INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was witness to significant cultural and political changes that were brought about by the Progressive Era. During this period of historic change, Progressive activists fought for variety of reforms aimed to improve education, welfare, public health and labor conditions in the country's urbanized areas (Scott 186). In Southern cities, activists also worked to strengthen race relations between blacks and whites.

The city of Richmond, Virginia, was no exception. It was in desperate need of reforms and civic improvements. In the early 1900s, a new generation of socially-conscious citizens, many of whom were women, sought to find ways to improve the quality of life for the city's poorest citizens. One of these initiators of social and political change was artist and activist, Nora Houston. Born into a white, wealthy and well-known Richmond family, Houston defied the traditional role of the "southern lady" with her choice of career and lifestyle.

As the niece of James H. Dooley, one of Virginia's wealthiest men of the Gilded Age, Houston could have led a life of leisure, an acceptable choice for a woman of her high social standing. Instead, she chose to fight for the less fortunate citizens in her community. She never married and had no children; she devoted her life to civic activities, teaching and creating art, and to the many charitable organizations to which she belonged. Nora Houston was an ardent suffragist who successfully balanced a career as an accomplished artist and social activist. Described as a woman of "deep social and

spiritual consciousness" (Simms 44), Houston fought tirelessly to champion women's rights, for children's welfare reforms and to help the underprivileged.

When she reached early adulthood, Houston, like many of her affluent counterparts, began to reevaluate her identity as a southern woman. Southern ladies, traditionally categorized as middle-to-upper-class white women who exhibited innocence, purity, piety and submissiveness (Scott 14-17), wished to free themselves from the old patriarchal social system through participation in local politics, a higher education and even financial independence.

During the Progressive Era, unprecedented numbers of women redefined the ideals of southern womanhood by stepping out of the private sphere and joining what was called "The Woman Movement" (Brooks 6). The Suffrage Movement provided the perfect opportunity for women to get involved in a cause that demanded national attention, becoming a vehicle for mobilizing "ladies" who yearned to become involved in local politics.

A founding member of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia, Nora Houston was an active participant in the suffrage movement in Richmond from 1910 until women were granted the right to vote in 1920 under the Nineteenth Amendment. Following the passing of the Amendment, Houston continued to encourage female participation in the public sphere through her work with the Virginia League of Women Voters. This included reaching out to members of Richmond's African American community and successfully encouraging black women to register to vote; a feat that would have been unfathomable in the South twenty years prior.

During the 1920s, Houston became head of the Children's Code Commission and helped to push forward new legislation that called for the governmental protection of working-class women and children. Her activism led to the establishment of new state programs that provided health care for orphans and low-income families, and also educated the public about proper hygiene and nutrition.

Additionally, through her career as an artist and art instructor, Houston helped to cultivate a thriving artistic community in Richmond. Her interest in politics, religion and social justice was frequently reflected in her paintings. Early in her career, she visited lower-class neighborhoods to paint segments of society that were rarely represented in the American visual arts. Nora Houston's insightful depictions of urban people and places provide an irreplaceable visual record of life in the early twentieth century. Houston's art work, along with her life-long commitment to working for social change, has left a legacy in Virginia that continues to endure to the present day. This noteworthy woman has earned a critical place in the state's long and colorful history.

Much recent scholarship has shown that within the southern states, women who were typically drawn to participate in suffrage activities and other reform movements did so out of religious motivation and their desire to promote inner spiritual growth (Brooks 7-12). As a devout Catholic and highly spiritual person, Nora Houston was inspired by her faith in all areas of her life. Throughout her career as an artist and activist, she used her moral compass and belief in a higher power as her guide.

Religiously-devout women like Houston fervently believed it was their duty to help those in need and to cure the social ills that afflicted society. The achievement of

earning the right to vote would enable them to fulfill "a divine call or religious obligation to reform American society" (Zink-Sawyer 13). To these particular women, fighting for suffrage in order to improve the human condition was "quite in keeping with God's will" (Wheeler 59). Many female participants in the suffrage movement frequently volunteered for local charities or with benevolent church groups. Through their volunteer work, these women became acutely aware of the social inequities that plagued the working class (Wheeler 39).

In her groundbreaking book about women's suffrage and social activism in the South, The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, historian Anne Firor Scott made an observation that has impacted all women's history research to follow: southern women's participation in activities *outside* of their homes, both paid and voluntary, resulted in profound societal changes in the early 1900s (Scott 134-210). In the South, women's clubs, associations and church groups that were dedicated to helping those in need began to recognize the importance of having direct access to political power. Women could not address problems in their local communities until they were given the right to vote. Joining the cause for suffrage, female participants quickly came to recognize the potential in combined forces as "in union, there was strength" (Scott 161).

In addition to religious motivations, researchers of women's history have also argued that the female activists who were the most successful in getting their message heard, and carrying their cause the furthest, were those who came from wealthy and influential families. These activists learned to use their "pedigree" to their advantage.

Initiators of the suffrage movement in Richmond were almost exclusively white, upper-class women. The wealth and status of these women helped to facilitate their suffrage work and influence local politics while providing them "immunity from criticism or social ostracism not enjoyed by Southern women of lesser social standing" (Wheeler 39).

Due to her socio-economic status, Nora Houston and other women of privilege "claimed the right to question the unjust foundations of southern society *because* they were southern ladies" (Brooks 8). In other words, these privileged women were afforded the permission to confront the problems that affected the local community and use their money and influence to find solutions. Nora Houston and the network of progressive women to which she belonged were not only listened to, but given some degree of respect because of their position within Richmond's high society.

Considering the impact that Houston's activism had upon Virginia's state government during the Progressive Era, as well as her connection to one of Richmond's most notable families, it is bewildering that up until this point, no biography has ever been published about her. A plausible explanation for this might be that Houston had no children, siblings, nieces or nephews to record and preserve her story and advocate her memory; it is often the responsibility of descendants to protect a family's history so that it may be honored by future generations. Additionally, female social activists of the Progressive Era did not boast about their accomplishments to the media for the purpose of self promotion, and so their stories are infrequently found in newspapers and journals of the time period.

Another possible explanation is this: “Virginia women have had a long history of unrecognized achievement” and “only in the past twenty-five years have scholars initiated research which demonstrates and documents their accomplishments” (Dessypris). Furthermore, these research efforts have been largely focused on activists who had gained national recognition, rather than the lesser known women who worked within smaller towns and communities (Scott 191). These stories are harder to find and slower to surface. Nora Houston’s unique life story was not purposefully omitted from the formal writings of modern historians–they did not know it existed.

This book serves as the first thorough biographical work about Nora Houston. The primary purpose is to recover the lost story of this influential woman, demonstrating how she advanced social causes that brought about change in early twentieth century Richmond. It is important that Nora Houston be given necessary credit for her many contributions to the city’s culture and politics, but it is equally critical to examine the reasons for how and why she was able to accomplish this work. By tracing Houston’s impressive career, this study substantiates the argument that religious, affluent women were undeniably instrumental in making social and political changes in the South during the Progressive Era.

St. Paul’s Catholic Church of the Diocese of Richmond owns an impressive collection of paintings made by Nora Houston between 1900 and 1940. Demonstrating the valuable artistic contribution Houston made through her social documentation of Americans “on the fringe of society,” a selection of her work is included in this biography. These paintings have never been published in a book until now. Of particular

significance are the portrait and landscape studies of the Jackson Ward community, which was Richmond's predominantly African American neighborhood. These works beautifully capture a segment of society often overlooked by artists of the time period. In addition, Houston's sensitive depictions of immigrants and the working class reflect her personal observations of urban America during the turn of the last century.

In my search to uncover vital information about Houston's artistic education, relationships, travel, social activism and the many organizations to which she belonged, a variety of primary sources were utilized. The Virginia Historical Society, the James Branch Cabell Library of the Virginia Commonwealth University and The Library of Virginia each have collections of correspondence, statements and other ephemera written by or pertaining to Nora Houston, as well as accounts written by her family members and associates. Most of these materials were bequeathed to these institutions by Adele Clark, Houston's life-long friend who shared her interest in art and advancing social causes.

These primary sources provide pertinent information such as names, dates, places and events which help in the development of a more concise illustration of her life. Additionally, surviving correspondence, particularly letters written in Houston's own pen, offer a glimpse into her thoughts, emotions and reactions to the momentous time period in which she lived and worked.

CHAPTER 1

THE DOOLEY FAMILY INFLUENCE

Eleanora (Nora) Clare Gibson Houston was born in Richmond on June 24, 1883. She was the only child of Henry Gibson Houston, a prominent physician in the city, and Josephine Dooley Houston. Sadly, Dr. Houston died when Nora was a young girl, leaving Josephine solely responsible for her daughter's upbringing ("Nora Houston"). Mrs. Houston never remarried and raised Nora with the help of her affluent parents and siblings, the Dooleys.

Though she was born into privilege, Nora learned at an early age that her family's economic and social status was a blessing and not to be taken for granted (Archer). Houston's character and career as an activist was influenced by her mother's devoutly Catholic family. Houston's maternal grandparents, John and Sarah Dooley, were deeply religious people who were frequently active in charitable work through their church. They believed it was their duty as Christians to participate in organizations that helped the poor and less fortunate in their community (Archer). Sarah Dooley served for many years as president of the Ladies' Benevolent Society of St. Peter's Catholic Church; John Dooley served on the Board of Trustees of St. Joseph's Orphanage. Houston's aunts and uncle were each involved in some form of charitable work, largely due to their faith and sense of obligation to help those in need ("James H. Dooley").

During the time of the Civil War, the Dooley family witnessed extreme devastation to the city of Richmond. The city's business district was destroyed by battle-

inflicted fire in 1865, and many families in Richmond faced financial hardship. At the close of the war, Nora Houston's mother and aunts watched with empathetic eyes as thousands of women struggled to care for their homes and families after their husbands and sons were killed in battle.

In the post-war years known as Reconstruction, as the city slowly began the process of healing and rebuilding, it became very apparent that the crowded and inadequate living conditions of the poor needed to be addressed. These lower-class neighborhoods consisted mostly of widowed women and their children, orphans, and newly-freed slaves and their families. These scenes of suffering forced the Dooleys and other upper-class families to recognize the urgent need for social reforms in Richmond.

Aunt Alice Dooley

Concerned for the plight of Richmond's poorest citizens, the Dooley women saw the pressing need to make positive changes in their community (Archer). Of the three Dooley sisters, Alice Dooley was arguably the most active in the public sphere. Nora Houston's "Aunt Alice" became a strong presence in her niece's life, inspiring her to work for social justice. A charter member of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia, it was Alice Dooley who encouraged Houston to join the fight for the right to vote.

For a woman of her generation, Alice Dooley was unusually progressive in her attitude towards women's rights and participation in the spheres of both church and state. In a letter that was particularly telling of her personality, she remarked to the Bishop of Richmond, Denis J. O'Connell, that he needed to remain in good health as "we can't

afford to lose men like you, especially as you can't be replaced by a woman at present. There is no telling how you men are going to be superseded after a while" (Dooley, Alice. Letter to Bishop Denis J. O'Connell).

Alice Dooley, like her niece, never married and devoted her entire adult life to affecting civic improvements to the city. Aunt Alice began her charitable work through St. Peter's Catholic Church. As her interests and concerns progressed, she became very active in women's suffrage and later, raised public awareness of the need for legislation to protect women and children. The task of fighting for new legislation for social welfare would eventually be taken up by her niece, Nora Houston.

Through the implementation of new programs, she sought to alleviate problems that many lower-class women faced. In an effort to rid Richmond of its "houses of ill fame," Alice Dooley helped to establish and served on the board of the Social Service Federation (SSF). Its purpose was to "render service in social betterment, whether by initiative or by the furthering of welfare work already inaugurated by others" (Social Service and Federation 1). The SSF provided housing and financial assistance to women who, argued Alice, were "unwilling victims and not responsible for their miserable condition" (Dooley, Alice. "Let All Women Protect the Week"). While considered a radical reform in 1910, other women (especially suffragists) would later rally around the SSF's mission to aid Richmond's many "fallen sisters."

Also resulting from her concern for women's welfare, Aunt Alice helped to establish the Catholic Women's Club (CWC) in 1914, which still exists in the Diocese of Richmond. The clubhouse of the CWC opened its doors to young women who were

either homeless, or new to the city and looking for work, by offering them a respectable place to board. This was another way to eliminate the problem of prostitution already plaguing Richmond and to prevent girls from being forced into such a hopeless situation.

Aunt Alice, and later, niece Nora Houston, enjoyed a certain respect and influence in Richmond that came from having a relative who was one of Virginia's wealthiest men in the early 20th century: James H. Dooley. When she reached adulthood, Houston would benefit from her wealthy uncle's reputation, learning to use his popularity throughout the state to her advantage. Through her familial association with "Uncle James," Houston would be able to campaign her social causes to captive audiences of well-connected individuals.

Major Dooley

James "Major" Dooley was a popular figure in Richmond during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. When he was wounded in battle during the Civil War and unable to continue fighting, Dooley was given the honorary title of "Major."

In the postwar years, Dooley became a successful attorney in Richmond and also served for six years in the Virginia State Legislature ("James H. Dooley"). While he maintained a successful law practice for several decades, Dooley's fortune was largely made through his stock investments. Like other American capitalists of the Gilded Age, Dooley took advantage of the economic climate of the time by making wise investments in stocks and railway development. He gained large profits by investing in companies such as the International Mercantile Marine Corporation, owned by J. P. Morgan, and

through his ownership in the common stock of Standard Oil. By 1890, James H. Dooley was one of four thousand millionaires in the United States (Cavarti 44).

While Major Dooley and his wife Sallie Mae lived a life of opulence and luxury, the couple often used their wealth to benefit of the public. The city's public library, medical college, schools and several Catholic organizations received financial support from Mr. and Mrs. Dooley. Upon his death in 1922, James Dooley left three million dollars to St. Joseph's Orphanage, the largest bequest ever received by a U.S. Catholic charity up to that time (Cavarti 60).

The Dooleys were also patrons of the arts and owners of an impressive collection of paintings, sculptures and antiques. To demonstrate his appreciation for the arts in Richmond, Major Dooley served as Director and primary financial supporter of the Richmond Art Club. Recognizing his young niece's artistic talent, Dooley funded Houston's room and board at the Chase School of Art, and later, her travel expenses to study art in Paris. Also, per her uncle's request, Houston was hired as an Arts Club instructor in 1910. Soon after this, she would take Dooley's place as the club Director.

