

The Honorable Elizabeth J. Patterson
U.S. Representative of South Carolina (1987–1993)

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

The “Fellows” of the House

Representative Patterson remembers a conversation about gender and the institution with Speaker Jim Wright.

Interview recorded April 3, 2017

Well, let me start with Jim Wright. He was serving when I was elected. And we, each new Member had the opportunity—a Democrat, or I guess maybe both—had the opportunity to meet with him. And when I went to meet with him in his Capitol Hill office, he asked me how things were going, and we chatted and talked about things. And I said, “Well, I just have one complaint.” He says, “What’s that?” I said, “You know, all through orientation, and even now, you all don’t seem to realize that there are women here.” And he said, “What do you mean by that?” He said, “Well, every place I go, it’s ‘Fellas, let’s get ready and do this.’ ‘Fellas, let’s get ready and do this.’” And I said, “It just seems to me, you could have said, said something, you know, ‘colleagues,’ or something besides ‘fellas.’” And he got, he had a smile on his face. He got up, and he went and he got this, rolled over this big dictionary—which I now have the one that was my dad’s like that. I think they gave them to every Member of Congress—and he rolled it over, and he showed me the definition of “fellow.” And, of course, it’s not male, you know, “fellowship,” you know. You know, whatever, so, he says, “So we really weren’t talking you all down. We were including you, you know, in this fellowship, we’re all together.” So, I had to sort of smile and say, “Well, that’s not quite how I take it, but thank you.”