

The Honorable Helen Delich Bentley
U.S. Representative of Maryland (1985–1995)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript
March 21, 2016

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

“I mean, when I was coming through there was nobody I could reach out to because they weren’t there. They weren’t there. I had to bust my way myself.”

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Abstract

Helen Delich Bentley came to Congress in 1985 as a well-known figure in her Baltimore-based district. A longtime journalist for the *Baltimore Sun*, producer of a local television show, and an acknowledged expert on maritime affairs, Bentley had an impressive resume that also included government service as Federal Maritime Commissioner. Much of Bentley's oral history focuses on her career before she won election to the House. (The former Congresswoman passed away before a second planned interview with the Office of the Historian transpired.) She discusses, for example, her first foray into politics as a volunteer for U.S. Representative Jim Scrugham's successful run for one of Nevada's U.S. Senate seats in 1942. Bentley briefly worked for Senator Scrugham, but left Washington, D.C., for Maryland when offered a job with the *Baltimore Sun*. Initially assigned to cover labor she quickly switched to reporting on the Baltimore docks and maritime issues. Her work led her to cross paths with local and national political figures and influenced her decision to make the jump to public office.

In 1980, Bentley ran for Congress against the incumbent Representative, Clarence "Doc" Long. Bentley recalls her three campaigns against Long—she defeated him on her third try—and her defining issue of protecting the Baltimore Harbor. Throughout her decade in the House, she emphasized constituent service and focused on many local issues. In her interview, Bentley discusses the role of women in politics and the impact of gender discrimination on her public career which included a lack of female mentors because of the gender barriers of the era. Bentley also talks about her women colleagues from Maryland and reflects on her role as a mentor and inspiration to younger women.

Biography

BENTLEY, Helen Delich, a Representative from Maryland; born in Ruth, White Pine County, Nev., November 28, 1923; attended the University of Nevada, and Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.; B.A., University of Missouri, 1944; journalist; television producer; chair, Federal Maritime Commission, 1969–1975; international business consultant; unsuccessful candidate for election to the Ninety-seventh in 1980 and Ninety-eighth Congresses in 1982; elected as a Republican to the Ninety-ninth and to the four succeeding Congresses (January 3, 1985–January 3, 1995); was not a candidate for reelection to the One Hundred Fourth Congress in 1994, but was an unsuccessful candidate for nomination for Governor of Maryland; private advocate; unsuccessful candidate for election to the One Hundred Eighth Congress in 2002; died on August 6, 2016, in Timonium, Md.

[Read full biography](#)

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <http://history.house.gov>.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:

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Interviewer Biographies

Matt Wasniewski is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. He has worked in the House as a historical editor and manager since 2002. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), and the *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, forthcoming 2013). He helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. He earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 2004. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master’s degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.

— THE HONORABLE HELEN DELICH BENTLEY OF MARYLAND —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: My name is Kathleen Johnson. I'm here today with Matt Wasniewski, who is the House Historian. The date is March 21st, 2016. We're in the House Recording Studio in the Rayburn House Office Building and we're here with Helen [Delich] Bentley, former Representative for Maryland. We are delighted to have you join us today.

BENTLEY: And I'm delighted to be with you, Kathy and Matt.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you for coming.

JOHNSON: Thank you. This interview is part of an oral history series that we're doing with former women Representatives to celebrate and to recognize the centennial of the election of the first woman in Congress, Jeannette Rankin.

BENTLEY: What year will that be?

JOHNSON: Her election was in 1916, and then her swearing-in was 1917.

BENTLEY: Okay, good.

JOHNSON: So, we wanted to start off today by asking you, when you were young did you have any female role models?

BENTLEY: No, I did not. I grew up in Ruth, a company mining town out in Nevada. It was 8,000 feet above sea level, 250 miles from the nearest city, and there was nobody around there. I was growing up. My mother Mary was urging me to

go to college. My mother was a widow and she had to keep boarders to feed us and everything. And so in that small town, I worked for a lady who owned a dress shop. And I got to know my teachers very well. I knew I wanted to really be a lawyer, but I knew we couldn't afford it, so I settled on journalism. And I've followed my nose that way.

I went to the University of Nevada for one year where I worked as a secretary. I went to the University of Missouri the next semester because that had the best journalism school in town. But before I did that, there was a man who came into the—I forgot to mention that I also worked during the week and weekends on a weekly newspaper in Ely, Nevada—that man was a politician. He was also state senator Charles Russell, who later became governor. And that was the path that I chose.