Childhood & Early Artistic Training

When she was a child, Nora Houston and her mother lived next door to the sister of prominent Richmond artist, Lilly Logan. Logan owned a local art studio where she taught classes in painting and drawing. When first introduced to 10-year-old Nora Houston, Logan immediately took notice of the young girl's drawing talent and invited her to study art at the Franklin Street Studio (Archer).

Another girl of the same age, Adele Clark, had recently moved to Richmond from Louisiana and had also enrolled at the Franklin Street Studio. It was at this particular art studio where Nora and Adele became acquainted, beginning a powerful and enduring friendship that would last for many decades.

When they reached their teenaged years, Nora and her best friend Adele (they affectionately called one another "Nonnie and Dellie") joined the recently-founded Richmond Art Club located on 4th and Franklin Streets, opposite the Franklin Street Studio. The purpose of the Art Club was "to bring in exhibitions of contemporary artists, to sponsor lectures, encourage local talent and provide a strong arts school" (The Valentine Museum). The Club provided a sophisticated atmosphere where art courses were offered to its members by well-traveled and accomplished artists, including two Richmond natives: illustrator William L. Sheppard and sculptor Edward V. Valentine. Both men had received formal training in European art schools and "strongly encouraged their more 'serious' art students to study abroad in Paris" (Archer). Their accounts of Parisian arts and culture may have prompted Houston to eventually travel to France.

In 1904, Nora's Uncle James, who had served as president of the Richmond Art Club for nearly a decade, provided the funds for the Club to relocate to a larger facility at Grace and Belvidere Streets. At the new location, classes were offered by two young and progressive women, Anne Fletcher and Hallie Taliaferro, both of whom made a considerable impression on Nora and Adele. Fletcher, formerly a resident of Colorado, had voted in that state during its previous election, a concept completely foreign to Richmond women during this time period (Showers 2). In addition to the activities of her

aunt Alice Dooley, it is likely that Anne Fletcher helped to spark Houston's interest in women's suffrage.

Hallie Taliaferro had received her training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich with fellow American artist, William Merritt Chase (Showers 3). Upon his return to the United States, Chase maintained a private studio of his own in New York City and also taught courses in art instruction. In 1896, he opened his own art school called the Chase School of New York, where he earned the reputation as being "one of the most influential art teachers in the country" (Perlman 78).

In 1904, Chase contacted Taliaferro and suggested that she submit the work of five of her most promising students for the chance of winning a scholarship to his school. According to an article that appeared in the New York Times on May 20, 1905, the school had "a system of scholarships by arrangement with various out-of-town schools of art" whereby "the winner receives his or her tuition free of charge" ("Annual Exhibition of Work By Pupils During the Past Season" 11). Every year, art schools from six American cities (including Richmond) were asked to submit student works. Scholarships for men and women were equal in number (Wardle 107).

Taliaferro encouraged Houston and four other students to prepare paintings to be sent to New York to compete. Of the five student submissions from the Richmond Art Club, Chase selected Houston's work and offered her free tuition to the Chase School for the 1905 academic school year.

CHAPTER 2

NEW YORK AND PARIS

Between the years 1905-1909, Nora Houston's interest in expanding her talent as an artist as well as her desire to travel would lead her to new cities and experiences. At the age of twenty-two, Houston departed Richmond for two years to study at the Chase School of Art in New York. The lessons she learned from the school's art instructors would forever influence her artistic style and choice of subject matter in her paintings. Young and impressionable, Houston would have been witness to the many social and cultural changes taking place in New York City during the early 20th century. In particular, neighborhoods in the city's Lower East Side provided a burgeoning new haven for bohemian artists and for the sharing of progressive ideas.

In 1908, through the encouragement of musician friend who was leaving for Europe, Houston traveled to Paris to study art at the Academie Collarossi. Due to the generosity of her Uncle James, she was able afford to rent her own studio and hire models to pose for her paintings. During the two years that Houston lived and worked in Paris, the young artist was exposed to not only the works of French Cubists, Fauvists and Le Bande Noire painters, but also to sensitive depictions rural of French peasant life. These genre scenes of the working class undoubtedly influenced the subject matter of her "en plein air" paintings when she returned to Richmond.

Her experiences from living in New York and Paris exposed the young woman to the many injustices faced by poorer segments of society, and further opened her eyes to

the plight of the lower class in her own hometown. Her great sympathy for these people effected the ways in which Houston came to view and paint the world around her, guiding her towards a life-long career as an artist and activist.

The Chase School of Art

James Dooley was so impressed by the Chase School's recognition of Houston's artistic ability that "he agreed to pay her living expenses in New York for the period of the scholarship and so she set off for the big city" (Archer).

At the Chase School of Art, Houston had the privilege to take painting and drawing classes not only with William Merritt Chase, but also with instructors Robert Henri and Kenneth Hayes Miller, two progressive artists who influenced the New York art scene during the first two decades of the 20th century (Perlman 78-83).

Houston excelled as a student at the Chase School and was offered the one-year, tuition free position of "Monitor" for the 1906 academic year. Responsibilities of this position included assisting the instructor and occasionally filling in as a model. This experience gave Houston her first taste of being a teacher and allowed her to continue her studies at the School. Much to Nora's delight, her best friend Adele Clark was awarded the Chase School art scholarship in the fall of 1906 and joined her in New York.

Letters written from Nora and Adele to their family members suggest that the two were roommates for the academic year, initially living in the Upper East Side near the school. The two also attended classes and lectures together. Reflecting on the events of her day in a note written to her mother in November, 1906, Adele writes:

"We went out yesterday evening to Mr. Chase's lecture. Took tea with Nora and the girls, then we went down to the school. The lecture room was quite crowded . . . poor Mr. Chase concluded his talk by saying that he believed he expressed himself better by his pictures on the walls than by his words!" (Clark, Adele. Letter to Estelle G. Clark).

In an undated letter to her mother from 1907, Nora reports that she and Adele had begun "going down to the school to attend Saturday Art School" on the weekends where they learned to draw the human form "in a life class taught by Mr. Chase" (Houston, Nora. Letter to Josephine Dooley Houston).

William Merritt Chase, the older and more conservative of the three instructors under whom Nora and Adele would study, cared less about subject and more about technique (Perlman 78). He adopted the "en plain air" method of painting and encouraged his students to take their canvases outdoors.

The artist preferred to paint picturesque landscapes or woman and children in leisurely poses. "Don't paint the grandiose thing," he would preach to his students, "rather paint the commonplace so that it will be distinguished" (Roof 319). Chase also disapproved of the traditional "academic style" of teaching that included painting from plaster casts. He believed this method "isolated art from reality." The artist's alternative "choice of using live models to obtain real life textures and the changeability that accompanied them" was considered revolutionary for that time period (Showers 3).

Chase School instructors Robert Henri and Kenneth Hayes Miller also employed revolutionary methods for teaching and creating art. These artists, however, were far more radical than Chase. While each of the three agreed that art should be a record of an

involvement in daily life, Henri and Miller believed “there should be no glossing over of its harsher aspects” (Geldzahler 17).

By the early 1900s, American art students had become increasingly dissatisfied with the “out-dated” modes of practicing art that were still being taught in prestigious schools in both Europe and the United States. In these schools, students were trained how to copy works of “master artists” that depicted Greek mythology scenes, biblical subject matter, or portraits of European aristocrats. While French Impressionism and even Post-Impressionism of the late 19th century offered a departure from this, artists who employed these techniques typically created works that “were pleasing to the eye” and “tended to be a direct, *cheerful* depiction of ordinary activities” (Bryant 112).

Like the French Impressionists, progressive American artists embraced the notion of capturing the fleeting moment, but refused to make light of the subject: these painters wanted to depict life from a different perspective and create a distinctly “American” art tradition. Rejecting the Gilded Age focus on genteel society, these artists favored the depiction of working-class subjects and immigrant neighborhoods (Wardle 119).

Rather than focusing on subjects that included picnics, parties and informal activities, bohemian artists such as Robert Henri and Kenneth Hayes Miller attempted to examine through their art “the rise of industrialism and all the chaos, danger and turbulence that it created” (Bryant 112). Henri, Miller and their associates formed a small group of artists who sought to document everyday life in turn-of-the-century New York City, capturing it in realistic and unglamorized paintings and etchings of urban street scenes. These artists recognized that the increase in industrialization and absorption of

European immigrants was quickly changing the city's character and landscape. Due to their choice in subject matter, the group was referred to by art critics as "The Ashcan School" (Bryant 211).

As instructors, Henri and Miller felt it was critical for their students "to study their own country and portray its life and types" (Geldzahler 16), and encouraged them to depict life as it existed in the neighborhoods of working-class immigrants in New York's Lower East Side. Henri (and to some degree, Miller) even praised students who "resisted class boundaries" and "dared to venture into urban streets and ethnic neighborhoods to paint" (Wardle 118).

Henri himself lived in Greenwich Village, an urban neighborhood that contained a blend of people from all walks of life. Near his home, Henri found the perfect subject matter for his modern, progressive style "in the tenements, saloons, and working-class street life of the East Side and Village" (Homberger 252). He sought to break down economic, ethnic and racial barriers through his sensitive portrayals of the lower-class and expected each of his students, male or female, to do the same. The mere fact that he enjoined middle- and upper-class white women to explore "ethnically and racially diverse neighborhoods, to paint what they saw and experienced, was fairly radical in the early modern era" and suggests Henri's "implicit approval of the changed gender dynamics of the burgeoning feminist movement" (Wardle 118).

Kenneth Hayes Miller, like Henri and their contemporaries, attempted to convey truths about society, capturing American life "how it really was, honestly and without adornment" (Art Students League of New York). His works from the early 1900s

frequently depicted women of the working class, for whom he had a "deep admiration of their power." The female figures he chose to paint were "seldom of the romantic, obviously pretty kind, but a more mature and robust type, women of the people" who displayed "a full measure of strength, amplitude and vitality" (Art Students League of New York).

Miller had a very liberal attitude towards the artistic education of men and women. While Chase and Henri favored the old tradition of segregating male and female students, Miller believed that every student should receive the *exact* same methods of instruction, regardless of gender. When he began teaching at the Art Students League of New York in 1911, Miller "was one of several instructors who favored the change in the [League's] old policy of segregation of the sexes" (Art Students League of New York). This reflected his understanding of radically changing cultural norms and gender-based behavioral expectations that had been brought about by the 20th century.

Nora Houston was clearly impacted by each of these three instructors in terms of artistic attitude and style, and she undoubtedly gained a new perspective from her social experiences outside of the classroom. Encouraged by Henri and Miller to explore the working-class sections of lower Manhattan and nearby Brooklyn as subjects for her paintings allowed her to discover new and unfamiliar ideas and people. Inspired by the works of these instructors, Houston chose to paint a series of portraits of Armenian immigrants whom she encountered in these urban neighborhoods.

Armenian Portraits

Surviving correspondence reveals that by the spring of 1907, Nora and Adele were sharing an apartment on Carlton Avenue in Brooklyn. It is not known why they chose to live there, but the location did put them in closer proximity to the Lower East Side and its intriguing inhabitants. The two women could have easily gained access to the city by trolleys that crossed over the Brooklyn Bridge.

The borough of Brooklyn itself would have provided many opportunities for documenting the life of the working-class. There was a vast expansion in the population and industrialization of Brooklyn in the early 20th century as it quickly became filled with gas refineries, ironworks, slaughterhouses, sweatshops and factories (Reiss 80-82). Employment in these places, though not always safe or healthy, was widely available and attracted immigrant workers by the thousands.

Among these new immigrant workers were families of Armenians. Fleeing the political and cultural persecution as well as genocide taking place throughout the Ottoman Empire, Armenian refugees began settling in Brooklyn in the 1880s (Vartanian 20-22). An article published February 7, 1896 in the New York Times even describes the establishment of a “Brooklyn Committee for Armenian Relief” whose mission was to “solicit funds” for the “relief of sufferers and surviving victims of these persecutions” (“Brooklyn to Armenians: Sympathy Expressed at Meeting” 16).

While many Armenians and other Eastern Mediterranean peoples clustered at the southern tip of New York City, particularly in its Lower East section, small numbers of

Armenian immigrants did establish pocket communities in Brooklyn from the turn of the century until the 1930s (Vartanian 20-22).

During the time that she was studying at the Chase School, Houston painted several "unglamorized" yet sensitive portraits of Armenian refugees. Three of these portrait studies have survived and belong to the Catholic Diocese of Richmond. It is not known how Houston met the subjects of these paintings, but it is likely that she encountered them through her expeditions into neighborhoods of the Lower East Side, or through opportunities presented by living in Brooklyn.

The majority of Armenians who settled in New York City during this time were Roman Catholic and practiced rites similar to those of the Greek and Russian orthodox churches ("Sights and Characters of New York's Little Syria" 32). In a letter written to her mother in 1907, Houston mentions that she attended services at St. Marks Church near her Brooklyn apartment (Houston, Nora. Letter to Josephine Dooley Houston). It is possible that she was introduced to Catholic Armenians through this church and perhaps invited them to sit for her portrait studies.

The portrait titled *Meditating Armenian Man* (Fig. 1) depicts a young man, shirtless, who is seated with his arms folded across his chest. In this emotionally-telling image, the figure has a pensive look on his face, as though he is feeling cautious, apprehensive and even troubled. The loose and hurried brushwork visible in the painting reveals Houston's eagerness to capture the pose of her model. It also reflects the influence of instructor William Merritt Chase, who employed the technique of using "spontaneity and rapid execution to capture both still-life and portraits" (Showers 3).

Fig. 1. Nora Houston, *Meditating Armenian Man*,
Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church,
Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

While this may have been a quick study, Houston successfully conveys through the painting the sense of trepidation and vulnerability that this immigrant must have felt after fleeing his homeland and settling in an American city.

Painted around the same time are two different portraits of the same woman, titled *Armenian Woman* (Fig. 2) and *Armenian Woman in Meditation* (Fig. 3). For both portrait studies, Houston appears to be experimenting with dark tonalities, a somber color palette and the effects of light and shadow on her subject. The style of these two portraits was

obviously influenced by Robert Henri's own portraiture style, which always incorporated "single-figure subjects, broad brushstrokes and dark, bare backgrounds" (Wardle 119).

Fig. 2. Nora Houston, *Armenian Woman*
Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church,
Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

Like the figure in *Meditating Armenian Man*, the female subject of *Armenian Woman* is seated with her arms folded in front of her. Unlike the man, she looks straight ahead to the viewer, conveying a sense of confidence, calmness and the wisdom that

comes with age. The deep lines in her face, shadows beneath her eyes and pursed lips suggest that she has not forgotten the horrific scenes of the suffering people in Armenia. Houston's depiction of this woman clearly demonstrates her admiration and respect for this woman, and her sympathy for the hardships that the immigrant has faced.

