Helpful Background:

HISTORICAL ACCURACY

Summary: The events portrayed in the film relating to the protests and the efforts of the U.S. government to suppress those protests are extremely accurate. The portrayal of Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt and the impression that Alice Paul and the National Women's Party alone were the driving force behind the suffragist victory are inaccurate. The romantic interlude is imagined.

Notes on Historical Inaccuracies and Poetic License

Some historians agree that the militants and their White House pickets played an important role in leading President Wilson to endorse a constitutional amendment giving women the vote. This was also the appraisal of some contemporary observers. For historians, see Adams and Keane and Lunardini. For observations of contemporaries, see Stevens, and in particular the passage citing a telegram from Walter Clark, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of North Carolina, p. 18. For the opinions of two women who were active in the suffrage movement but not in Miss Paul's National Women's Party, see Gluck, Interview of Jessie Haver Butler, p. 105 and Laura Ellsworth Seiler, p. 228.

However, it is generally agreed that the militant suffragists were just one of several factors leading to the President's change of position and to the passage of the amendment. Mrs. Carrie Chapman Catt's "Winning Plan," NAWSA's network of state suffrage organizations, NAWSA's state by state strategy which increased the numbers of pro-suffrage representatives in Congress, NAWSA's cooperation with President Wilson in supporting the war effort and criticizing the militant suffragists, and the political debt that President Wilson came to owe NAWSA, were probably more important than the efforts of Alice Paul and the NWP.

From an historian's perspective, the movie's use of Mrs. Catt for comic relief is one of its weakest points. Mrs. Catt was one of the great leaders of the suffrage movement. For example, here is what one woman, who understood the importance of Alice Paul's leadership, said of Mrs. Catt:

. . .[H]er speeches were oratorical. They were profound speeches, they weren't just superficial. They were tied in with the history of government and the theory of democracy and what it all means. It wasn't just a superficial speech about the needs of women, but was a whole philosophy of the right of individuals to govern themselves. Gluck, 1976, Interview of Jessie Haver Butler, pg. 108

Here is an example of the eloquence of Mrs. Catt, speaking to NAWSA in 1902:

The world taught women nothing skillful and then said her work was valueless. It permitted her no opinions and said she did not know how to think. It forbade her to speak in public and said the sex had no orators. It denied her the schools, and said the sex had no genius. It robbed her of every vestige of responsibility, and then called her weak. It taught her that every pleasure must come as a favor from men and when, to gain it, she decked herself in paint and fine feathers, as she had been taught to do, it called her vain. Biography of Carrie Chapman Catt, from Women in History Website accessed January 4, 2009.

Moreover, Mrs. Catt's leadership included much more than speeches. Her political skills and
her organizational ability were superb and they were essential to the suffrage cause.

Every movie needs a villain and the filmmakers have made President Wilson serve in that role. However, once President Wilson came over to the suffragists' side and with the continued unrelenting pressure of the White House pickets and NWP members who demonstrated at his speeches and public appearances, he did much more than make a speech to Congress. He repaid his political debt to NAWSA several times over by: (1) supporting the suffrage position in state campaigns; (2) later changing his position and supporting passage of the amendment in Congress; and (3) providing his political support for ratification of the amendment by the state legislatures. Women's suffrage came to be one of the many reforms of his administration. When the 19th Amendment became law, President Wilson said, "I deem it one of greatest honors of my life that this great event, the ratification of this amendment, should have occurred during the period of my administration."

The characters of Ben Weissman, Emily Leighton, and Senator Leighton are fictional. There is no record of Alice Paul having any love interests. Alice Paul was, apparently, totally focused on the cause of women's suffrage and later, women's rights. The character of Mr. Weissman is totally fictional and was added to spice up the story and provide scenes in which the character of Alice Paul could be explained. The scene in which the Alice Paul character and the Lucy Burns character compete for a hat that they see in a shop window seems out of character for a Quakeress intent upon her "testimony." As for the character of Emily Leighton, there is no record of a senator's wife being arrested for picketing. This character and that of her husband are amalgams of several types of people who were caught up in the militant suffragists' struggle. They are used by the filmmakers to describe these types and the roles that they played in the events preceding the adoption of the 19th Amendment. Senator and Mrs. Leighton also provide opportunities to show events that really occurred to other people. These include the scene in which Alice Paul recruits Mrs. Leighton into the cause by asking her to first do a simple and non-controversial task. This was a typical way in which Alice Paul recruited women to her cause. See Stevens, p. 12. The characters of Senator and Mrs. Leighton also allow the filmmakers to show that when married couples divorced or were separated, custody of children was routinely awarded to husbands. The character of Senator Leighton is a composite for the many men who were not active in the suffrage movement but who were outraged when their wives and daughters were abused in prison.

