

Former Congress member Marjorie Holt dies at 97



Congresswoman (R) 4th District, Anne Arundel County and southern Prince George's County, Marjorie S. Holt, photographed throughout the years.



By **Jacques Kelly**
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Marjorie S. Holt, the first Republican woman from Maryland to be elected to Congress, who represented Anne Arundel and Prince George's counties in the state's 4th Congressional District, died Sunday at her Severna Park home. She was 97.

Her daughter, Victoria Holt, said she died of complications from old age.

"Marjorie was a trailblazer for women in politics in this area," said Robert R. Neall, the recently sworn-in Maryland health secretary and a former Anne Arundel County executive. "She was first and foremost a lady, and she served with dignity and honor. ... One of her secrets was that she provided superlative constituent service."

Gov. Larry Hogan said Mrs. Holt "helped to chip away at the glass ceiling, paving the way for the next generation of women leaders from Maryland."

Maryland flags will be lowered on the day of Mrs. Holt's interment, the governor said.

Born in Birmingham, Ala., she was the daughter of Edward Sewell, a farm equipment dealer, and Juanita Sewell. She earned bachelor's and law degrees from the University of Florida at Gainesville.

She married Duncan Holt, an electrical engineer in 1946. They lived in Pittsburgh until moving to Maryland's Harundale when he became a manager at Westinghouse at what is now Baltimore-Washington International Airport.

She practiced law in Severna Park, her permanent home, and became involved in Republican state politics.

She was named to the Anne Arundel County board of elections and served as supervisor of elections.

She tried to run for the Maryland House of delegates in 1966 — and lost.

"I found out that nobody wanted to vote for a woman," she said in a 2010 oral history interview. They said, 'You're a nice lady, but I can't vote for a woman.'

She then defeated Louis Phipps, a political stalwart, in 1966 in a race for clerk of the Anne Arundel Circuit Court.

"She knocked off one of the real big dogs of Anne Arundel politics," said Mr. Neall, the former county executive. "She ran on a bipartisan ticket with Joe Alton, and her name was at the bottom of the ticket. People were sensing a need for change — a change in behavior and a change in type of people serving the public. She successfully exploited her situation. She was an attorney, a fresh face, intelligent and engaging."

Mrs. Holt said in the oral history, "The clerk's office was a wonderful place to do favors for people, help 'em out in the courthouse, yet not have to make any tough policy decisions. I wrote a lot of notes, did a lot of favors, and built quite an organization."

In her six years as court clerk, she married numerous couples and helped business people and contractors get licenses. If they did not pick them up on time, she hand-delivered them.

After the 1970 census, a new congressional district, the 4th, opened up in Anne Arundel and a portion of Prince George's counties, There was no incumbent.

Mrs. Holt recalled her thoughts: "OK, here it is, it's your time." She defeated the Democratic candidate, Werner Fornos, who had just survived a fractious 10-way primary fight. She won the race with 59 percent of the vote.

She was aided by her party's leader, President Richard M. Nixon, and his economic policies.

"She has, more than any other Marylander, been a supporter and defender of President Nixon in his Watergate travail," said a 1974 column by Peter A. Jay in The Baltimore Sun. "Conservatism fits the Fourth District, and Mrs. Holt is nothing if not conservative. Local pride is another reason for Mrs. Holt's strength. Anne Arundel has two-thirds of the vote in the district, and Mrs. Holt is Anne Arundel's first very own congress person."

Then-House GOP leader Gerald Ford helped her get a seat on the Armed Services Committee, “Having never been in the military, and with no military background, I was a little frightened. But I figured: ‘Darn, my opinion can be just as good as anybody else's, so — I really want to do this.’” she said in the history.

Mr. Neall said, “Her career took off on that committee. She helped the 4th District which was home to the Naval Academy, Westinghouse, Fort Meade and the National Security Agency.”

She was re-elected to her seat until 1986, when she left office and resumed the practice of law in Baltimore at the firm of Smith Somerville & Case.

President Ronald Reagan named her to the General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament. She remained active in Republican politics and attended the 1988 Republican National Convention in New Orleans.

After joining the Baltimore law practice, she told an Evening Sun reporter that she and her husband were “able to do more sailing than we have in 14 years.”

She was active as a volunteer at the Light Street Soup Kitchen and Meals on Wheels.

Plans for a funeral service are incomplete. Mrs. Holt was a member of the Woods Memorial Presbyterian Church.

Survivors include her son, Dr. Edward Holt of Annapolis; two daughters, Victoria Holt Perry and Rachel Tschantre, both of Severna Park; two sisters, Susan Bell of New Orleans and Jane Fernandez of Wellington, Fla.; 10 grandchildren; 14 great- grandchildren; and a great-great-grandson. Her husband died in 2014.

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