The treatment of the woman's features in *Armenian Woman in Meditation* is very similar. In this realistic and honest depiction, she sits in a dark and dingy room,

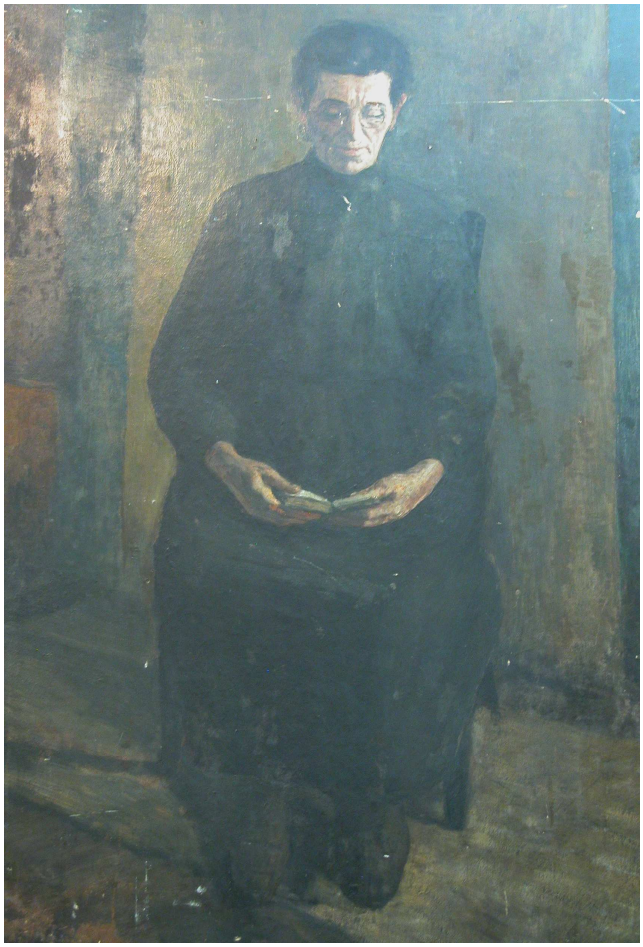

Fig. 3. Nora Houston, *Armenian Woman in Meditation*,
Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church,
Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

quietly reading the small book on her lap. Since Houston uses the word “Meditation” in the title for this work, it is possible that the woman is reading a pocket bible or devotional prayer book. Through this work, it is apparent that the young art student took heed to the advice of instructor Kenneth Hayes Miller, who encouraged his class to “show humanity without glamour, romanticizing or moralizing; merely the monumental fact of its existence” (Art Students League of New York).

Return to Richmond

When Houston returned to Richmond in the summer of 1907, she was armed with new skills and techniques and probably eager to put into practice the lessons she had learned in New York. With no job or employment prospects on the horizon, Houston “bravely rented a room near her home where she set up her first personal studio” (Archer). She also began taking commissions to do portraits of friends and family members.

It is believed that it was at this point in time when Houston painted the portrait of herself (Fig. 4) and the portrait of her mother, Josephine (Fig. 5). Houston’s self-portrait reflects a confident woman, poised to begin her career as a professional artist. Josephine Houston is accurately depicted as the quiet and composed intellectual that she was in real life.

In these two paintings, the influence of William Merritt Chase can be seen once again in her use of rapid, visible brushstrokes. The sense of incompleteness in both portraits suggests that they were completed in one, quick sitting (Showers 5).

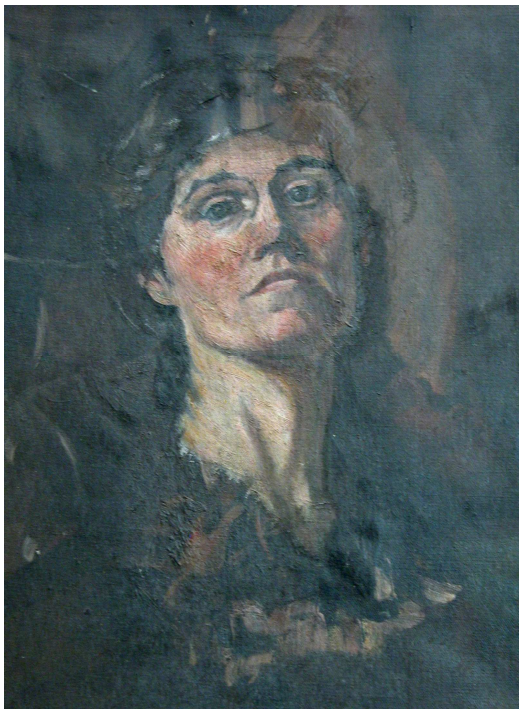

Fig. 4. Nora Houston, *Self-Portrait*, Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church, Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

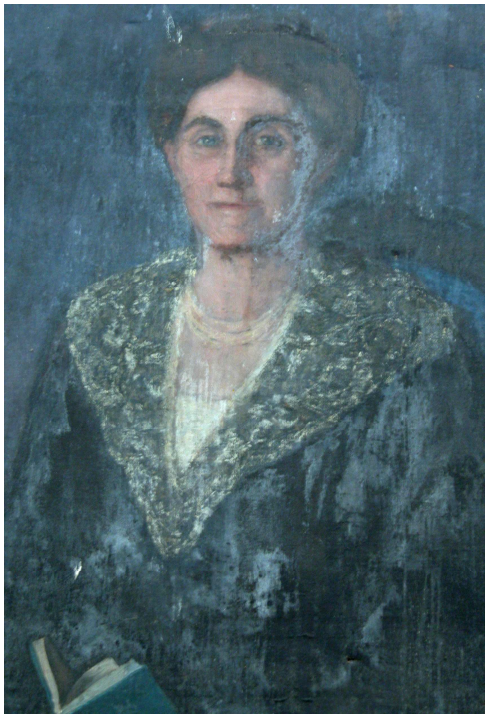

Fig. 5. Nora Houston, *Josephine Houston*, Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church, Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

Additionally, both paintings reflect Houston's continued experiments with using a somber color palette and darker background, placing particular emphasis on the shadows found in the contours of the subject's face. In a style similar to her portrait studies of the Armenians, Houston uses little or no detail in the background, focusing the viewer's attention explicitly on the facial expression of the sitter.

During a brief return trip home to Richmond, Houston's friend John Powell sat for a portrait study in her studio. The talented young pianist was in the midst of an extended period of study in Vienna under the tutelage of famous composer, Theodor Leschetizky. Powell greatly impressed Houston with his stories of travels around

Europe, and of his new friendships with “various personalities from the world of arts and letters” such as poet Karl Burger and sculptor Auguste Rodin (Kushner).

Inspired to travel abroad and gain her own exciting cultural experiences, Houston began to make plans to study art in Europe. Her first step was to convince her uncle of her genuine dedication to building a career out of painting. Wishing to support his niece in her artistic endeavors, James Dooley agreed to finance two years of study in Paris at the Academie Collarossi, as well as the funds to rent out her own private studio space. In February of 1908, Houston set sail for France (Showers 5).

Life in Paris

Landing squarely in the glamorous and glittering city of Paris, considered at the time to be “the world capital of modernity and progress” (Hussey 310), must have been truly exhilarating for the young artist. This “cultural Mecca” was home to numerous artists and intellectuals who were drawn to the new ideas and ideologies that were being openly exchanged within the city’s bohemian circles.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Paris saw the “rapid rise of the avant-garde movements, from Cubism to Surrealism and Existentialism, and all of their offshoots” (Hussey 309). While there was a variety of experimentation taking place in terms of artistic style and subject matter, many European artists, much like those of New York “Ash Can” movement, preferred to paint the life and daily labors of the working-class in both urban and rural environments. Epitomizing the sentiment that many “modern” artists of this time period were feeling, the post-Impressionist artist Edvard Munch stated:

"We should no longer paint interiors with people reading and women knitting. They should be people who live, breathe, feel suffer, and love" (qtd. in Wiggins 52).

Between the years 1908-1909 when Houston was living and working in France, the movements of Cubism and Fauvism dominated the Parisian art scene. Pioneered by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who maintained studios in Paris at the time, Cubist artists used flat planes of color, geometric shapes and simplified lines to create the human form, and to demarcate areas light and shadow (Habasque 14). Rather than using one viewpoint, Cubists depicted objects or subjects using a multitude of viewpoints, creating compositions of abstract forms and shapes. This new technique shocked the art world.

Equally as revolutionary were the works of Fauvist artists such as the French painter, Henri Matisse. Fauvists painted their subjects with the use of bright, bold and unnaturalistic colors with little use of modeling or accurate perspective. These "flat" compositions were inspired largely by Japanese woodblock prints, an art form that had gained international appeal in the early 20th century (Wiggins 28). During this time period, the radical new methods of interpreting and capturing subject matter used by both Cubists and Fauvists helped to liberate painting from the "representational expectations" that had dominated Western art since the Renaissance (Whitfield 103-145). Inspired by these new styles of painting, her experimentation with vibrant hues and the use of flat plans of color and geometric forms can be seen in several of Houston's paintings from the 1910s. Two of which, will be discussed in the next chapter.

Upon her arrival to Paris, Houston immediately enrolled in the progressive and avant garde, Academie Collarossi (Archer). The Academie Collarossi was a private

institute that offered an alternative to the conservative French state academies such as the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (Krystof 68). Widely popular among French and international students, the Academie provided an atmosphere in which artists had the freedom to explore new ideas, techniques and themes. It welcomed women artists and encouraged both male and female students to work with nude models. Unlike the state academies, instruction at the Academie "consisted above all in providing the students with models whose poses they could then determine themselves" (Krystof 68).

At the Academie, Houston studied with artists Charles Cottet, Lucien Simon and Rene Menard. These men were part of a small group of painters who became known in the 1890s as "Le Bande Noire" (the black band) due to the dark tonality of their work. Le Bande Noire artists often spent much of their time painting landscape and genre scenes in Brittany, "fascinated by the region's intense melancholy and the harsh life faced by those who lived near the sea" (qtd. in Bonfante-Warren 235). Through their work, these artists attempted to depict the struggles faced by the lifestyles of Breton fisherman, farmers and peasants.

The darker palette used in many of Houston's paintings from this time period, as well as her continued interest in depicting the working class and addressing basic human issues and experiences through her art, was probably reinforced after seeing the works of her Le Bande Noire instructors.

While taking courses in drawing and painting instruction, Houston also rented her own private studio where she hired models to sit and pose for her. This fortunate opportunity helped the young woman to gain additional practice in portraiture techniques.

It was also during this time that Houston began to professionally exhibit her work for the first time at the International Student Alliance (Showers 5).

During her two-year stay in Paris, Houston lived with wealthy American expatriates Dr. and Mrs. George Bull. The couple lived on the fashionable rue de la Paix near the Arc de Triomphe, just mere blocks from the Louvre. Dr. Bull was a physician who worked in an ophthalmology laboratory at the Sorbonne where he gained recognition for his invention of the Bull Optometer ("Bull Optometer" 58).

Mrs. Bull and Houston's mother had been schoolmates at Mount de Chantal Visitation Academy, a Catholic girls' school in West Virginia. The school had been managed by the Sisters of the Visitation, a religious order that originated from France. At the school, the Sisters and their pupils spoke mostly in French. Conveniently, Houston had learned to speak French from her mother, an ability that helped her greatly while living in Paris (Archer).

Dr. and Mrs. Bull often took in art students as boarders, and even founded an art club in for young Americans who were studying in Paris. Through this club, Houston was able to meet other like-minded artists. While Houston met many interesting men and women through the club, her most significant acquaintance was American-born painter, Elizabeth Nourse. Houston greatly admired Nourse's painting philosophy and choice of subject matter, and "was more influenced by her than by any of the French artists with whom she studied" (Archer).

Nourse, like the Le Bande Noire artists, had an interest in painting scenes of the grueling harbor life in Brittany. However, she was best known for her sensitive

depictions of French peasants. Her paintings from the late 19th to the early 20th century provide a visual documentation of the daily routines of rural men and women at work, particularly of mothers caring for their home and children.

It is easy to understand why Houston would have felt a personal connection to Elizabeth Nourse. Like Houston, Nourse was a very devout Catholic who frequently performed acts of personal charity (Burke 39). She had great respect and empathy for French peasant life, "identifying with its simplicity, piety and familial devotion" (Burke 35). Nourse never married and was a self-supporting artist who often faced financial hardships. She was acquainted with and exhibited alongside many well-known artists such as John Singer Sargent and Mary Cassatt. Yet despite her cosmopolitan circle of friends, Nourse lived a relatively simple and frugal lifestyle, dedicating herself to creating art and helping those in need. Her success at balancing both work and charitable acts must have provided great inspiration to Houston, just on the brink of beginning her own career as an artist and activist.

The eye-opening experiences that Nora Houston gained while living in both New York and Paris gave the young woman a greater understanding of the struggles faced by the working-class and the urgent need to address the issues plaguing the poor in her own hometown. Her exposure to progressive new art that promoted greater social awareness catalyzed her belief that an artist should be a force for social reform. Houston's travels would influence the way she would view and paint the world upon her return to Richmond at the close of 1909.

CHAPTER 3

PAINTING, TEACHING AND FIGHTING FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE (1910-1920)

After nearly two years of study in Paris, Houston returned to Richmond as not only a more mature and cultured individual, but also as a much stronger artist. She arrived back to her hometown feeling empowered and ready to face the new challenges that the next decade would bring.

The years spanning from 1910 to 1920 would prove to be tremendously eventful, exciting and exhausting for Nora Houston. After settling into her mother's home in the heart of downtown Richmond, she began to teach painting classes at the Richmond Art Club and by 1910, took over its directorship. At this point, Houston and Adele Clark became the Club's primary instructors. In the same year, the two young women, along with Josephine Houston and Aunt Alice Dooley, joined the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia (ESLV) to fight for the right to vote through activities such as meeting with legislators and recruiting volunteers to help work for the cause. Due to the wealth and distinction of Uncle James Dooley, whose name was recognized throughout the state, Nora Houston would have the ability to voice her suffragist agenda to some of Virginia's most influential citizens. Her family ties would also help her to earn the respect of the local press as well as members of the local government.

