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**H**elen Delich Bentley, the colorful and cantankerous former Maryland congresswoman whose fierce advocacy for the port of Baltimore led to its being named in her honor, died Saturday.

Mrs. Bentley, who was 92, died at her home in Timonium, said longtime aide Key Kidder. She had brain cancer.

She had a long and varied career that took her from The Baltimore Sun newsroom to the Federal Maritime Commission to the U.S. House of Representatives. She ran for governor in 1994 but lost in the Republican primary.

"Congresswoman Bentley worked with tenacity, energy, and passion on behalf of her constituents, making her a rare breed in politics and a role model to public servants across Maryland," Gov. Larry Hogan, also a

Republican, said Saturday. "She was a trailblazer for women in media and government, a longtime champion for manufacturing, maritime issues, and the Port of Baltimore which proudly bears her name as an everlasting tribute to her achievements."

He ordered flags in Maryland to fly at half-staff.

Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, dean of Maryland's congressional delegation, was a longtime friend of Mrs. Bentley. "She fought for jobs and she fought for the little people and she always put people and their opportunity to earn a living over petty partisan politics," said Mikulski, a Democrat. "Helen was a fighter and she believed in constituent service and she took on bureaucracy and foreign governments to get jobs in our community."

Mrs. Bentley's passions in life were to preserve and promote her adopted hometown's port, the U.S. maritime industry and American manufacturing. Gruff at times, she spoke out relentlessly in her unmistakable gravelly voice against anyone that threatened them.

Into her 90s, she remained a force in the business of the port. For 70 years, little on the waterfront escaped her notice.

"Nothing happened that I didn't know about," she said in a 2015 interview.

Helen Delich was born Nov. 28, 1923, in Ruth, Nev., the daughter of a Serbian immigrant miner. While in high school, she got her first taste of journalism and politics working on the weekly Ely, Nev., Record, published by Republican state legislator Charles Russell, a future congressman and Nevada governor.

She won scholarships to study at the University of Missouri, then known as the premier journalism school in the United States.

She earned a bachelor's degree in three years and took jobs in Fort Wayne, Ind., and Lewiston, Idaho. But she wanted out of small-town newspapers. She wrote to every major newspaper in the East to ask for a reporting job — but not on the society pages, where women of that era were usually relegated.

The only two papers to respond were the Louisville, Ky., Courier-Journal and The Baltimore Sun. She initially accepted the offer from Louisville. Then came a telegram from Baltimore in 1945 offering a reporting job at \$5 a week more. She took it.

After a stint covering labor, she was dispatched to the waterfront to revive coverage of the port, a beat the newspaper had neglected during World War II. She had never seen a ship, or the ocean. It was a tough, male-dominated environment, but she loved it.

"I had to be as mean and as tough as I could be. And I was," she said in 2010. "I was thrown out of more union halls. I was kicked out and carried out of the halls."

But it wasn't long before the union bosses became her friends and sources.

"I wore 'em down because I was always fair and I was always honest with them," she said.

She found other ways to fit in. Once, a longshoreman made a disparaging comment about her nose. She slugged him.

It wasn't much easier dealing with male colleagues in the newsroom. Her desk was next to the sports department, and she was constantly picked on.

"Those mean-ass sports reporters on the morning Sun were always piling on me and I had to fight back," she said. "That's why I had to learn all these dirty words."

Management wasn't much better. When Mrs. Bentley learned male reporters were getting paid more, she went to the managing editor to demand a \$5-a-week raise.

"He said, 'You're a woman,'" she recalled. "'What do you need a raise for?'"

John O'Donnell, a retired Sun reporter and editor, said she was one of the few women working in the newsroom who wasn't a secretary.

"She was a tough cookie," O'Donnell said.

Robert A. Erlandson, a retired Sun journalist who remained a close friend, knew Mrs. Bentley as "the hardest-working reporter I ever met," and a tough editor.

"She screamed at everybody, and of course she had a mouth like a longshoreman," he said. "She was a hard taskmaster but her people loved her and respected her because they knew she was honest.

"Helen underneath could be a very sentimental person. It was hard to dig down to it sometime," he said.

In 1950, Mrs. Bentley launched a pioneering television show on WMAR called "The Port that Built the City and State." Mrs. Bentley said the maritime trade paid \$30,000 to produce 30 shows a year.

She told stories of the port, the shipping business and the people who worked the waterfront. The program continued until 1965.

