Sarah worked with the California Woman's Suffrage Society to present to Legislature the "Women Lawyer Bill", which allowed women to become lawyers. Although there was a lot of disagreement, the bill eventually passed. Not long after, the Hasting College of Law was passed which stated that no one could be denied into a state college because of gender. During this time, women's suffrage was receiving more recognition by the public. Many claimed that the Constitution be rewritten since it did not include the rights of women who made up at the least half of the nation's population. Reformers fought with Congress and the Senate to rid the word "male" and change it to "citizen" in the 14th Amendment, as well has add to the 15th Amendment that one will not be discriminated against because of their sex. Sarah, along with others, worked for allowing a women to deal legally with her affairs with wealth and children. However, Sarah, unlike the other major suffragists, kept a low profile nationally. She mainly concentrated to improve the local community's beliefs and morals.

Sarah's Fight for Prohibition and Women's Suffrage

Sarah disapproved of drinking, and she approved of the temperance movement. Apparently, her two previous marriages, Sarah's husbands were habitual drinkers. While Montgomery frequently drank and was associated with drunk revolutionists, Talbot Green pleaded with Sarah to help him break his addiction for alcohol. Although Sarah was against drinking, her 3rd husband as well as her sons were heavy drinkers. Sarah was a member of the Good Templars in Mayfield and later was elected the Worthy Chief Templar. She began the Mayfield Temperance Press, which emphasized prohibition. The temperance movement; however, caused the women suffrages to suffer because the Liquor Dealers' League opposed women voting since they felt that if women were granted the opportunity, they would vote for prohibition. Thus, women suffragettes faced more defeat, but they continued to fight for both equal rights as well as the temperance movement.

Sarah, many times, was in charge of the openings of the meetings. It was popular in the 1880's for the meeting to begin with a hymns and prayers. Although Sarah was a Protestant, her meetings in Mayfield attracted an assortment of religious people. During the 1875 Depression, the Wallises were forced to sell their Mayfield Farm and moved into a smaller, but still expensive house, in Mayfield; however, because she was financially burdened, to fund these Mayfield meetings, Sarah often held community talent shows and charged twenty-five cents admission. She recruited performers from all around the area and sometimes from abroad for her "gospel meetings." She apparently held wonderful concerts and was recognized for her efforts by women suffrage.

After Joseph Wallis' death in 1893, Sarah was depleted of her remaining wealth and was evicted from her Mayfield home. She moved to Los Gatos where she died on January 11, 1905, from heart and kidney failure. Both she and her husband died before the Legislature allowed the first woman to cast her ballot and passed the Women's Suffrage Bill, yet her inspiration caused more women to support and join the suffrage movement. Another inspiring and nationally-known suffragette, Elizabeth Cady Stanton stated that the efforts made by Sarah for women's suffrage was "untiring.....{she} accomplish great good for her sex." Other friends claimed that Sarah was "one of the most prominent woman's rights advocates on California."

Today, a plaque, which is California State Historical Landmark, memorializes her efforts for women suffrage, near where her house once stood in Mayfield. Commemorated for her strength to face rough West, she was also honored for intrepidity towards the opposition she received when she first joined the women's suffrages. Though Sarah did not care for fame, she accomplished a personal achievement and had a charismatic attitude and optimism that made her a popular hero.

Sarah Wallis helped improve the lives of all women today giving them the opportunity to vote and own land, while supporting and increasing funds toward sex education, social awareness, and women's rights. She was a pioneer, who not only conquered and domesticated the West, but also was courageous enough to question the long-held beliefs and views about women. Although she did not live to see what she started, this influential and strong-headed woman, helped ensured equality for women. Sarah Wallis was a pioneer who overcame mountainous obstacles and ventured forth to a new destiny for women.

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