In addition to her activities with the ESLV, Houston continued to create paintings and serve as director of the Richmond Art Club until President Wilson's declaration that

U.S. troops would enter the World War. In the spring of 1917, as a result of the war effort which impacted most of Richmond's population, the Art Club was forced to close due to the lack of funds and members. Its closing prompted Houston and Adele Clark to open their own "Atelier" in the city that offered courses in arts and crafts.

The Richmond Art Club

In 1910, James Dooley decided to retire as director of the Richmond Art Club and hand the directorship responsibilities over to his niece. Houston was delighted with this new opportunity to not only teach, but to change and expand the Club's programs. She immediately hired Adele Clark to assist with teaching art classes and together, the two women served as the Club's primary instructors for a period of seven years. Houston also appointed her mother as the Club's secretary.

The mere fact that Houston and Clark were able to earn a living solely through teaching art (without the financial support of a spouse) was unusual for this time period. Due to gender-based behavioral expectations of the early 20th century, former female art students were rarely able to pursue careers as artists. Additionally, they often found themselves marginalized by the largely male-dominated art world. Explains Betsy Fahlman, a contributing writer to American Women Modernists, though "education in the arts became more egalitarian as society at large changed," in terms of careers, "few women had the opportunity to do what they saw their instructors doing: teach" (93-94).

Under Houston's leadership, the mission of the organization was to offer education in the arts and handicrafts, sponsor lectures by local artists and art historians, and provide a local venue for regional artists to display their works.

Houston's former instructor, Robert Henri, made the statement in 1907 that an art classroom should function, "not as a place where students are fitted into the groove of rule and regulation but where personality and originality of vision and idea are encouraged" (Wardle 109). Much like the kind of instruction she had received in New York and Paris, Houston's Art Club classes were fairly "anti-academic" in their approach. Her students painted subjects from real life and were given the freedom to develop their own personal style.

Houston's former art student, Theresa Pollack, remarked in an interview in 1972 that the Art Club had "an atmosphere that was 'free'," in which "live models and even nudes were used" (qtd. in Showers 7). She also recalled that when Houston and Clark became increasingly active in the suffrage movement, the instructors did not allow their teaching responsibilities to be neglected. Pollack had fond memories of the studio which was located "in an inviting, large house and garden" that radiated with "warmth and artistic disorderliness" (qtd. in Showers 7). Another former student, Edmund Archer (who later became a curator for the Whitney Museum of Art), described the Richmond Art Club as having a very "professional atmosphere" that arose out of Houston's varied experiences in the art world. In terms of instruction at the Club, he remembered receiving "practical assistance and encouragement to think for one's self" ("Former Pupil Praises Work of Nora Houston, Artist").

In addition to teaching and managing the Richmond Art Club, Houston frequently took her canvases outdoors to paint in nearby neighborhoods, a habit she retained from her school days in New York. She often painted scenes of daily life in Richmond's Jackson Ward, a neighborhood that consisted of older generations of former slaves and families that descended from freed slaves. These paintings are significant as they depict a segment of the city's population that was often overlooked and rarely recorded in artwork from the 1910s.

Fig. 6. Nora Houston, *Fourth Street Winter*,
Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church,
Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

Fig. 7. Nora Houston, *Fourth Street Summer*,
Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church,
Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

Explains Dr. Maureen Elgersman Lee, Director of Richmond's Black History Museum & Cultural Center, while many early 20th century photographic images of the neighborhood have survived, "there exists today a comparatively limited inventory of fine art that depicts Jackson Ward" (Elgersman Lee). Two beautiful examples of Houston's observations of street activity in Jackson Ward can be seen in the seasonal works titled *Fourth Street Winter* (Fig. 6) and *Fourth Street Summer* (Fig. 7).

Remarks Edmund Archer about this period of time in Houston's career: "She returned to Richmond with the prestige and assurance of two years in Paris and two years in New York. It was about this time that, near her home on East Main Street, she painted the scenes of Fourth Street in summer and winter, which are more evocative of 'old Richmond' than any paintings that I know" (Archer).

Houston always depicted her Jackson Ward subjects with sensitivity and respect. Through the time she spent carefully recording street scenes and people in this neighborhood, Houston must have earned the trust of the Jackson Ward community as she was able to engage several men and woman to sit for portrait studies. There are two portraits of African American women that have survived from this time period: *Nicolina* (Fig. 8) and *Young Negro Woman* (Fig. 9). It is believed that these two works were created between the years 1910-1915.

Both portraits reflect the influence of art movements that had taken root in Europe during the early 20th century, which undoubtedly made an impression on Houston during the time that she was in Paris. The inspiration for her artistic execution of these paintings probably came from Houston's exposure to Cubism and Fauvism. The two portraits contain modified elements of Cubism with their somewhat "flattened" planes, minimal use of shading (especially in the treatment of the fabrics) and stylized, angular lines. This is particularly true in the background of *Nicolina*. The areas of rich, saturated, "blocks" of color, as well as limited detail in the drawing of the forms, are all representative of the influence of Fauvism.

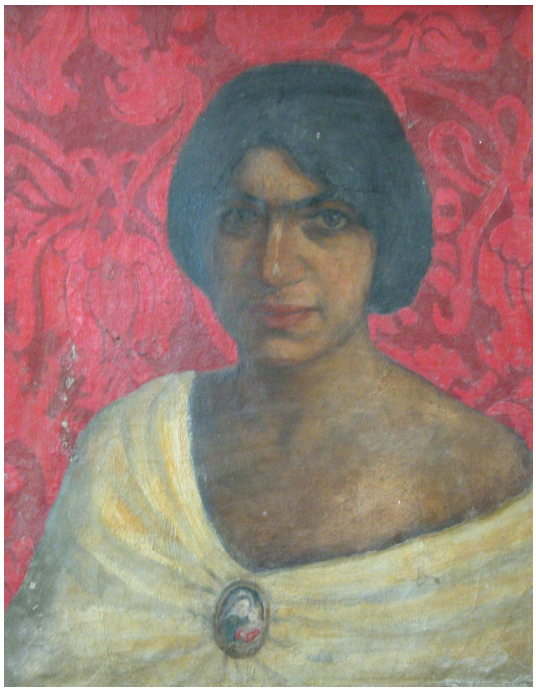

Fig. 8. Nora Houston, *Nicolina*, Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church, Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

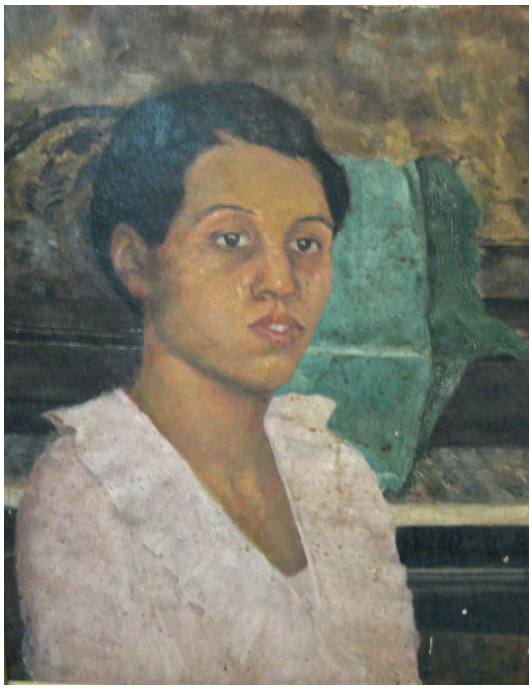

Fig. 9. Nora Houston, *Young Negro Woman* Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church, Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

In a letter dated September 8, 1911, Houston writes to her mother (who was visiting family in West Virginia) about her latest portrait study, likely referring to *Nicolina*. She describes her sitter as wearing an ivory shawl "with a distinctly greenish caste" that is "pinned with a porcelain brooch." Delving into great detail about her chosen color palette for the painting, Houston refers to her background as being "well blocked in" with the blended colors of Indian red, white, and black (Houston, Nora. Letter to Josephine Dooley Houston). It is clear that Houston took great care and consideration in the depiction of each of her portraiture subjects, capturing the individual personalities of her models while preserving the subject's sense of pride and dignity.

Of noteworthy importance, Houston's *Young Negro Woman* was later featured in a 1936 exhibition of her works in Richmond's Anderson Galleries where it was very well-received. Reviewing this piece, an art critic remarked that unlike other artists of the time, "Miss Houston found blacks to be interesting to paint as human beings, not as minstrels, servants or in grotesque caricatures" ("Nora Houston, Anderson Galleries Show"). The compassion that Nora Houston felt for all human beings, regardless of age, gender or race, was repeatedly demonstrated through her art and her actions from early adulthood until the end of her life.

Women's Suffrage in the South

By early 1909, the women's suffrage movement had come to the city of Richmond**.** The fight for suffrage in the South coincided with major national reform movements related to health, safety and morality in America. These Progressive Era reforms were aimed to improve public education, create public health programs, address the welfare of women and children in need, and better regulate industrial practices. In particular, child labor and the working conditions in urban factories. Public debate on these issues sparked an interest in local politics and gave many women a deeper understanding of the power of the ballot. Those who took up the cause for suffrage understood that their direct involvement in government would ensure that these growing problems would be properly addressed.

Women who supported progressive reforms argued that urbanization and industrialization in towns across the country had negatively impacted the family and

home life of the nation's poorest citizens. Economic development, they believed, was grossly exploiting the working class. Writes Beverly Zink-Sawyer in her book From Preachers to Suffragists, at the turn of the century "changes in the sociological configuration and economic fortunes of the nation created a perceived decline in its moral standards" (175). Various ministries and missions emerged in response to this "moral decline" in America, most of them spearheaded by women who "concluded they must be able to apply their nurturing, protective instincts to society as a whole" (Baker 22).

Female participants in the suffrage movement were often heavily involved in charity work or with benevolent church groups and societies in their communities. Explains historian Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, author of New Women of the New South, this work "led them to a growing knowledge of social ills and a commitment to use their influence for good beyond the traditional limits of woman's sphere" (39). Eventually, one social concern led to another and "women soon found themselves at work in the halls of legislature" (Scott 160).

Initiators of the suffrage movement in Virginia consisted almost exclusively of white, upper-class women. In fact, a large percentage of the participants of the movement during its formative years included women who were wealthy, self-supporting and often, college-educated (Adams and Keene 172-173). Explains Clayton McClure Brooks in Proper Voices, Radical Words, many of these suffragists decided to join the cause out of *noblesse oblige* (the obligation of the elite to help those less fortunate), believing that it accorded with their social position (23). The privileged socioeconomic positions of these women worked to their advantage in many ways. Their status "facilitated their suffrage

work; it brought with it a certain familiarity with and access to the political process and a degree of immunity from criticism or social ostracism, not enjoyed by Southern women of lesser social standing" (Wheeler 39). As a result, leaders of the suffrage movement in Virginia deliberately recruited women from prominent southern families.

Another advantage that was afforded to women of wealth and privilege (such as Nora Houston and other Richmond suffragists) was the ability to finance much of their own suffrage work. This included expenses incurred while traveling across the state for speaking engagements, and from financing the production and distribution of various informational materials on women's suffrage.

The role of religion is an often overlooked but important aspect of the suffrage movement in the South, and was a common denominator among many of its participants. Their desire to "improve the secular world through moral virtue, led many deeply religious women into the suffrage movement" (Brooks 23). Several women of faith rose to leadership positions in organizations that fought for suffrage and women's rights (Zink-Sawyer 4). Suffragists of Christian backgrounds each shared the common theological belief in "the equality of all human beings in the eyes of God" (Zink-Sawyer 4-5). This belief became part of the rhetoric of these suffragists from the very onset of the movement.

For the southern suffragists, religion would play an integral part in their activities and become part of their argument for women's suffrage. Many women would join the cause due to a sense of divine call or religious obligation. Others would find their faith to be a source of motivation and confidence. To them, fighting for suffrage in order to

"improve the human condition of their fellow sisters" was "quite in keeping with God's will" (Wheeler 59). With her Catholic upbringing and family who placed deep importance on Christian values, Nora Houston would have most certainly subscribed to the religious rationale that supported women's suffrage.

The Founding of the ESLV

When the suffrage movement came to Richmond, Houston's socially-conscious aunt, Alice Dooley, immediately took up interest in voting rights for women and began investing her time and energy into the cause. Reflective of her lifelong devotion to charitable and philanthropic efforts, Aunt Alice "took part in every laudable movement looking to social and civic improvement" ("Obituary for Alice Dooley" 10). She believed that through gaining the right to vote, women would have more opportunities to make positive changes in their communities that would benefit both women of privilege and their less fortunate sisters.

At the encouragement of Aunt Alice, Houston, her mother and Adele Clark decided to become involved in the suffrage movement. In November of 1909, the women attended the first public meeting in Richmond regarding the establishment of a statewide suffrage organization. The attendees of the meeting, all civic-minded women, agreed to band together to form the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia (ESLV). Its mission was "to safeguard and advance the educational, industrial and legal rights and interests of women, and to obtain for women the franchise on equal terms with men" ("Declaration of

Principles"). The League's members believed that with the right to vote, women could work more effectively for the passage of health, education and child labor laws.

Each member of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia had particular social causes to which she was devoted to. Nora Houston was deeply concerned about two particular issues: the welfare of working-class children and the healing of race relations in Richmond. She contended that both of these issues could be properly addressed if women, both black and white, were given the freedom to vote.

Describing the founding members of the ESLV in the book Visible Women, Suzanne Lebsock writes: "they all were women, all were white, and they tended to be members of socially prominent families," and "a high proportion of them lived in Richmond" (69). Additionally, these women of privilege had all been actively involved in social reform or charitable work that stimulated their desire for women's suffrage. The social positions and recognizable family names held by members of the ESLV made the organization difficult to ignore. They were each well-connected ladies who found opportunities to make their voices heard (Fig. 10). While members of the ESLV were almost entirely female, they continuously sought allies among men, occasionally winning "the support of liberal clergymen, a few public officials and a very occasional newspaper editor" (Hewitt and Lebsock 69).

Another characteristic that women of the ESLV shared was their belief that Virginia was "generally poorly run by men who either failed to understand the crucial need for reforms . . . or preferred to use their offices to line their pockets" (Wheeler 65). To these suffragists, it was clear that many Southern legislators were failing to live up to

their responsibilities to the citizens that they served. The women feared that crucial issues such as health, education and welfare of the people had become less important to politicians than the rapid growth of Virginia's economy. In public speeches, such as those that Houston would eventually give, many Virginian suffragists placed emphasis on the dishonesty of politicians in state government, claiming that any hope for the restoration of morality and preservation of the nation's integrity rested in its women. "Corrupt or impious politicians would be defeated," they believed, "if only women had the right to vote" (Baker 22).