In 1959, she married William Roy Bentley, a teacher whom she had met on a blind date. Mr. Bentley opened an antiques store on Baltimore's 33rd Street in 1967. Not interested in politics, he would later open a well-known "antiques mall" at the York Road underpass in Cockeysville.

"Bill was a very private guy. Why the hell we agreed to marry I don't know," Mrs. Bentley said. "He loved his store. He loved his dogs and he loved his customers and he loved teaching. He was a good teacher."

By the time of her marriage, Mrs. Bentley had established herself as one of the premier maritime reporters in the country.

As the United States was becoming more deeply involved in the Vietnam War, Mrs. Bentley learned about congestion and inefficiency in the port of Saigon. She went to Vietnam to report on the difficulties of supplying U.S. troops.

Her reporting caught the attention of President Lyndon Johnson and eventually led to the development of modern port facilities at Cam Ranh Bay, some 180 miles from Saigon.

After Richard M. Nixon was elected president in 1968, Mrs. Bentley was approached about an appointment in his administration. She said she turned down a seat on the Federal Maritime Administration, holding out for the chair.

With a push from the handful of Republican women who were then in Congress, she got the position. It made her the highest-ranking woman in the Nixon administration.

Mrs. Bentley said she probably would have stayed in journalism but for one reason: "I wanted more money. They wouldn't give me the money."

On the maritime commission, she said Japan was discriminating against U.S. shipping. She was determined to use her regulatory authority to open their markets — over State Department objections.

"I finally won," she said. "They finally stopped trying to get me fired."

She stayed at the maritime commission through Nixon's resignation and into Gerald Ford's administration. In 1975, she returned to Baltimore and became a consultant to the maritime industry.

She became convinced that the long-term survival of the port of Baltimore depended on dredging the Chesapeake Bay to a depth of 50 feet so that it could continue to accommodate the world's largest cargo ships.

Rep. Clarence Long, a powerful Democratic congressman from Baltimore County, objected to the placement of the muck dredged from the channel at Hart-Miller islands in the Chesapeake Bay.

Mrs. Bentley said she tried to persuade Mr. Long of the importance of the dredging. When it became clear he would not yield, she entered elective politics in 1980 as his Republican challenger.

She lost that year, and again in 1982. But on her third attempt in 1984, with favorable redistricting and Ronald Reagan's landslide re-election over Walter Mondale, she unseated Mr. Long and began a decade in Congress.

"She and Barbara Mikulski shared a style," said former Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. "It's gruff. It's tough. It's very populist. ... It served her remarkably well in convincing ... blue-collar, conservative Democrats to go one tick up on the ballot to vote Republican."

Once in Congress, Mrs. Bentley said, she "worked like hell," and pushed through legislation to open up the islands to the dredge spoil and ensure that the channel would allow the largest ships to continue to make the trip up the bay.

Mrs. Bentley was a supporter of organized labor. And while she did not receive the endorsements of the Democratic-leaning unions that represented workers at the old Sparrows Point Steel Mill or the former General Motors plant on Broening Highway, their members turned out for her in election after election.

"She was able to break that barrier that it was OK to vote for a Republican in blue-collar Dundalk," said Greg Massoni, Mr. Ehrlich's former communications chief.

In Congress, Mrs. Bentley gained a reputation as a critic of U.S. trade policy.

Toward the end of her first term, Mrs. Bentley learned the Japanese company Toshiba had sold equipment to the Soviet Union that could help its submarines run more quietly, helping them evade detection by the U.S. Navy.

In July 1986, she led a group of members of Congress in a demonstration that captured international attention. Before TV cameras, Mrs. Bentley took a sledgehammer and smashed a Toshiba radio outside the U.S. Capitol.

"It felt great," she said almost 30 years later.

Mrs. Bentley advocated for preservation of the World War II-era Liberty Ship SS John W. Brown, and worked to bring the vessel to Baltimore. The ship was built in 1942 at Bethlehem Steel's Fairfield Yard, and is one of two operating Liberty ships left in the nation.

"Helen played an absolutely vital role in our obtaining the Brown," said former Project Liberty Ship chairman Capt. Brian H. Hope, a retired Chesapeake Bay pilot. "The Coast Guard commandant told us we needed to get a bill through Congress that exempted the Brown from modern ship passenger regulations." He said Mrs. Bentley and Senator Mikulski got the measure passed.

"The Brown arrived in Baltimore in 1998, and the first person up the gangway was Helen Delich Bentley," said Captain Hope.