I went to the University of Missouri for the first semester of my second year, and again I keep forgetting about the summer I spent in my first political experience. Jim [James Graves] Scrugham, who had been a Member of the House here, was running for the U.S. Senate [in 1942]. It was an open seat and Jim came into our newspaper office down in Ely and asked Charlie, the publisher, "I need somebody to run my campaign in White Pine County. Can you recommend anybody?" Now Jim was a Democrat, but in those days, everybody worked together. Charlie looked at him and said, "Get her." I had never, never been around politics before. So, Scrugham came over and talked to me a little bit with his colonel friend, who was accompanying him, and I said, "I'll try it. I don't know anything about it, but I'll try it." So, that was my first venture into politics.

I went door-to-door talking about Jim Scrugham, and then about midway,

they added Eureka County to my White Pine County. Well, Eureka was really, I mean, White Pine was bad enough—copper mines, old miners, immigrants who knew not much about voting. My parents were immigrants. And we won. Both of my counties won for Scrugham. So, after he got in the next January, he offered me a position in his Washington office, and I grabbed it. And I said, “Yes, I’ll come.” Now let me say this: The way I campaigned back in 1942, door-to-door talking to people, you know what? Campaigning hasn’t changed much in those years. People want to feel a handshake, and they want to hear from the candidate or somebody close to the candidate.

JOHNSON: Did you enjoy that experience? Do you think that really sparked an interest for you?

BENTLEY: I did. I did. And because I enjoyed it is why I accepted Senator Scrugham’s offer to come to Washington. Now at that time he was located in the Russell Building. There were only five employees on his staff then. And in those days, they went from January to June 30 because there was no air conditioning in the building, and you did everything in those six months and then you went back to your home, or wherever.

Now it didn’t take me long to decide I didn’t want to be in politics because I was upset at the questions and the demands of the constituents, things I felt did not belong in a U.S. Senator’s office. So, after the semester and a half here, I said, “I’m going back.” Because I was going to GW [George Washington University] at night. And we would also play around—staff people—together on weekends and nights and that was crazy.

I decided I was going back to Missouri. Now the first time I was in Missouri, I had a job at 10¢ an hour in a drug store, which paid my expenses. This time, I was going back and working this—World War II was on, so I was going back and worked in the dining hall at the university at 30¢ an hour—big jump, one hour would get you breakfast, or lunch, or dinner. And anything over your three meals, you could use that money for whatever else. I was graduated from Missouri in 1944, September, and it happened on the same day my mother became a citizen. She was being sworn in out in Nevada, so we could not be together. But I went then in the journalistic field. I got a job with United Press in Indiana, and I liked it. But I was not happy that United Press did not feel they had to pay me as much as they paid the men, and I fought that issue with them and quit because I lost. It was \$5 a week difference, but I didn't feel that they were being fair, so I went out to Lewiston, Idaho, as a night editor. And after a very short while there, I decided, "This ain't for me. This ain't for me."

I wrote to every big newspaper on the East Coast and told them how good I was. And the *Louisville Courier* offered me a job, but it was not as a reporter. I wanted to be a reporter. So, I accepted it because I had no other offer at that moment. I was all packed, ready to go to Louisville, when the *Baltimore Sun* came through. And not only did they offer me a reporter job, but it was \$5 more a week than anybody else was going to pay me, and they would pay my train fare from the West to Baltimore. So, I immediately canceled Louisville and all aboard for Baltimore.

When I got to Baltimore, my first day of work was on Flag Day of 1945. The day city editor said, "I want you to go cover the Flag Day ceremony of the Elks and when you come back, write a half a column." So, I went and I came

back and I wrote my first paragraph. I sent it up to the city desk, and then I heard this voice from the other end of the room. “You stupid [expletive]. Don’t you know you’re supposed to check in with the city desk when you come back?” This was Phil Potter, who was very famous on the *Sun*. And if he hadn’t have been leaving within a week to go overseas on assignment, I would have quit right there. But he did so I stayed.