Dramatization of Incidents that Actually Occurred

Many specific scenes in the film are reasonably accurate portrayals of actual events. These include:

- The 1913 Suffrage parade generally, including: the impressive visual effects presented by the women; their efforts to obtain police and army protection; Ida Wells, a black woman, joining the march; the tableaus; the violence of the crowd; the police doing nothing to protect the demonstrators; and the calvary being called to quell violence against the marchers; Lunardini, pp. 25 - 31;
- The fact that the suffrage parade on the day of President Wilson's first inauguration took crowds of people away from the inauguration and Wilson's question, "Where are the people?"; Stevens, p. 21;
- President Wilson being driven through the picket line and looking away; Stevens p. 67;
- The "Kaiser Wilson" banner that was a stinging personal insult to the President; Stevens, 124; Adams and Keane, 186 - 188;
- The attacks on the protesters by crowds unrestrained by the police; including the attack on Lucy Burns by the three sailors; and the bullet fired at the suffragists' headquarters; Adams and Keane, p. 188; Lunardini, 128 & 129
- The arrests and proceedings in court; Stevens 93;
- Events in the jail: generally: Stevens 152 et seq.; and Lunardini, 123 - 148; and Bozonelis;
  - the demand to be treated as political prisoners; Stevens 177;
- Woody song; Stevens, 152;
- poor food: sour bread, half-cooked vegetables, rancid soup with worms in it; Stevens, 142 & 145;
- the attack by the guards; the night of terror; Stevens, 196; Lunardini, 134 & 135; Bozonelis 7 - 10;
- hanging Lucy Burns up by her arms; Stevens, p. 200; Lunardini 135;
- the forced feeding of jailed protesters including Alice Paul and Lucy Burns; Stevens, p. 201; Lunardini, 133 - 135;
- the effort to intimidate Alice Paul and have her diagnosed as mentally ill; giving her an extensive mental exam and placing her in a psychiatric ward; Stevens, p. 220; Lunardini, 130, 131, 133 & 134;
- the refusal of Dr. White, the chief psychiatrist at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, to classify Miss Paul as insane; Stevens p. 226;
- the exterior scenes of the Occuquan workhouse are of the original building which is still standing today, although it is not used; the interior scenes were shot on a set; DVD Commentary;
- The headlines shown in the film are all real headlines from the time; DVD commentary;
- The hostile feelings between NAWSA and NWP; failure of NAWSA to protest deprivation of Civil Rights of NWP members and questioning motives of NWP members; (actually it was worse than is shown in the film; NAWSA operatives contacted members of the press and asked them not to report on the conditions in the jails, supporting President Wilson's effort at a press blackout; the movie shows Miss Paul and Mrs. Catt exchanging friendly and respectful glances when Wilson speaks to Congress to endorse the Amendment; Paul and Catt never reconciled); Lunardini, pp. 83, 84, 124; 128, 138, 163;
- The origin of the term "Iron Jawed Angels" created by a suffrage opponent; Stevens, p. 65;
- The first delegation to visit the President; Stevens, pp. 21 and 57 ; there were in fact several delegations and Wilson's words as shown in the movie came from his speeches or writings; DVD commentary;
- The role and tragic death of Inez Millholland, including her last words and the large funeral, organized by Alice Paul; see, e.g., Stevens, p. 48 and DVD commentary;
- The resignation from Wilson's Administration and the efforts on behalf of Miss Paul by Dudley Fields Malone; Lunardini 129, 136;
- The visit of a close personal friend of President Wilson to try to bargain with Miss Paul; Lunardini 136 & 137;
- NWP and NAWSA operatives lobbying the Tennessee Legislature for ratification; Lunardini 148 & 149.
- Husbands had complete control over the family's finances and if there was a divorce or separation, husbands were customarily awarded custody of the children;; DVD Commentary;
- Alice Paul did use Susan B. Anthony's old desk; DVD commentary;
- There really was an incident in England in which a suffragette, hiding in a closet in parliament, urinated into a lord's boot; but Lucy Burns and Alice Paul were not involved in the incident; DVD Commentary;
- The use of soot and rose petals as make-up; DVD commentary;
Iron Jawed Angels - Lesson Plans from Movies and Film - Women's Suffrage; Alice Paul, National Women's Party

http://www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/iron-jawed-angels.html