Throughout her political career, Mrs. Bentley worked with Democrats and sometimes crossed party lines to support them, as she did with Senator Mikulski, a close friend.

In public, the Democrat she was most closely associated with was William Donald Schaefer, Baltimore's 15-year mayor and a two-term Maryland governor.

Baltimore had acquired a bad rap as "the port that wouldn't work in the rain," owing to a clause in the International Longshoremen's Association contract.

The clause angered Mr. Schaefer. Mrs. Bentley asked him to let her mediate with the association.

"He gave me authority," she said, "and we got the rain clause eliminated."

Lainy Lebow-Sachs, Mr. Schaefer's chief of staff when he was governor, recalled that her boss and Mrs. Bentley had a "wonderful friendship."

Though both were combative with others, she couldn't recall Mrs. Bentley and Mr. Schaefer ever butting heads. When Mr. Schaefer died in 2011, Mrs. Lebow-Sachs said, Mrs. Bentley was devastated.

In 1994, as Mr. Schaefer neared the end of his second term, Mrs. Bentley set her sights on the governor's

mansion. As the best-known Republican in the state, she entered the Republican gubernatorial primary against Del. Ellen R. Sauerbrey as a heavy favorite.

Mrs. Bentley ran as a moderate who could appeal to conservative Democrats who supported Mr. Schaefer. Mrs. Sauerbrey ran as a conservative, portraying Mrs. Bentley as a "tax-and-spend" Republican who voted against the party agenda.

The contest quickly turned ugly, and Mrs. Sauerbrey scored an upset victory. Mrs. Bentley never endorsed Mrs. Sauerbrey and refused to shake her hand at a party "unity breakfast." In the general election, Parris N. Glendening beat Mrs. Sauerbrey by 6,000 votes.

Mrs. Sauerbrey said she jumped into the race when Mrs. Bentley, a longtime friend, couldn't make up her mind whether to run. Mrs. Bentley subsequently decided to get in the race,

"I'm not going to deny there was tension after that primary, but we put that behind us long ago and have had at least a cordial relationship over the years," Mrs. Sauerbrey said. She said she would remember Mrs. Bentley as "a feisty fighter who did not give up."

After Mrs. Bentley left Congress, she started Helen Bentley & Associates in 1995, working as a lobbyist for maritime and defense industries and on patent protection issues.

In 2002, she attempted a political comeback at 78, seeking election to her old House seat. The campaign between Mrs. Bentley and then-Baltimore County Executive C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger was noteworthy for its civility. But the district had been redrawn to favor a Democrat, and Mr. Ruppersberger won.

Mrs. Bentley accumulated many honors over the years. In 2004, she was inducted into the International Maritime Hall of Fame in New York. But no accolade was as meaningful to her as Mr. Ehrlich's decision in 2006 to name the port in her honor as part of its 300th anniversary celebration.

The announcement came as a surprise to Mrs. Bentley. She had helped organize the festivities, but wasn't told of the honor.

Mr. Ehrlich, who succeeded Mrs. Bentley in Congress, hailed her as "the godmother of the port," and announced the new name.

Mrs. Bentley received a standing ovation. She declared herself "speechless."

"It was the first time I ever shut her up," said Mr. Ehrlich.

In her later years, Mrs. Bentley reveled in the port's resurgence. Though frail, she continued to turn out for important port events.

William Bentley died in 2003 of a stroke. The couple had no children.

The former congresswoman continued to operate Bentley's Antiques Show Mart, which her husband opened in 1971. She closed it in 2007.

Over the decades, as her friends and acquaintances died, Mrs. Bentley was called for comments in more than 100 Sun obituaries. When former Vice President Spiro Agnew died in 1996, 23 years after his resignation in a bribery scandal, Mrs. Bentley stood up for her fellow Baltimore County Republican.

"He served Maryland well. He served President Nixon well," she said. "And the misfortunes that came his way should be allowed to die with him."

Mr. Erlandson said that loyalty was typical of Mrs. Bentley.

"She'd curse you to your face, but she'd never stab anyone in the back," he said.

Mrs. Bentley had four brothers and two sisters, all of whom preceded her in death. She is survived by a niece, Sue Everson of Rancho Cordova, Calif.

Mr. Kidder said a memorial service will be held in October.

*Baltimore Sun reporter Frederick Rasmussen and former Baltimore Sun reporter Candus Thomson contributed to this article.*

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