Fig. 10. Members of the ESLV posing for a photograph before entering a suffrage parade, c. 1910. Nora Houston is seated in the back row, third from left; Adele Clark is standing in the front row, far left. Image courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

The ESLV supported equal rights for women as well as the right to vote. Women, the League members argued, were intelligent, sensible, tax-paying citizens who deserved to cast ballots ("Declaration of Principles"). Additionally, the female population had special concerns and interests that were being poorly addressed by male legislators. If given a voice through voting, Virginia's women could add valuable insight into resoving a number of problems that were ignored by state politicians.

While he did not stand in the way of his niece and sisters when they joined the suffrage movement, James Dooley was not particularly in favor of equal voting rights for women. Hoping to gain his support for the cause, Alice Dooley approached her brother at a board meeting of the Richmond Art Club for his signature on a petition that would go to Congress. The petition asked Congress to simply consider the question of women's suffrage. James Dooley refused to sign, possibly out of loyalty to his wife who did *not* support the suffrage movement (Cavarti 55).

Sallie Mae Dooley served on the Executive Board of the Virginia Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (VAOWS). This anti-suffrage organization believed that suffrage for women, especially the potential for black female voters, threatened white supremacy and southern civilization as a whole (Baker 110). The "antis," though they recognized the need to improve the moral and social conditions in America, "fought to maintain gender behavior unchanged with regard to political justice" (Baker 119). In a letter to the editor of the Richmond Times-Dispatch that asserted the position of the antis, the Board President of VAOWS argued that women's suffrage would ultimately "lead to racial social equality and the intermarriage of whites and blacks" (Williams, Mary Mason

Anderson. Letter). Though disappointed that James Dooley refused to support the cause for suffrage, Houston and the Dooley women were not deterred from their mission.

Fighting for the Right to Vote

Nora Houston served as a delegate to the first State Convention of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia, held in Richmond in November of 1911; her mother and aunt were also present ("Attendees of the State Convention of the ESLV"). Houston would continue to serve as a delegate at the ESLV State Convention every year from 1914 to 1920. The three women also attended the annual gatherings of the Southern States Woman Suffrage organization, which began in 1912 ("Southern States Woman Suffrage Convention").

To aid the ESLV in its efforts, Houston frequently volunteered to speak at public meetings in Richmond to inform men and women about the cause for suffrage. Additionally, she volunteered for many of the League's sub-committees, and for several years, served as the ESLV's recording secretary. While serving in this capacity, Houston wrote a detailed typescript called "The History of the ESLV" which provides a useful illustration of the League's activities between 1909-1920.

Together, Nora Houston and Adele Clark utilized their artistic talents in the design of posters, banners, postcards and leaflets for the organization. Houston, Clark and other members of the ESLV traveled to various venues to distribute their literature, including schools and universities, county fairs, suffrage rallies and town meetings (Houston). They also held bake sales and sold needlework hand-made by League

members in order to raise money for their cause. According to the yearbooks of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia, Houston made arrangements for and supervised the ESLV booth at the 1911 Virginia State Fair. The following year, Houston and Clark artistically collaborated in the design of the Richmond League's float in a city suffrage parade.

Traveling through towns across the state, Houston went on various speaking engagements, canvassed from house to house, and worked to recruit more participants in the suffrage movement. As head of the ESLV's Public Meetings Committee, Houston was "among the corps of speakers who helped to organize Equal Suffrage Leagues throughout Virginia" (Yearbook of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia, 1916).

While promoting the suffrage cause in western parts of Virginia, Houston and her mother stayed at the estate of Florence Dooley Lewis in Sweet Springs, West Virginia, a town that boarders Virginia. "Aunt Flo," who was Josephine Houston's older sister, helped to advance the suffrage campaign by arranging meetings in towns near Sweet Springs where Houston could address the public.

In a brief note to Adele Clark, Houston writes: "We are going to our meeting Thursday night in the school house on the Virginia side of the state line. There are several girls around here who took part in the suffrage debate and whom I have asked to side . . . they said they couldn't but I hope they will" (Houston, Nora. Letter to Adele Clark). Also writing to Adele Clark from Sweet Springs, Josephine Houston explains the difficulties her daughter has faced while traveling through rural western Virginia. "Nora hasn't been

able to see as many people in the country as she had hoped to . . . I really think you & Nora could work better as a team" (Houston, Josephine. Letter to Adele Clark).

Houston also traveled to counties on the eastern side of Virginia where she spoke at public meetings to encourage local citizens and politicians to sign a suffrage petition. She wrote to Clark almost daily, reporting her activities and experiences. Remarks Houston in a letter: "It was very thrilling to speak in Westmoreland County Courthouse with portraits and busts of Washington & Lee all around. The Judge was exceedingly nice . . . He is supposed to be an anti, but I don't think he is at all!" In the same letter, Houston recounts to Clark that after she spoke to a group at the Tappahanock Court House, the judge exclaimed: "Gentlemen, if there's any one of you who can answer that speech, I invite you to do so right now. But no one did! I wish you could have seen those dear old souls in the Court Room come up to sign" (Houston, Nora. Undated letter to Adele Clark).

Houston's own economic independence but even more significantly, the absence of any obligation to care for a home, husband or children afforded her the freedom to travel around the state to educate Virginians about women's suffrage. With Adele Clark as an instructor at the Art Club, Houston had the opportunity to leave for periods of time, entrusting Clark with the management of their students. It was this flexibility in her general lifestyle that enabled Houston to pursue her suffrage work.

Though the ESLV often held fundraisers and sought contributions to the cause, its more "financially independent" members were expected to donate not only their time, but also their money (Wheeler 44). Houston was responsible for financing most of her travel

and activities for the League. This was not unusual for many suffragists of independent means. Explained southern suffragist Pattie Ruffner Jacobs in a newspaper article from 1913, the "women of the leisure class can afford to go around stirring up enthusiasm for the movement which the women of other classes cannot do, [giving them] an opportunity to do something for their less fortunate sisters that will be of benefit to the entire feminine world" ("Equal Suffragists Hold Meeting at Library").

By early 1910, the ESLV joined with the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), whose mission was to advance the legal rights of woman as well as secure the right of suffrage. Through the instruction that they received from leaders of NAWSA, members of the ESLV began an aggressive campaign to educate Virginians on the issue of women's suffrage. By 1916, almost every town in Virginia with more than 2,500 residents had a suffrage league (Hewitt and Lebsock 72).

The Equal Suffrage League of Virginia had quite an impact on conservative Richmond, and received a very mixed response from both men and women. To many of Richmond's citizens, joining the ESLV was considered "radical." Traditionally, southern women had been entrusted with protecting the morals and welfare of their own families and to some extant, members of their community. However, they were expected to stay out of politics. The suffrage movement, in the eyes of conservatives, "was revolutionary and emancipatory, claiming for women equality of rights, opportunities, and respect with men. More than just paving the way to the ballot box . . . suffragists were also attempting to rethink and redefine what womanhood meant, a threatening

proposition to men and women alike" ("Woman Suffrage in Virginia").

Pro-suffrage leaders in Virginia made every effort to present their cause as nonthreatening and in agreement with traditional Southern values. They understood that this would be the only way in which state legislators would consider the question of woman suffrage. Female enfranchisement, they insisted, would *not* lead them to neglect their duties to home and family, but help them to carry out these responsibilities. "Proud to be Southern Ladies, these women took care to look and act the part; publicists for the suffrage movement deliberately celebrated the femininity and social prominence of their leaders" (Wheeler 73).

In their courageous efforts to acquire suffrage for women, members of the ESLV tried to maintain a sense of decorum in their public activities, even tailoring their rhetoric to align with the traditional morals of the "southern lady." Evidence of this can be seen in the following excerpt, taken from a booklet produced by the ESLV in 1910 that outlined principles of their argument for female enfranchisement:

> No one admits more quickly than the equal suffragist that the home is the basis of all things good, the foundation of all that is best worth preserving; and it is to protect it from disaster and develop it into its highest possibilities that is desired by many women that they shall be allowed some voice in those matters which pertain most closely to its welfare. (The Equal Suffrage League of Virginia)

The ESLV preferred to use more subdued, educationally-focused campaigns rather than some of the "militant" tactics used by other suffrage organizations. When they

learned that a group of northern suffragists had been loudly and aggressively picketing the White House, the ESLV immediately released a statement that denounced the actions of these women, claiming that they were “unwise” and “unpatriotic.” In the statement, the League’s members pleaded to their state politicians that they not “condemn the suffrage cause as a whole because of the folly of a handful of women” (“Press Release of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia”).

It should also be noted that American “suffragists” intentionally distinguished themselves as being separate from the European “Suffragettes.” Suffragettes, particularly those active in London, were notoriously violent and often damaged public and private properties during their protests. The ESLV would have never tolerated such behavior in their effort to secure the right to vote.

When addressing the public, Nora Houston and other members of the ESLV tried to use the most effective language in their argument to appeal to legislators. They suggested that men needed to enfranchise women so that *all* of Virginia’s women and children could be properly safeguarded. They reminded the politicians that not all women “enjoyed the personal protection of a Southern gentleman,” and so they alternatively “required state legislative protection” (Wheeler 95).

Despite their careful rhetoric and proper decorum, by supporting the suffrage movement, Houston and Clark were making a brave and risky stand that ultimately had an impact on the Richmond Art Club. Several members of the club were rumored to have left the organization due to the “progressive” attitudes of these two instructors (Showers 6).

Some members may have been displeased with the tactics the young women employed to inform the public about the goals of the suffrage movement. Houston and Clark would park in an open-topped car at the corner of Grace and Belvidere streets (in front of the Richmond Art Club) and make large sketches. These sketches depicted images from suffrage-related events such as marches and sit-ins. When a sufficient crowd was gathered, the two artists would begin to lecture about women's rights and the importance of winning the right to vote (Showers 7).

Dwindling membership at the Club did create some financial hardship. In order to cover its operational costs, Houston had to decrease the salaries for both herself and her mother. In a letter from James Dooley to Houston's mother dated September 1, 1914, he wrote that he was "sending along a nice suit, hat and shoes [for you] to wear to the office, and also a nice suit for Nora to wear at the Club. I know her failure to get her salary has made her 'economize,' and is pretty hard on her" (Dooley, James. Letter to Josephine Dooley Houston). Despite her self-imposed pay cut, Houston continued to finance her own suffrage activities and travel expenses.

At this point in time, the National American Woman Suffrage Association, in an attempt to give the suffrage movement in the South more momentum, began to garner support for the cause from churches and clergy. NAWSA even initiated its own Committee on Church Work to explain how women's suffrage was directly linked with Christian values. The Committee encouraged clergymen "to conscientiously admit that woman's influence has been for good in the home, in the church and in society, and cannot fail to be a power for good in the State as well" (Zink-Sawyer 183).

In 1914, at the suggestion of her friend and spiritual advisor Denis O'Connell, Bishop of Richmond, Houston joined the newly-formed Catholic Women's Club. Bishop O'Connell had encouraged the establishment of a Women's Club, stating that "the time has come when the Catholic women of Richmond should band themselves in an organization . . . to take their place in the civic and social affairs of the day" ("Catholic Women's Club").

The objective of the organization, of which Alice Dooley had been a founding member, was to encourage "Catholic ideals and actions through spiritual growth, cultural involvement, civic pursuits and philanthropic endeavors." During its first year, nearly 125 women who wished to "assist with the spiritual and civic needs of Richmond" joined the Club. All of these club members supported progressive reforms; political, social or moral, and many of them supported the cause for women's suffrage (Catholic Women's Club Yearbook and Directory).

Women's clubs such as this were quickly spreading across the southern states as "women gradually came to recognize the strength inherent in combined forces," as "in union, there was strength" (Scott 161). These clubs and special interest groups provided the opportunity for the exchange of ideas and to better achieve shared goals.

Houston viewed the organization as a new platform through which potential participants in the suffrage movement could be found. The Women's Club gave her another opportunity to reach civically-active and in many cases, wealthy and well-connected Catholic women who could move the suffrage cause forward. While Bishop O'Connell was well aware of Houston's interest in recruiting more participants for the

movement, it is not known how he personally felt about voting rights for women. However, O'Connell was recognized among American Catholic bishops of the time as "one of the leaders of the 'liberals' in the Catholic hierarchy," making it a strong possibility that he supported the cause for suffrage.

Woman Suffrage and the Issue of Race

In the final years leading up to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, many southern state legislators upheld the argument that they would willingly support women's suffrage if a way could be found to prevent the enfranchisement of black women (Wheeler 112). Other lawmakers, vocal in their strong disapproval of the suffrage amendment, wished to restore white supremacy in the South through the disenfranchisement of black men and without enfranchising *any* women (Baker 108).

Many southern suffragists, in an attempt to appeal to legislators, made the claim that through suffrage, white supremacy would in fact be secured. They believed that since white women in the South outnumbered the population of black women and men combined, that votes cast by white women would more than offset any votes cast by blacks (Hewitt and Lebsock 63).

According to Votes for Women: The Struggle for Suffrage Revisited, even the National American Woman Suffrage Association reluctantly permitted the use of racist arguments in the movement as a concession to southern suffragists (Baker 102). Though opinions regarding voting rights for blacks varied among white suffragists, "few of them

and none of the regional suffrage leaders strayed outside the bounds tolerated by white southerners of their era while their own enfranchisement was in doubt" (Baker 104).

Ultimately, the desire to win their own political rights caused many members of the ESLV to embrace racist tactics. This would lead them to either support suffrage for white women exclusively, or support a state amendment that would have specific provisions for black female voters, enabling only educated, property-owning black women to become enfranchised (Wheeler 127). Many members of the ESLV felt conflicted on the matter. Existing personal correspondence between Nora Houston and Adele Clark suggests that while they did not oppose voting rights for blacks, they did not openly defend these rights or argue the issue with other members of the ESLV. The two probably feared that speaking publicly on the issue would greatly jeopardize the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment altogether.

In 1916, the ESLV printed a flier titled "Equal Suffrage and the Negro Vote," asserting that woman suffrage would not endanger white supremacy. The flier argued that "the enfranchisement of Virginia women would increase white supremacy," suggesting that a literacy test and the poll tax would serve as effective deterrents to black female voting. The following year, the president of the ESLV bemoaned in a public address that "white women in the South must forever be deprived of political rights, must forever be inferior, not only to white men but to negro men also, who now have those rights" ("Presidential Address"). Ultimately, southern black women were almost completely silenced in the public debate. Virginia's black newspapers, while publishing occasional suffrage news, took no public position on the issue (63-66 Visible Women).

