

Lindy Boggs, Longtime Representative and Champion of Women, Is Dead at 97

By [Douglas Martin](#) July 27, 2013

Lindy Boggs, who succeeded her husband in the House of Representatives after his plane crashed in Alaska and who went on to serve nine terms on Capitol Hill, notably as a champion of women's rights, died on Saturday at her home in Chevy Chase, Md. She was 97.

Her daughter, the ABC News commentator Cokie Roberts, confirmed the death.

In 1976, Mrs. Boggs became the first woman to preside over a Democratic National Convention. Three years earlier, she had become the first woman from Louisiana elected to the House.

Her victory came in a special election in which she campaigned to succeed her husband, Hale, a powerful member of the House who had served there for 28 years, the last two as majority leader. He was presumed dead when a plane in which he was a passenger disappeared while he was campaigning with Representative Nick Begich in Alaska in the fall of 1972.

Mrs. Boggs gained her husband's seat in no small part on the strength of his name. The special election was held in March 1973; Mr. Boggs had been re-elected the previous November, even though he was presumed dead.

But Mrs. Boggs's own experience did not hurt. She knew the ways of the capital as an astute political wife from a family whose political lineage reached back to George Washington's time and included governors of Louisiana and Mississippi.

Her own children found public renown in their own right: her daughter, Ms. Roberts, as a Washington journalist for ABC and National Public Radio; her son, Thomas Hale Boggs Jr., as an influential Washington lawyer and lobbyist; and another daughter, Barbara Boggs Sigmund, who died in office as the mayor of Princeton, N.J.

In her 1994 memoir, "Washington Through a Purple Veil: Memoirs of a Southern Woman," written with Katherine Hatch, Mrs. Boggs wrote that she had learned an important lesson as a political wife and as a politician herself: "You played the Washington game with confidence and authority and graciousness."



Lindy Boggs served Louisiana for nine terms in Congress. Credit...Jennifer Zdon/Times-Picayune, via Associated Press

The velvet Southern charm she had absorbed growing up on two Louisiana plantations was her not-so-secret weapon.

She displayed it early in her first term when the House banking committee was composing an amendment to a lending bill banning discrimination on the basis of race, age or veteran status. She added the words “sex or marital status,” ran to a copying machine and made a copy for each member.

In her memoir she recalled saying: “Knowing the members composing this committee as well as I do, I’m sure it was just an oversight that we didn’t have ‘sex’ or ‘marital status’ included. I’ve taken care of that, and I trust it meets with the committee’s approval.”

Thus was sex discrimination prohibited by the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974.

Mrs. Boggs used her membership on the Appropriations Committee to push for other women’s economic concerns, like equal pay for government jobs and equal access to government business contracts. She became a champion of historic preservation and port development, flood control and housing in her New Orleans district.

She also fought for higher pay for senators and representatives, a politically unpopular cause, because she thought it would raise the quality of legislators and reduce turnover.

Mrs. Boggs hated offending anyone, she wrote in her memoir, and so taking strong stands did not come easily. But “maybe” was not a voting option, she added; only “aye” or “nay.”

Mrs. Boggs championed racial justice at a time when doing so invited the resentment if not hostility of most Southern whites. She saw the growing civil rights movement as necessary to the political reform movement of the 1940s and '50s.



President Richard M. Nixon congratulated Mrs. Boggs in 1973 after she was sworn in. Credit...Associated Press

“You couldn’t want to reverse the injustices of the political system and not include the blacks and the poor; it was just obvious,” she said in 1990.

While her husband was in office, she supported civil rights legislation as well as Head Start and antipoverty programs. As the president of two organizations of Congressional wives, she saw to it that each group was racially integrated.

After her district was redrawn in 1983, giving blacks a majority, Mrs. Boggs was re-elected three times. In the first of these victories, in 1984, she captured more than a third of the black vote in defeating a popular black politician, Israel M. Augustine Jr., a former state judge, who was backed by black political organizations. When she announced her retirement from Congress in 1990, she was the only white member of Congress representing a black-majority district.

Her national profile was raised in 1976 when Robert S. Strauss, the chairman of the Democratic Party, chose her to preside over the party’s 1976 national convention in Manhattan, where Jimmy Carter became the presidential nominee. In 1984 she was often mentioned as a possible vice-presidential candidate, but she was ultimately passed over by the presidential nominee, former Vice President Walter F. Mondale, in favor of Representative Geraldine A. Ferraro. Mrs. Boggs believed that her strong stand against abortion had hurt her chances.

In 1991, a room that had been used as the House speaker's office in the 19th century was named the Lindy Claiborne Boggs Congressional Women's Reading Room.

Marie Corinne Morrison Claiborne was born on March 13, 1916, on a sugar plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish, La., the only child of Roland Philemon Claiborne, a lawyer, and the former Corinne Morrison. The name Lindy was a shortening of Rolindy, the nickname she was given by a nurse, who thought she looked more like her father than her mother.

Beginning with Thomas Claiborne, a Virginia congressman when George Washington was president, every generation of Mrs. Boggs's family had at least one public officeholder.



Mrs. Boggs during her Congressional campaign in 1973. Credit...United Press International

Lindy's father died when she was 2. Her mother remarried when Lindy was 7, and the newly constituted family moved to a prosperous cotton plantation.

After attending Roman Catholic schools, Lindy Claiborne entered Sophie Newcomb College, the women's branch of Tulane University, at 15. At a dance in 1934, she once said in an interview, a young man cut in while she was dancing. As they made their way around the floor, Thomas Hale Boggs said, "I'm going to marry you someday."

She and Mr. Boggs both worked on the Tulane newspaper, The Hullabaloo, she as the women's editor and he as the editor in chief. After graduation, he went to Tulane Law

School, and she taught history and English in Romeville, La. They married in New Roads on Jan. 22, 1938, in a ceremony with 15 bridesmaids and 15 groomsmen.

In 1940, Mr. Boggs, at 26, was elected to Congress as a reform candidate. He lost a re-election effort in 1942 but regained the seat in 1946, the beginning of 22 consecutive victories by him or his wife.

Mrs. Boggs quickly learned to navigate Washington. She managed her husband's campaigns and oversaw his Capitol Hill office. She also organized voter registration efforts and various events for President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 campaign. She was the first woman to manage two inaugural balls — for John F. Kennedy in 1961 and for Mr. Johnson four years later. She was also known for hosting more than 1,000 guests at Washington garden parties and, remarkably, doing the cooking herself.

Mrs. Boggs left Congress in 1990 to help her daughter Barbara Boggs Sigmund, the Princeton mayor, deal with eye cancer, an ocular melanoma, which had spread to other parts of her body. Mrs. Sigmund died that year.

Besides her son and Ms. Roberts, Mrs. Boggs is survived by eight grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren.

In 1997, President Bill Clinton appointed Mrs. Boggs ambassador to the Vatican. The post was known for its sober decorum, but Mrs. Boggs would have none of that. The morning after she arrived to take up the job, she was informed that she was to be seated that night at a table filled with nothing but cardinals. She mulled that over and said, "I think I'll wear red."

At another point, she exchanged three phone calls in one day with an Italian archbishop on a minor piece of Vatican diplomacy. Picking up the receiver for the last time, she said, "Dahlin', does this mean we're going steady?"