

Helen Delich Bentley, journalist-turned-politician who promoted Baltimore port, dies at 92

By Emily Langer August 6

Helen Delich Bentley, a Maryland journalist-turned-politician who elbowed her way as a woman into newsrooms, shipyards and the U.S. House of Representatives, distinguishing herself as one of her state's foremost boosters of Baltimore's port, died Aug. 6 in Timonium, Md. She was 92.

The cause was brain cancer, family spokesman Key Kidder told the Associated Press.

Mrs. Bentley, a Republican, was once described in The Washington Post as “an unreconstructed American original — raised in the desert, schooled on the waterfront, propelled to Capitol Hill.” She represented a largely blue-collar swath of the Baltimore suburbs in the House from 1985 to 1995.

A daughter of Serbian immigrants, she had grown up in a Nevada copper-mining town. She trained as a journalist when few women covered hard news and was hired in 1945 by the Baltimore Sun.

She vowed that she would write for any section but the society pages and found an assignment covering the port, a cornerstone of the state's economy, where she said the newspaper sorely needed greater coverage.

As the Sun's maritime reporter and editor, she discarded skirts in favor of work pants and cussed in her memorably raspy voice as wantonly as the sailors she covered. Baltimore legend had it that when a longshoreman insulted her appearance, she punched him in the jaw.

Mrs. Bentley became widely respected for her extensive sourcing, which reached from the ranks of dockhands to the higher echelons of Maryland's political establishment. Outside her beat reporting, she did publicity work for port agencies and the shipping industry, an arrangement that would be considered improper in modern newsrooms but one that she said did not represent a conflict of interest.

“She was one of the best reporters I ever saw,” Russell Baker, the Pulitzer Prize-winning humorist and onetime rewrite man at the Sun, once told The Post. “She was dogged. She knew everybody.”

He added that while her connections were among her strengths, writing was not. “It was always terrible to have to rewrite Helen,” he remarked, “because she didn’t take it well.”

During her quarter-century career with the Sun, Mrs. Bentley wrote a syndicated column, “Around the Waterfront,” and produced an educational television program, “The Port that Built the City and State,” which aired from 1950 to 1965.

In 1968, President Richard M. Nixon offered her a seat on the Federal Maritime Commission. In an oral history with Pennsylvania State University, Mrs. Bentley recalled her ire when she learned that a man “who had never been on a ship, who knew nothing from a bow and a stern,” was to be offered the chairmanship as a political favor.

She told a Nixon representative that she would take “the chairmanship or nothing” and that if the administration preferred otherwise, they could “shove it.”

Nixon relented, and Mrs. Bentley left the Sun to serve as the commission’s chairman, becoming one of the highest-ranking women in the executive branch at that time. “I suppose I’ll have to stop swearing now that I am going to be a madam,” she remarked.

She held the post from 1969 to 1975, using her clout to bolster federal support for U.S. shipyards and attracting controversy over allegations that she had also used her position to solicit political donations from the shipping industry.

She soon began eyeing the House seat held since 1962 by Clarence “Doc” Long, a Democrat who for environmental reasons opposed deepening Baltimore’s port — a move that Mrs. Bentley supported. She lost to Long in 1980 and again in 1982 before winning in 1984, a narrow victory attributed in part to President Ronald Reagan’s landslide reelection that year.

In Congress, Mrs. Bentley defied easy categorization. She was mainly conservative but was staunchly pro-union. She supported women’s causes, including the Equal Rights Amendment, but opposed abortion rights. In the 1990s, when Serbia was widely seen as the belligerent in the Balkan wars and the perpetrator of ethnic cleansing, she defended her parents’ homeland, saying that there was “blame to go around.”

She was known most of all as a trade protectionist — her station wagon’s license plate read “BUY USA” — and as a promoter of Maryland’s shipping interests. She won seats on influential House committees including Appropriations and obtained funds to deepen the Baltimore port. She successfully mediated a labor dispute there in the winter of 1989-90.

The nerviness that she had shown as a journalist often surfaced on Capitol Hill.

“It’s like this, Mrs. Bentley,” an admiral told her in a discussion of foreign-made equipment for Navy vessels, “they make these parts cheaper in Korea.”

The Sun recalled her retort: “Well, Admiral, they make admirals cheaper in Korea, too, and maybe we should buy some!”

In 1987, to highlight what she regarded as the country’s ill-advised trade practices with Japan, Mrs. Bentley took a sledgehammer to a Japanese-made radio outside the Capitol, declaring that “this is what we feel about Toshiba products.” Later, House Speaker Tom Foley (D-Wash.) told her, “Helen, you’re the most famous American in Japan since Admiral

Perry.”

Mrs. Bentley vacated her seat in 1994 to seek the Republican nomination for Maryland governor. She lost to Ellen R. Sauerbrey, the minority leader in the House of Delegates, who in turn lost to Democrat Parris N. Glendening. Mrs. Bentley remained active in maritime issues as a consultant, and in 2006, then-Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) renamed the port of Baltimore in her honor.

Helen Delich was born in Ruth, Nev., on Nov. 28, 1923. She traced her interest in maritime issues to her mother, who had come to the United States on a steamship.

Mrs. Bentley was 8 when her father died of silicosis, an occupational disease contracted by miners. She worked in a dress shop while her mother took in boarders.

Scholarships allowed her to pursue university studies, which she interrupted to work on the 1942 Senate campaign of then-Rep. James G. Scrugham (D-Nev.). He appointed her his Senate secretary, giving the future congresswoman her first experience on Capitol Hill.

In 1944, she received a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Missouri. She worked briefly for a wire service before being hired by the Sun.

Eight years after leaving Congress, Mrs. Bentley tried to reclaim her old seat in 2002, when Ehrlich, her successor, left the House to run for governor. She lost to Baltimore County Executive C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger (D).

Mrs. Bentley co-authored the book “The Great Port of Baltimore: Its First 300 Years” (2006). With her husband, William Bentley, she ran an antiques business in Cockeysville, Md. He died in 2003 after 44 years of marriage. She had no children, and a list of survivors could not immediately be determined.

Local Politics Alerts

Breaking news about local government in D.C., Md., Va.

[Sign up](#)

Reflecting on her career, Mrs. Bentley once told The Post that she did it “all on my own.”


“Women have to be willing to work and produce,” she said, “and not just expect favors because they are women.”

She received no favors on her last reporting assignment for the Sun, when she scored a spot aboard the SS Manhattan in 1969 as it became the first commercial ship to traverse the Northwest Passage.

Transmitting over the radio a dispatch to the newsroom in Baltimore, she used what she described as “a common Anglo-Saxon expletive” to convey her “impatience with a rewrite man.” The frequency, which was monitored by the Federal Communications Commission, was no longer made available to reporters on the ship.

“The male correspondents onboard were furious, blaming me for shutting down communications,” Mrs. Bentley wrote years later in a recollection published in the Sun. “I realized later that sponsor Humble Oil was trying to one-up the only female correspondent onboard, and management later admitted that it had seized the chance to eliminate press traffic from the ship.”

Read more **Washington Post obituaries**

Emily Langer is a reporter on The Washington Post’s obituaries desk. She has written about national and world leaders, celebrated figures in science and the arts, and heroes from all walks of life.  Follow @emilylangerWP

Campaign 2016

×

State of the 2016 race

>