While many historians have argued that the majority of Virginia's suffragists were racially motivated to secure the vote for women, not all researchers of women's history concur. In her essay "Woman Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study," Suzanne Lebsock argues that the "white women in Virginia who became suffragists did not do so out of a desire to preserve white supremacy, nor did they use any white supremacist argument as their principal argument" (64). Lebsock states that while *some* members of the ESLV wanted to become enfranchised in order to advance white political power in the South, most of the League's members did not use this as their primary argument (64-89).

It is clear that many southern suffragists, including Nora Houston and Adele Clark, were divided on this issue. They feared that the General Assembly would not support the suffrage amendment if it appeared to give more political power to African Americans. This was unfortunately the inescapable mindset of most southern politicians during this time period. However, following the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, Nora Houston and Adele Clark together made a considerable effort to assist black women to register to vote.

World War I, the Atelier and the YWCA

In 1916, a New York-based "for-profit" organization called Grand Central Art Gallery presented a show of works at the Richmond Art Club. This organization convinced some prominent local citizens, as well as Club board members, that the Club needed to change its methods of art instruction. The students of the Club, argued Grand

Central Art, should be trained to create “fashionable art” that had mass appeal to the public and therefore, be more marketable (Showers 9).

Refusing to change their methods of teaching art to appease board members, Houston and Clark left the Richmond Art Club and started their own Atelier a few blocks away on Franklin Street. Interestingly, the Richmond Art Club closed one year later due to mismanagement and lack of funds to support its programs resulting from the country’s involvement in World War I (Showers 9).

In their 1918 Atelier Course Offerings brochure, Houston and Clark devote several paragraphs to the mission and goals of their new arts organization, reflective of their attitude towards the function of art in modern America. The following is an excerpt from the brochure:

> It is the purpose of the Atelier not only to conserve art in Richmond during the war, but to foster and develop in its classes and lectures the talent and interest which will create in the community an art of the future.
>
> In the training given to students, stress is laid on the development of their individual talents . . . and to show forth the lives of men and women and the spirit of America (Atelier Course Offerings, 1918).

With a combination of course offerings in the practical and fine arts, Houston and Clark “set out to keep art from being pallid and isolated from the general public” (Showers 9). The Atelier provided instruction in portrait and landscape painting, book and manuscript illustration, spinning and weaving, art restoration and art history. Perhaps

the most revealing of the time period and the public's interest, special courses were also offered for making posters and book-plates for the war effort.

Additionally, the Atelier provided lectures that were open to the public and centered around critical topics of the day, such as art in museums and schools, the attitude of the national government toward art and "propaganda arts," which promoted the war effort (Atelier Course Offerings, 1918). Houston and Clark, like many suffragists, probably felt it a matter of necessity to support war work and explore the important role that art could play in aiding the American war effort. Keeping their suffrage goals in mind, support of war work would have demonstrated the suffragists' patriotism and reflected their value as potential voters.

The entry of the United States into World War I provided a unique opportunity for the ESLV suffragists to strengthen their argument for enfranchisement. They contended that "women had earned the vote by their prodigious war service, and they repeatedly cited the recommendation of Virginia-born President Wilson that women be enfranchised as a war measure" (Hewitt and Lebsock 68). According to records found in the Adele Clark Papers of the Virginia Commonwealth University Library, Nora Houston, Adele Clark and the majority of the members of the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia registered with the Woman's War Service Registration Bureau which was conveniently and symbolically located in the main office of the ESLV.

The purpose of the Bureau, which was created by the Women's Committee of the National Council of Defense, was to "record in definite form, the training, capacity, and the willingness for service of as many women as can be reached throughout the country"

as “every woman should be given an opportunity to register for patriotic service” (Wetmore, Maude. Letter to state chairmen). Women’s service included activities such as canning and preserving fruits and vegetables, food and clothing drives, collecting books for soldiers and even classes in auto repair and ambulance driving.

In 1919, out of the interest in using their artistic talents to help the greater good, Nora Houston and Adele Clark volunteered to design posters for the Richmond branch of the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA). The YWCA was established as a nonsectarian Christian organization that aimed to “advance the physical, social, intellectual, moral, and spiritual interests of young women” (“Supporting Working Women: YWCA Buildings in the National Register of Historic Places”). These aspects of its mission are symbolized in the YWCA blue triangle insignia, the three sides of which stand for body, mind, and spirit.

World War I saw some of the greatest growth in YWCA's history (Brinson and Slusher 2). The Richmond YWCA took on the important responsibility of helping local women fill job positions left vacant by men departed for war. The YWCA provided job training, placement and safe housing for the women involved in this work. Additionally, the YWCA sponsored a Traveler's Aid program for women who flocked to Richmond during the war years looking for work in tobacco factories, department stores and local businesses. At its headquarters, the YWCA provided for these women clean dormitory rooms, a gymnasium, a library and cafeteria (Brinson and Slusher 2).

The Richmond YWCA relied heavily on charitable giving and the generosity of private donors. For a 1919 campaign aimed to garner financial support from the local

community, Nora Houston and Adele Clark collaborated in the design of a campaign poster titled “Why Not Invest in These Materials?” Now in the collection of the Library of Congress, this poster depicts an image of a young woman who stands next to four stacked blocks labeled "Physical," "Educational," "Social" and "Spiritual." The blocks represent the “materials” required to build a more effective and efficient program in the city of Richmond.

It is very clear as to why Houston and Clark would have been strong supporters of the YWCA. During the war years, the YWCA leadership became acutely aware of the conditions facing women in factories such as low wages, long hours, and no protective rights for workers (Scott 192). The organization served as a safe place where women could express their views and needs as well as develop resolutions that could reform industrial work. The YWCA played a critical role in the United States during the war, and its programs were recognized and applauded by the suffragists of the ESLV (“Supporting Working Women: YWCA Buildings in the National Register of Historic Places”).

Ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment

Despite the fact that the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia was one of the most vital suffrage organizations in the South, the woman suffrage question was defeated in the Virginia legislature three times between 1912 and 1916. The Virginia General Assembly was not supportive of passing an amendment to let women vote; ultimately, the

majority of politicians believed that women's suffrage would be a threat to white supremacy in Virginia (Hewitt and Lebsock 72-74).

Making a change in their strategy, the ESLV decided to participate in Carrie Chapman Catt's "Winning Plan" by putting aside their campaign for suffrage in Virginia and joining the national campaign for the passage of a Constitutional amendment (Hewitt and Lebsock 83-89). A major element in Catt's plan was to discontinue suffrage campaigns in states she considered to be "hopeless," most of which were in the South (Wheeler 112). Though ESLV suffragists were disappointed, they agreed to Catt's strategy to develop a national coordinated effort (Wheeler 113). NAWSA provided them with guidelines for how to most effectively participate in the Plan.

By the beginning of 1918, "only the House of Representatives and the Senate stood between women and the possibility that every state legislature would have to make a final determination about supporting the enfranchisement of women" (Baker 124). President Wilson endorsed the Susan B. Anthony (Nineteenth) Amendment in 1918 and by the spring of 1919, both the House of Representatives and Senate had passed the suffrage amendment. Over the course of the next year, individual states would began to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment.

According to the minutes of the June, 1920 meeting of the ESLV (as documented by Nora Houston, recording secretary), the League had begun to develop a citizenship education program "because of the probable early ratification of the Amendment." In collaboration with the University of Virginia, the ESLV would hold courses in

"governmental procedure" during the summer months to prepare women for the voting process ("June, 1920 Board Meeting").

In order to fund and carry out the citizenship education program, the ESLV created a Citizenship Committee to solicit donations from suffragists across the state. Houston, who served on the committee, began to send out letters to potential donors. In a hand-typed letter to a friend and fellow suffragist, she writes: "I have been working out a plan to get new people to give [in addition to] you generous ones who have done so much. My plan is to call up a hundred and fifty to give monthly according to what they can pledge. If it is convenient, would you send in your first contributions in the next few days?" (Houston, Nora. Letter to Mrs. Block).

By August of 1920, thirty-five states had ratified and one more was needed to make women's suffrage a federal amendment. It came down to a final contest in Tennessee when the issue came before its state legislature (Baker 125). The ESLV fired off dozens of letters and telegrams to Tennessee's state capitol, urging lawmakers to vote in favor of suffrage. In a surviving Western Union Telegram to Tennessee's Governor, the ESLV writes: "Virginia suffragists thank you for calling the special session of the Tennessee legislature for ratification of the 19th amendment, hoping that a southern state may be the thirty-sixth" (Equal Suffrage League of Virginia. Telegram to Governor A.H. Roberts). In another telegram addressed to the Honorable S. M. Walker, the ESLV pleaded that the "Virginia women are hoping that their sister state of Tennessee will enable them to cast their votes in the presidential election in November!" (Equal Suffrage League of Virginia. Telegram).

Tennessee's state legislature voted in favor of the amendment and Governor A. H. Roberts signed the bill on August 24, 1920. Two days later, the Nineteenth Amendment became national law and celebrations were held by suffrage leagues all over the country. After receiving word of the passage of the Amendment, the ESLV held its own celebration at the League's Richmond headquarters. Nora Houston and Adele Clark designed and painted commemorative signs for the event. In a letter to her mother (who was visiting family) dated August 24, 1920, Houston describes their progress in making these signs: "The frames are sticky to-day but the dampness held it back . . . We made a fire which will dry it out. In the meantime the letters are almost ready to stencil on and then the final touching up of them. Adele and I are planning to get up early so as to get in a lot of work! I will let you know tomorrow how we get on" (Houston, Nora. Letter to Josephine Dooley Houston).

Newly-enfranchised women across Virginia had only one month to register to vote in the upcoming November election: suffrage leagues wasted no time. "They accepted suffrage as a gift from fellow citizens outside the South and went promptly to work to give meaning to the new-found right" (Scott 184). The ESLV moved quickly to mobilize Richmond female voters. Its Citizenship Committee (for which Houston was a volunteer) held free classes for instruction in "ballot marking," which took place at the League's headquarters (Thompson, Ida M. Letter to Citizens of Richmond).

Unfortunately, after the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, "few southern white suffragists came out in support of southern black women," leaving them to fend for themselves to register and get to the polls (Baker 113). The racist attitudes of registration

and poll booth workers prevented many black women from attempting to vote. Nora Houston and Adele Clark refused to sit by idly; the two women had come to believe that all individuals, regardless of race, deserved the right to vote.

Together, they canvassed Richmond's Jackson Ward neighborhood in an effort to register as many black women as possible. Nora Houston and Adele Clark assisted hundreds of black female voters to registration booths. In the end, the city of Richmond saw 2,410 black women register to vote ("Colored Women in Rush for Ballot"). Prior to Election Day, the two artists invited leaders from the black community to their Atelier to discuss a plan to get female voters to the polls.

In an interview that appeared in the 1920 election edition of the Richmond News Leader, Adele Clark explained the plan that she and Houston devised to assist black female voters. In the end, their efforts were a success. An excerpt from this interview is quoted in Suzanne Lebsock's "Woman Suffrage and White Supremacy: A Virginia Case Study," published in Visible Women (88):

> As Adele Clark would later tell it, 'threats of bloodshed and riot and everything else' were flying about Richmond, so she and Nora Houston invited the black leadership to their studio (since they were painters, they thought they could make this daring move and chalk it up to artistic eccentricity) to discuss what they might do. It was agreed that the white women would find cars and cruise the polling places on election day. [They] kept their promise, and . . . black women voted without incident.

While the campaign for the right to vote may have faltered in Virginia, there were several positive outcomes that directly resulted from the work of the ESLV. The League was victorious in securing bills concerning juvenile delinquency and child neglect, and helped to defeat legislation that would have increased the working hours of women and children in factories (Wheeler 56). The efforts of Nora Houston and the ESLV helped to extend the "women's sphere" to encompass politics and progressive reforms, beginning a new chapter in Virginia's history.

CHAPTER 5

ART, ACTIVISM AND TRAVEL (1920-1933)

After the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920, Nora Houston sought to forge a new role for herself. She continued to confront the social inequalities faced by the city's lower class, and used her desire for social change as an inspiration in several of her paintings. Houston would spend the next decade volunteering for the Virginia League of Women Voters, working to improve the treatment of blacks in Richmond, and fighting for state legislation that protected women and children, regardless of race.

Following the passing of her beloved Uncle James in 1922, Nora Houston and her mother each received a generous inheritance from him. This money provided Houston the opportunity to travel multiple times to Europe in the 1920s, and to spend leisurely summers with her aunt and cousins in Sweet Springs, West Virginia. Additionally, Houston was more financially equipped to carry out her social reform work, to afford her

painting supplies, and to eventually purchase a home and studio with Adele Clark. Her new financial independence fueled Houston's career as an artist and activist until the years of the Great Depression.

The Virginia League of Women Voters

After women's suffrage became a constitutional amendment, the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia changed its name to the Virginia League of Women Voters (VLWV). The new league was run by women (Fig. 11), was nonpartisan and focused on citizenship education (Baker 141). Its first goal was to educate newly-enfranchised female voters by sponsoring registration drives and voter education programs.

Fig. 11. In this 1923 photo, representatives of the League of Women Voters attend a meeting with Virginia senators Claude Swanson (center left) and Carter Glass (center right). Nora Houston stands in the back row between Senators Swanson and Glass. Image courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

Houston continued her work with the organization in an effort to increase the number of registered female voters in Virginia. This work expanded her interest in improving governmental efficiency, leading her to fight for new legislation related to social welfare issues.

In 1926, Houston was chosen by the VLWV to serve as one of the American delegates to the Annual Convention of the International Alliance for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship held in Paris, France. In a letter to Adele Clark written May 31, the day after Houston had arrived, she writes: "There has been much in the papers about the Alliance. Splendid publicity–lots of press profile and list of the American delegation in the papers, so there is no reason to think it entirely unknown that I am here." Explaining further in the letter that she had attended a meeting of the League of Nations and participated in a procession through the city's streets, Houston exclaims to Clark: "Think of me in a Suffrage parade in Paris!" (Houston, Nora. Letter to Adele Clark).

Clearly thrilled to have had the opportunity to return to Paris sixteen years after studying at the Academie Collarossi, Houston reflects upon this experience in a letter to Adele Clark dated August 3: "It is the first time since February 1908 that, well, I do enjoy Paris for itself and so enjoy the life here" (Houston, Nora. Letter to Adele Clark).

