Alice Paul was the eldest of 4 children born into a well-to-do Quaker family. Her father William Paul was a banker. Her mother Tacie Parry Paul was the daughter of the founder of Swarthmore College, and member of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association. Alice grew up on the family farm where she learned the value of hard work. Although wealthy, the Quaker Pauls lived a modest life. After attending a Quaker school in Moorestown, where she finished at the head of her class, Alice attended Swarthmore College where she graduated in 1905 with a degree in Biology. She then attended the University of Pennsylvania earning an MA in Sociology in 1907. Originally, she intended to be a social worker, but concluded that social work did not do much good. She also did not want to teach. Instead she went to England in 1907 to study at the University of Birmingham, and later at the London School of Economics.

While she was at Birmingham, she had an experience that changed her life. She witnessed a woman’s suffrage speaker being heckled and driven from the stage by a crowd. When she introduced herself, she discovered the woman was Cristobel Pankhurst, one of the leaders of the radical suffragists (suffragettes) in England. Alice began selling suffragist magazines on the street corners where she was harassed by hostile crowds. She soon moved on to London, where the radical suffragists were making headlines. Alice joined the them and was arrested for the very un-Quaker behavior of smashing windows in London’s posh West End. Her next arrest came after she and another suffragette disguised themselves as cleaning ladies and crashed a party for London’s Lord Mayor. More arrests followed, 7 in all. At the police station after one of her arrests she met fellow American suffragist Lucy Burns. Burns, known for her looks with her bright red hair, and militant oratorical style, was a perfect match for Paul, who could be eloquent, but was a steeley organized behind the scenes. The two spent time in Edinburgh Scotland organizing Scotswomen. After she returned to London, Paul was arrested again in 1910 and went on a hunger strike in prison. After her release she decided to return to America to recover and re-energize the American suffrage movement. People who knew her said she had become radical in England and learned many new tactics.

Burns returned in 1912 and they began to pressure NAWSA to change its tactics. NAWSA preferred to take a state by state approach to suffrage and used traditional lobbying techniques. Paul and Burns insisted that women must press for a national amendment and a more confrontational style, demanding the vote. After some debate, Paul was given $10 and permission to open an office in Washington D.C. to
lobby Congress. Renting a basement on F Street, she, Burns, and others began planning a parade for March 1913 to confront the new president, Woodrow Wilson. NAWSA reluctantly agreed, and 8000 women marched as Wilson arrived in town for his inauguration. The police did little to protect the women from a mob, and the Army had to step in to protect the marchers. The parade, with its banners and floats, resembled the ones Paul and Burns had seen in England.

Their disagreements on tactics, as well as Alice’s incredible ability to raise money, soon led to a split with NAWSA. Paul’s group originally called themselves the Congressional Union, but by 1916 they became the National Women’s Party. Paul was a masterful organizer for the NWP persuading other women to do things they thought impossible. Women who had never given a public speech before did so, and women who donated money were told to go get arrested after the arrests began in 1917.

Paul’s next move, seen as extremely radical at the time, was to order her followers to picket the White House. President Wilson insisted to the NWP that it was not time for a federal amendment, and outraged Alice and the NWP when he brushed them off after Inez Milholland’s death in 1916. At that point, Paul, Burns and Harriet Stanton Blatch decided to picket the White House. Beginning in January 1917 the Silent Sentinels took up their place by the White House fence with banners demanding the vote. Paul refused to stop the picketing after the U.S. entered World War I. As the women’s banners became more inflammatory, police officials contacted Paul to warn her they would begin to make arrests. Citing the women’s legal right to picket, Paul refused to back down. Women were arrested in large numbers and by July 1917 were sent to D.C.’s Occoquan Workhouse. Working from Cameron House, Paul kept in contact with the police and also increased the pressure on Wilson. An illness, originally diagnosed as fatal Bright’s Disease, was treated in Philadelphia. At some point during this period, Paul became a vegetarian.

In October, noting that she thought she might find prison restful, she allowed herself to be arrested. She received a 7-month sentence but was sent to the D.C. Jail rather than Occoquan to separate her from her allies. While there she went on a hunger strike after demanding status as a political prisoner. She was force fed, kept up all night by bright lights, and told they might commit her to St. Elizabeth’s. A psychiatrist asked to examine her told the authorities that she was not crazy but was willing to die for her cause. Paul was released when all of the suffrage prisoners were discharged from prison by a federal judge on November 27 and 28, 1917. Wilson soon announced his support for woman’s suffrage, but it took him 2 more years to convince Congress. Working tirelessly Paul organized further protests near the White House. She lit one of the famous Watchfires herself in 1919.

Once the amendment was sent out to the states, Paul worked the phones sending speakers and organizers to most of the states where there was a question about ratification. As each state ratified the 19th amendment, she sewed a star on her purple, white and gold suffrage banner. When victory was achieved, she draped the banner from the balcony of NWP headquarters.

Paul saw the 19th Amendment as just the 1st step for woman’s rights. In 1923 she introduced the Equal Rights Amendment, and this cause consumed her for the rest of her life. She did win a victory in this area when she convinced Harry Smith of Virginia to include sex in the 1964 Civil Rights Act.
Conservatives like Smith believed this would kill the bill, but President Lyndon Johnson used his famous personal approach to get the bill through Congress. The law gave women to right to sue if they thought they had been denied their rights in the workplace, a major step forward for women’s economic rights.