

Virginia Foster Durr

1903–1999



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY Virginia Foster Durr was an outspoken civil rights leader. She is best known for helping bail Rosa Parks out of jail.



As you read the biography below, think about the prejudice that Durr faced as a white woman supporting civil rights. Why do you think she became so passionate about the civil rights movement?



The Papers of C.B. Baldwin, Special Collections, The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa

The 1960s were a difficult time in the United States. While segregation was still widely accepted, more and more people were beginning to question it. Many people took a stand against the separate bus lines, restaurants, and schools that existed for blacks and whites. Virginia Foster Durr was an early leader in this movement for civil rights.

Virginia Foster was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1903, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. She grew up in a middle-class family and attended local schools. In 1921 she enrolled in Wellesley College, a prestigious school for women in Massachusetts. The college had a policy that required students to rotate from table to table to eat their meals. Foster resisted the policy. Raised in the segregated South, she did not want to eat with the African American students. When Foster was told she would have to drop out of school if she refused to share a table with an African American, she complied with the policy.

Family financial problems forced Foster to drop out of Wellesley, but her experiences there opened her mind and changed her views on racism and segregation. Foster moved back to Birmingham and began working at a law library. In 1926 she married attorney Clifford Durr.

During the Great Depression, Virginia Foster Durr worked to help the city's poor. Then in 1933 her husband accepted a job in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, and the family moved to the Washington, D.C., area.

In Washington, Virginia Foster Durr volunteered for the Democratic National Committee. She worked to eliminate the poll tax used to prevent African Americans and poor whites from voting in the South. She also became involved in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, an organization that brought activists from all walks of life together.

The Civil Rights Movement

Biography

In 1948 Clifford Durr left his government job and opened his own law practice. He defended people who were accused of being sympathetic to Communists. During the height of the McCarthy era Virginia Durr was asked to testify about her involvement in the Southern Conference. She refused. These events inspired Durr to take an even more active role in protecting civil rights.

Through their work in the civil rights movement, Durr and her husband became friends of Martin Luther King Jr. as well as Rosa Parks. As a result, many people in the white community turned against the Durrs. When Parks was arrested in 1955 for refusing to give up her seat to a white person on a segregated bus, the Durrs bailed her out of jail. They also provided legal counsel for Parks.

Durr remained active in the civil rights movement throughout the 1960s. She died at the age of 95 in a Pennsylvania nursing home.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** What roles did Durr play in the civil rights movement?

2. **Draw Conclusions** How did the rotating table policy at Wellesley College help change Durr's views on segregation?

ACTIVITY

Virginia Foster Durr was among the activists who helped steer the Democratic Party away from support for segregation and toward support for civil rights. Do some Internet and library research on the history of the Democratic Party in the South from the 1930s through the 1960s. Present your findings to the class.