The international delegates who attended the Paris Convention shared the belief that women's equality was an "unstoppable, revolutionary force that would eventually reverse the traditional practices that subordinated women throughout the world" (Kimble 116). Presentation topics at the Convention argued for the advancement of civil equality

for women all over the globe. (In 1926, “civil equality” would have meant the right to vote, equal educational and employment opportunities for women and state-sponsored maternity benefits). A Parisian lawyer and keynote speaker at the Convention received a resounding applause when she declared that “in all countries where civilization is sufficiently advanced that the human individual is believed to have an inalienable, inherent value, woman, who also possesses intelligence and conscience, must be held as the equal to man in regards to laws and institutions” (Kimble 116).

Interestingly, Houston brought a sketchbook with her to the daily sessions of the Convention, drawing the individual faces of delegates from various countries. She also made quick sketches of delegates, speakers, meetings, and other activities that took place during the week (Fig.’s 12-13). The Virginia Historical Society has carefully preserved the pages of this invaluable sketchbook in its collection of the Nora Houston Papers.

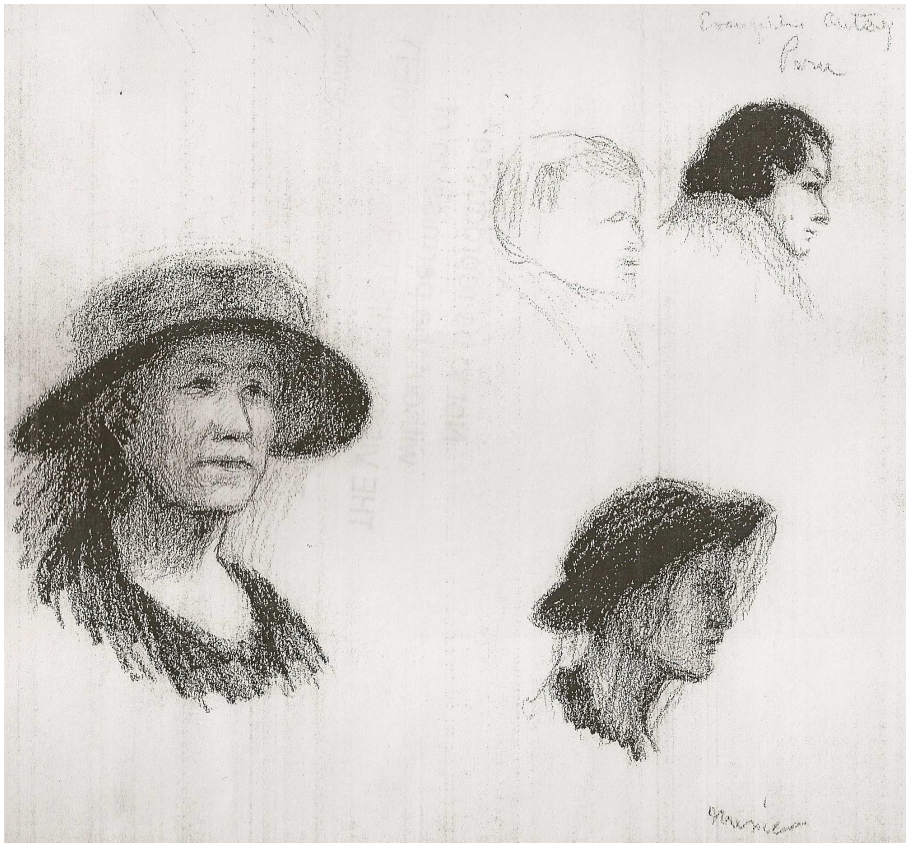

Fig. 12. Nora Houston, sketch of Peruvian and Mexican delegates. Nora Houston Papers, The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

Fig. 13. Nora Houston, sketch of meeting during the 1926 Suffrage Convention. Nora Houston Papers, The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

When she returned to Virginia, Houston was elected by the VLWV to serve as its Finance Chairman. Her main responsibility was to oversee fundraising projects to help support the League's activities. Houston would spend the fall and winter months of 1926 seeking pledge support for the League, and was also chosen to represent Richmond at the State Convention of the VLWV held at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

In need of a temporary reprise from her duties with the League, Houston, her mother and Aunt Alice took a trip to the British Isles during the summer of 1927. Writes Adele Clark in a note to Houston: "My dearest Nonie, if anyone has earned a holiday this year you have, and the League ought to present you with a large chunk of new pledges! You've done so, so much" (Clark, Adele. Letter to Nora Houston).

Throughout the remainder of the 1920s, the Virginia League of Women Voters maintained a positive public presence in the city of Richmond. In January of 1930, when campaign funds for incoming governor John Garland Pollard were lacking and "memories of the 1929 stock market crash were still fresh" the VLWV generously offered to sponsor his Inaugural Ball ("Virginia Governor Inauguration"). This opportunity allowed their organization to gain further recognition among the state's most influential citizens. Richmond newspapers applauded the League's effort for having revived this tradition, and even remarked on the impressive decorum, behavior and dress of the ladies of the VLWV.

Several years later, when financial troubles forced the VLWV to find a new location, Houston and her mother demonstrated their deep commitment to the organization by "loaning their beautiful home at 314 East Main Street" to the League for use as its official headquarters ("Obituary for Alice Dooley").

Interracial Cooperation

Nora Houston's close contact with members of Richmond's black community at the end of the suffrage movement strengthened her awareness of the need to heal race relations in Virginia. Additionally, it became very apparent to Houston that racial and economic inequalities were irrevocably intertwined.

By the early 1920s, a fledgling interracial movement had begun to take shape in Richmond led by Nora Houston, Adele Clark, and other members of the Virginia League of Women Voters. After making several new friendships with women in Richmond's

African American neighborhoods through voter registration, Houston and Clark felt compelled to continue their efforts in reaching out to their black female counterparts. They began by communicating with black women who were involved in home missionary work through local churches. These women were well aware of the social problems that still plagued the city of Richmond.

In the book Visible Women, contributing writer Mary E. Frederickson argues that black and white religious women in the 1920s transitioned from service to their church congregation to what would be defined as "home mission" work (302). Through their missionary work, churchwomen encountered many social problems that needed to be addressed such as bad housing, poor nutrition, illiteracy and juvenile delinquency. While these women "began by teaching Sunday school and caring for sick church members, they ended up addressing regional public health issues, the education system, women's working conditions, child welfare and racial inequities" (Hewitt and Lebsock 302).

Finding a common ground with black churchwomen through their shared spirituality and desire for social change, Houston and Clark successfully bridged the racial and economic gap that divided them. Concerned for the city's future, all of the women recognized the urgent need for protection of families in poverty, the passage of labor reforms, and the elimination of prostitution that continued to affect poor white and black Virginians. Change could only be made through the combined actions of both whites and blacks. Inspired by Houston and Clark, other former suffragists would soon join this systematic movement for interracial cooperation.

In 1914, a Southern Methodist woman published a controversial book titled In Black and White that outlined methods for diminishing racial tensions in the South. Chastising her fellow white southerners for creating the "poor Negro condition," she "held a mirror up to southern society which caused some soul-searching among her readers" (Scott 195). Ultimately, the book provided the blueprint for the work accomplished in the 1920s by the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, a group established in the South to help prevent race riots and end racial abuse.

By 1920, the Commission had created "interracial committees" in every southern state to help improve the social conditions of blacks and to establish compulsory education laws for both black and white children. "There had never been much in the way of public education in the slave states . . . and a growing number of southerners were concluding that an increased educational effort was essential if the economy was to be rebuilt and tensions ameliorated" (Scott 110).

At the suggestion of one of the Commission's leaders, Virginia State Senator Harry F. Byrd, a local interracial committee was established in Richmond. The committee members included Nora Houston, Adele Clark and other leaders of Richmond's suffrage movement, as well as black and white women who headed local church organizations. Meetings were interracial, and problems plaguing Richmond's black population were openly discussed. The group strongly believed that "social progress depended on greater justice for black people and on greater contact and frank discussions between the representatives of the two races" (Hewitt and Lebsock 83).

Nora Houston was appointed chairwomen of the committee, and she quickly set out to establish goals for the group such as improving housing for the poor and creating schools and libraries for blacks in Richmond. The committee also condemned white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, and spoke out against lynching and the sexual exploitation of black women ("Meeting of Interracial Committee").

During the time that Houston was working with the Richmond interracial committee, she frequently met with black female parishioners of St. Joseph Church in the Jackson Ward neighborhood. St. Joseph's, established in 1884, was the oldest parish to serve black Catholics in Virginia (Fogarty 531). Additionally, it was the first permanent black Catholic church to be constructed in the South, giving it special historic significance.

Houston was given permission to paint the important event of young children receiving their First Communion in the church (Fig. 14). This interior scene provides a beautiful visual record of a traditional element of the sacramental life of St. Joseph's. The church was torn down in the 1960s when the parish was merged with the all-white congregation of Richmond's Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. Relatively few

Fig. 14. Nora Houston, *Suffer the Little Children to Come Unto Me*,
Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church,
Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

images of St. Joseph's exist at the present day, and Houston's painting is one of the only known interior scenes from the early 20th century.

Children's Welfare

Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, Americans witnessed major social, political and economic changes across the country. By the early 1920s, this "massive cultural upheaval" had created an atmosphere in which "religious and moral arguments for women's participation in the political realm were both heard and affirmed"

(Zink-Sawyer 180). Suffragists had made a solid case for their cause, and continued to move forward in their fight for various social reforms.

In nearly every state, women were active in the effort to secure better health care for pregnant mothers and children, to build schools and to establish child labor regulations. "The case of Virginia," remarks Anne Firor Scott, "is instructive" (The Southern Lady 188). By 1921, the Virginia League of Women Voters had become involved in the establishment of a Children's Code Commission. Its purpose was to review Virginian laws concerning children's health, labor laws and compulsory education. The commission agreed to serve without pay. Due to awareness of her involvement with the suffrage movement and continuing efforts as a social activist, the governor of Virginia personally appointed Nora Houston to head the Children's Code Commission (Showers 12).

Houston became an advocate for governmental protection of working-class children, fighting for new laws that would be vital to their welfare. While traveling to cities and towns throughout Virginia for her suffrage work, Houston had witnessed first hand the plight of poor and orphaned children in economically-depressed areas. In industrial towns such as Richmond, children as young as eight years old were forced to work ten hour days "while being victims of a high accident and tuberculosis rate" (Showers 12). Out of her despair for not having yet won protective laws for children, Houston decided to translate her passionate feelings about the issue onto canvas through a painting titled *The Children's Amendment* (Fig. 15).

Fig. 15. Nora Houston, *The Children's Amendment*,
Property of St. Paul's Catholic Church,
Catholic Diocese of Richmond.

In this emotionally-charged piece, dozens of children are seen ascending a staircase to a set of double doors that lead to an unknown realm. Lining the children's pathway are eighteen winged figures, presumably guardian angels, and fourteen statuesque women who bear shields. Given their individualized features, these women may represent actual members of the Children's Code Commission. Looming in the corners of the painting are large, ominous figures dressed in black who appear to represent danger or even death. Clearly, legislative protection for children was an issue that weighed heavily on Houston's mind.

As head of Virginia's Children's Code Commission, Houston traveled from state to state to meet with other child welfare advocates, many of whom were former suffragists. In the spring of 1921, Houston served as Richmond's representative at the National Child Welfare Committee Meeting in Cleveland, Ohio. Elated that so many attendees had been leaders of the suffrage movement, Houston exclaimed to her mother in a letter dated April 11: "These splendid women with names as familiar as 'Jefferson' and 'Washington' and whose personalities are well known through suffrage literature turn out to be so lovely and sweet!" She goes on to describe an important moment during the meeting when a "lovely young colored woman" took the floor. After the woman proposed a plan to help poor and underprivileged black children, the crowd stood up and applauded. "She had very good ideas as to what should be done," writes Houston, "and a resolution was passed to form an inter-racial welfare subcommittee" (Houston, Nora. Letter to Josephine Dooley Houston).

That same year, the Children's Code Commission as well as League of Women Voter groups pushed forward the passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act which called for better maternal and infant health care. Family income was a critical factor in high infant mortality rates, and the Sheppard-Towner Act was created to encourage states to develop programs to serve families at lower income levels ("Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921").

This law, "which pioneered federal-state cooperation in welfare, was the first concrete national achievement of newly enfranchised women" (Scott 189). It provided federal matching funds for such programs as: health clinics for women and children, better care for pregnant women, mothers and their children, midwife training, and the distribution of nutrition and hygiene information.

The Sheppard-Towner Act is significant in women's history and in American history because it addressed the needs of women and children directly at a federal level ("Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921"). Nora Houston, Adele Clark and several of their former suffragist colleagues were instrumental in putting pressure on southern senators to vote for the bill.

In February 1922, an exhausted Houston typed a letter to a friend in which she described her recent activities and her frustrations. She writes:

> I feel like the old woman whose petticoats were cut. You remember that I am on the Children's Code Commission and we have so far introduced twenty-five bills. They are pretending the bills are complicated and holding them up in committee . . . but to our joy the Maternity & Infancy bill has passed. Virginia is the seventh state to accept it. The first bill to

> pass was one of mine, that I wrote for the Code Commission, to provide "Occupational therapy" in Hospitals & Asylums; and it has been signed (Houston, Nora. Letter to Julie --).

Based on the belief that "without occupation, there is no quality of life," occupational therapy called for the humane treatment of physically and mentally handicapped patients. Through exercise, art and music programs, it emphasized the importance of crafting with one's own hands (Quiroga 19-22).

The occupational therapy or "OT" profession was initially developed during World War I due to the overwhelming number of wartime injuries. Between 1917 and 1920, when nearly 148,000 wounded men were placed in hospitals upon their return to the states, the Surgeon General recruited physical and occupational therapists for hospitals across the country. OT services allowed war veterans to gain a sense of independence and maintain a positive self-esteem (Quiroga 19-22). This same philosophy was used in the design of programs for hospitalized children with physical limitations. Through the use of art and music, children could have the freedom of creative expression.

In addition to her work with the Children's Code Commission, Houston's concern for children's welfare led to her fight for better working conditions and wages for women. Most female laborers in Richmond's factories were working for minimum wages at maximum hours. Houston, and other concerned social activists, viewed the situation as the cruel exploitation of human workers. Joining forces with her colleagues from the Virginia League of Women Voters, Houston began fighting for new legislation that would improve working conditions for women. This fight for labor reforms was met with

great resistance from Virginian businessmen, mill and factory owners who believed these "meddlesome women" were "bent on spoiling the competitive advantage which child labor and cheap female labor gave the South" (Scott 191).

After lobbying for two long years, Houston and her associates were victorious in their fight for protection of the state's women and children. The Virginia General Assembly passed twenty of the twenty-eight bills proposed by the Code Commission (Scott 188). These bills included a state-wide juvenile court system, the abolition of child labor, the construction of better children's hospitals and the bill designed by Nora Houston creating occupational therapy programs for children. Additionally, legislation was finally passed that called for a "living wage" in every industry, and an eight-hour work day for adult laborers (Showers 12).

At the close of the 1920s, Nora Houston began a brief hiatus from her social welfare work. In 1928, she retired from teaching art classes in order to focus entirely on her painting career. During this time, she and Adele Clark purchased a small cottage in the north side of Richmond to share together as a home and an art studio.

Summers in Sweet Springs

With the financial freedom she had gained from her inheritance, Houston began to travel more frequently to visit the gracious home of her aunt Florence Dooley Lewis and cousins in Sweet Springs, West Virginia. These trips to rural West Virginia provided new scenery for Houston to capture on canvas, much in contrast to the scenes of urban life in Richmond. During these extended summer visits, she resided at the Lewis family's

century-old estate named “Lynnside Mansion,” situated in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Vacationing in picturesque Sweet Springs must have helped to nurture Houston’s strong sense of faith, allowing her to feel a spiritual connection with the beautiful and lush countryside. Between the years 1928-1933, Houston painted a series of landscapes of this region, most of which had Latin titles based on phrases from the book of Psalms. These landscape paintings reflect her deep respect for all of the earth’s inhabitants. Two examples of these works include *Jubilate Deo, omnis terra* (“Sing joyfully to God, all over the earth”) and *Laudate Dominum de terra, dracones et omnes abyssi* (“Praise ye the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures, and all depths”).

Houston chose titles from the book of Psalms because she was “thrilled by psalms that call on nature to give voice to the glory of God” (“Interview with Nora Houston”). Explaining Houston’s inspiration for this painting series, former Art Club student Edmund Archer recalls that “she was profoundly religious, and uttered a prayer, perhaps an unconscious one, every time she took up her brush” (Archer).

In 1933, Houston and her Lewis relatives suffered a great loss when a fire engulfed and destroyed most of Lynnside Mansion. While no one was harmed, only a small portion of the home’s foundation was left in tact. The family was devastated to lose such a beautiful and historic piece of property. To this day, the only surviving visual record of the Lewis family home is Houston’s c.1930 painting of the mansion’s façade (80 Williams).

CHAPTER 6

HOUSTON'S FINAL YEARS: THE WOMEN'S CLUB AND WORKS PROGRESS (1933-1942)

Still recovering from the loss of her family's Lynnside Mansion, Houston returned to Richmond to focus her energies on working for social causes as well as painting and exhibiting her art work. Over the next and final decade of her life, Houston would become regularly involved in Catholic charity work, and towards the end of the 1930s, have the great fortune to work as an artist for the Works Progress Administration. This position allowed her to earn an income for doing what she loved dearly: creating art that was both meaningful and reflective of the time period in which she lived.

The Catholic Women's Club

In 1934, Houston accepted the nomination as president of the Catholic Women's Club and again became quickly involved with charity work. While serving as president, she initiated three new "study groups" for members of the club: art appreciation, social justice and civic matters (Houston, Nora. Letter to CWC Members).

The art appreciation group invited local artists and art historians to speak to the Club, either through a lecture presentation about a particular genre of art, or to present their own works of art. These talks were often open to the public. Houston believed that this was a wonderful opportunity to bring awareness of modern working artists in the city to a broader audience, and was consequently praised for "raising the taste and interest in Richmond" through her "high standards and enthusiasm" (Archer 11).

The purpose of the social justice and civic matters groups was to join forces with the local Bureau of Catholic Charities (BCC). Together, Women's Club members and the BCC collaborated in a variety of causes such as "relieving pastors of the city of the care of homeless transients" and "caring for dependent, neglected and delinquent children by placing them in orphan asylums or in Catholic homes for adoption" ("The Richmond Bureau of Catholic Charities"). Additionally, the Women's Club organized food and clothing drives for low-income families.

The majority of the children who came into their care were placed at St. Joseph's Villa, a spacious home for orphans constructed with the funds from the three million dollar bequest left by James Dooley. Under the terms of Dooley's will, his gift was to be used "in the building of a hospital, for crippled children and two orphanages; a tract of land will be given as a site . . . to save little children from lives of suffering and helplessness" ("Major Dooley Monument").

Not surprisingly, Nora Houston (as well as several other members of the Women's Club) was an active volunteer at the Villa. According to surviving correspondence regarding the Villa, Houston was also a member of the orphanage's "Buddy Club," a mentoring program through which Catholic women were paired with orphaned girls.

To further ensure that her uncle would be remembered by all who came to live at St. Joseph's Villa, Houston created a life-sized oil portrait of James Dooley that was displayed prominently in the entrance hall of the orphanage (Houston, Nora. Letter to Josephine Dooley Houston). To this day, Houston's painting still resides at the Villa.

The Virginia Federal Art Project

By the late 1930s, Nora Houston and Adele Clark, like many other American artists, turned to their state's Federal Art Project for employment. The economic downturn of the Great Depression left very few job opportunities for people in the arts and humanities. After President Roosevelt proposed his plan to initiate a series of programs known as the New Deal, things began to look up.

The following is a quote taken from a draft of a letter that Houston wrote to President Roosevelt:

> I feel that, under God, change has been brought about through your direction in carrying your policies straight to the people over the radio, and through the clarity and simplicity of your explanations.
>
> I want to thank you for saving our country . . . from the quicksands into which we were sinking, and express to you the admiration and gratitude that millions of citizens of these United States feel for you, and to wish you God speed (Houston, Nora. Letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt).

The Federal Art Project, subsidized by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), was one of the programs created under Roosevelt's New Deal. It provided relief for struggling artists by commissioning them to design and create murals or statues for new post offices, courthouses and other federal buildings (Leuchtenburg 243). The progressive new program "did not discriminate according to sex and as a result, forty-one percent of the artists enrolled were women" (Dearinger and Dervaux 166). Themes in these works often featured important events in the country's early history, and many of

them can still be seen today in public buildings around the country (Hemming and Savage 244).

In 1937, Adele Clark was hired as the Director of the Federal Art Project in Virginia which was headquartered in Richmond. Desperately seeking employment for herself, Houston contacted the national administrator of the Federal Arts Project to see if she too could get involved. After she had enjoyed nearly fifteen years of financial freedom, Houston's inheritance was now depleted and she was forced to borrow money from her mother. In a letter to the administrator, she pleads: "I feel it is my duty to get work if there is any to be had, and to support myself and pay back to my mother the money that I have borrowed, as well as to discharge other obligations" (Houston, Nora. Letter to Thomas C. Parker).

Much to her relief, Houston was approved to work as a certified WPA artist, enabling Adele Clark to hire her as the Production of Works Supervisor for the Virginia Federal Art Project. In this capacity, Houston was placed in charge of hiring and assigning regional artists to paint murals for various public places such as libraries and city department buildings.

For her own public works project, Houston created a large-scale painting for Richmond's city library system titled "Rosa Bower Branch of the Public Library." The newly-built Rosa Bower Branch was the very first public library for Richmond's African American community. This painting depicts a group of black children who eagerly wait behind the library counter for their new books (Simms 48).

As part of the Virginia Federal Art Project, Houston hired professional artists to execute hundreds of paintings for distribution to state tax-supported museums and art galleries. In an effort initiated by the government to educate the public, these paintings depicted significant people, places and events in American history. Houston was invited to submit her own works for display in several WPA exhibits at the Virginia Federal Art Gallery in Lynchburg (Nottingham, Elizabeth. Letter to Nora Houston).

In 1938, Houston was appointed as supervisor of the federally-funded "Index of American Design Manual." This manual features a pictoral record of arts and crafts objects found in Virginia's museums. WPA artists were hired to create watercolor illustrations that documented these "objects of good design made in America between the period of the settlement of Virginia by Europeans up to the year 1900" (Houston, Nora. Letter to Norfolk Museum of Arts and Sciences). After this assignment, Houston remained employed as an hourly-paid artist of the Virginia Federal Art Project until 1941.

Of other noteworthy importance, Nora Houston spent the last several years of her life traveling and exhibiting her art works in venues across the country. She also continued to paint in the studio that she and Adele shared in Richmond until the time of her death in 1942 (Showers 11). Between the years 1936 to 1940, Houston actively exhibited her work in galleries and museums around the state, as well as Chicago, San Francisco, Washington D.C. and New York City. In 1940, she was given the great honor of having her own one-woman show at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA). One of Houston's works, a painting of a young black girl titled "Mary Frances," was so well-

received by art critics for its "poignant capturing of the small child with large confronting eyes" that it was added to the VMFA's permanent collection (Showers 13).

"Virginia Honors Her Daughter"

In February of 1940, the Art Digest, once a nationally distributed magazine, printed an article that chronicled the life and accomplishments of Houston in response to her exhibit at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. In the article, the museum's director, Thomas C. Colt, beautifully summarizes the impressive career of this artist and activist:

> "A person of deep social and spiritual consciousness, Nora Houston worked fruitfully in the social field as well as in the field of art. Her paintings prove the training and practice of years and reflect the deep feelings of one who . . . labored long and sympathetically for her fellowmen in Virginia" ("Virginia Honors Her Daughter: Nora Houston").

Almost like a harbinger that her eventful life was coming to a close, Houston died of a sudden and undetermined illness exactly two years later on February 20, 1942. She was fifty-eight years old.

Following the heart-breaking and unexpected death of her life-long companion, Adele Clark carried forth Houston's activist agenda by pushing for more legislation that protected women and children in need, and working as an advocate for the arts in Richmond. Houston's extensive body of art work remained in Clark's possession until a suitable facility could be found to house the collection. In 1972, Houston's paintings were given to St. Paul's Catholic Church and following a formal dedication ceremony,

several pieces were hung on display in the church's parish hall. When the building underwent substantial renovations, the paintings were permanently placed into attic storage. The collection remains stored there to the present day.

EPILOGUE

While there exists today extensive research about national leaders of social reforms, little is known about the innumerable female leaders who quietly but effectively helped their local communities. Nora Houston is a fine example of those remarkable yet unknown community leaders who, during the Progressive Era, "seized a moment, proposed momentous innovations without alienating the powerful, invented new careers and built new institutions" (Kneebone, Tarter and Treadway 357-59).

By examining her career as an artist and activist, this study demonstrates how Nora Houston's accomplishments lend credibility to the argument that religious, affluent women were undeniably instrumental in making social and political changes in the South during the early twentieth century.

Raised in the American South in a culture dominated by male authority, Houston redefined what it meant to be a "southern lady" through her choice of career and unconventional lifestyle. Working as both artists and activists, she and companion Adele Clark defied the expected behaviors of high-society women of their time. Additionally, Houston's Catholic upbringing contributed to the uniqueness of her character and influenced her desire to help the underprivileged. Houston exemplified the type of "spiritually motivated" suffragist who felt that her "belief in equality of women and belief in traditional Christian doctrine . . . could be held together and employed for social change" (Zink-Sawyer 22).

While participating in the suffrage movement, Houston, like other affluent southern suffragists, used her pedigree to her advantage. State legislators and audiences of the upper-class elite listened to Houston's argument because she was a well-mannered southern "lady" from a respected family. Her courage, conviction and just as importantly, financial freedom, allowed Houston to canvass the state to voice her suffragist agenda.

Houston's experiences with fighting for women's suffrage led her to develop a genuine concern for the welfare of Virginia's poorest citizens. She came to the realization that regardless of race or social status, all men and women share common humanity and should be treated with decency, compassion and fairness. Additionally, while working as a visual artist during this time period, Houston had the opportunity to develop friendships with female leaders from Richmond's black community, witnessing the poverty and discrimination that these citizens still faced. With the lessons she learned through her experiences with the suffrage movement, Houston chose to confront and eliminate the social injustices that still plagued Virginia

Nora Houston epitomized the type of southern woman who contributed significantly to efforts of the progressive movement and influenced a wide range of new government legislation. After earning the right to vote, and with a fueled desire for political change, Houston and her like-minded associates not only convinced the state to take responsibility for public welfare, but also worked tirelessly to eliminate the underlying conditions that created these problems. These women demonstrated how everyday citizens had the ability to intervene in the economic and social affairs of their state and improve life conditions for those less fortunate.

Resulting from the tremendous efforts of women like Nora Houston, new national programs were brought forth that aided low-income families in need. Furthermore, when Houston and other former suffragists established the Virginia League of Women Voters to ensure that voting women were educated about responsible citizenship, they initiated a major change in the way the state's democratic system would function (Baker 192).

Nora Houston left an honorable record of service to the city of Richmond. She, like other influential white, southern women of the Progressive Era, found a voice through the suffrage movement and other social reform activities. Refusing to be bound to the traditions of her Southern heritage, Houston did not conform to the old expectations of the "proper southern woman."

Houston's art provided a lens through which ignored segments of society could be viewed. Her captivating portraits of men and women of the working class serve as irreplaceable records of those who defined America in the early twentieth century. "It is perhaps because (in spite of great modesty) she had the courage to be herself . . . that Miss Houston's work is so good (Archer 11).

Though she has hardly been mentioned in Virginia history, she unquestionably played a significant role. Nora Houston devoted her life to fighting for political rights for women, improving living conditions for working class families, and to healing race relations between whites and blacks. As a result of her efforts, generations of women to follow have had the freedom and entitlement to participate in state politics, lobby for new legislation, and initiate social change.

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ABSTRACT

In the early 1900s, a new generation of socially-conscious women initiated reforms to improve the quality of life for the nation's poor. One of these initiators was artist and suffragist, Nora Houston. Born into a white, affluent Virginian family, Houston defied the traditional role of the "southern lady" with her choice of career and lifestyle. Houston's art provided a lens through which marginalized citizens could be viewed. Her portraits of the working class provide irreplaceable records of those who defined America during this time.

This thesis contributes to the growing body of scholarly work that examines women's participation in the public sphere during the Progressive Era. Recovering the untold story of this influential woman, this paper supports the argument that wealthy, religious Southern women advanced social causes that brought about change in the early 20th century.

Utilizing primary archival sources and artwork, this thesis presents the first biographical study on Nora Houston.

NORA HOUSTON: ARTIST AND ACTIVIST

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