The end of the war, ships were coming back and I became fascinated by the waterfront and I asked the new city editors, not Phil Potter, Bill Wells and Ed Young. They put me on labor, covering labor, which was a great assignment because there were a lot of strikes then. And there was a 20-week strike at the Bethlehem shipyards. We had a lot of shipyards in Baltimore then. They produced 609 ocean-going ships in a four-year period during World War II. And this 20-week strike, I felt Bethlehem was very unfair to the workers, so I asked Ed and Bill, I said, “I don’t want to cover labor anymore. Give me something else.” So they said, “Why don’t you go down to the waterfront and cover the port? We haven’t had anybody since before the war.” They sent me and I’m still there. I’m still there. That was a long time ago.

JOHNSON:

What was it like for you working in such a male-dominated field?

BENTLEY:

Well, let me get into that. The men were coming back from the war, and the city room was crowded with women, and they began laying them off. There was Anne Hutchinson, who was a woman who’d come down from Connecticut. She was kind of an elitist. There was Marge Mathis. Marge—who had been an absolute magnificent reporter, older woman—she came from the Hearst family. She wasn’t a member of the family, she was in that

arena, and myself. We were the three who were left, and I was amazed that I was left. Well, then the undercurrents began with the men against us. At one point . . . and I love the waterfront and I did a great job there. I did personality stories, I did daily stories, there were a lot of strikes then, et cetera. I ended up being the labor and the maritime editor, which was okay. I began talking a lot to all of the providers and entrepreneurs around the waterfront.

It was about the time of the birth of television—1950, 1949, I'd say—and a couple of the men who are in charge of the Propeller Club of Baltimore and the Traffic Club of Baltimore said, "Helen, we need to do a television show." I said, "I don't know anything about television. Hell, I hardly know anything about reporting." So, I ended up structuring a television show and it was called, "The Port that Built a City." It ran for 15 years every Sunday, and I did it. I raised the money for it, I laid out the stories, I went with a camera man, we shot the film, I helped edit, I wrote the script, and then I was on with a moderator also—15 years. But it gave me a big boost in being able to think about elections because I was the person, at that time, who, candidates who were running for office would come and talk to me about the port, and I would tell them all of the pluses and all of the minuses.

BRIEF BREAK

WASNIEWSKI: We wanted to get into the story of how you were appointed in 1969.

BENTLEY: I'm coming to that.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay.

BENTLEY:

Okay. Because I was so fond, as I said earlier, of the maritime activities, and I must say that my managing editor at that time, Buck Dorsey, was great. After a couple years, he said, "Helen, you're on your own. You can do what you think you need to. You can go where you want. You just have to make sure that we keep the Port of Baltimore up here." Well about that time . . .

BRIEF BREAK

One of the complaints I always heard about our Port of Baltimore was that the railroads controlled the piers, and the railroads did not want trucks on the piers. Now this was a new era, so I went to the governor, [Theodore Roosevelt] McKeldin at that time, and I said, "We need to do something about getting a public agency running the port." The governor agreed and he appointed a committee to work on that.

In the first year, 1955, at the state legislature, we lost that effort. That was the first time I'd been in Annapolis and I guess you'd say politicizing. So right after that session ended, those of us who were very sensitive to the need started our committee back up for 1956. And in 1956, we won. We got the Maryland Port Authority then. We changed later, and here we are, 1956, July 1, we got a new agency. Well, more of the local politicians would come around to me and say, "All right. Now what do we need to do?" And we would work on things.

And during that time, the Saint Lawrence Seaway was being enlarged, and I was going back and forth up there and writing stories that indicated Baltimore might lose business. Well, as it happened, Baltimore didn't lose any

business with Saint Lawrence Seaway—a little bit, not much—but we went on, and again there were strikes and strikes by seamen, by longshoremen. I got to know all of the labor union leaders very well during those days, and I've broken many stories that . . . I was the head of the *New York Times* and *New York Herald Tribune*, and I had a good friend on the *Journal of Commerce* at that time, and he and I would coordinate stuff, but by 1965, when the Vietnam War broke out, my columns and stories were read all over the maritime world. I had established that presence. I was always very careful on accuracy. And I made a couple of mistakes. I buried the wrong guy one day, and I had to apologize to his family, and a couple of other things like that. A guy by the name of Richard [Milhous] Nixon was running for the presidency. He had a guy working for him by the name of Pat—

WASNIEWSKI: Buchanan?

BENTLEY: Pat Buchanan called me and said, “We would like to talk to you about working with us on our maritime stuff.” I said, “Pat, I’m just leaving for Vietnam, and when I get back, I’ll talk to you.” I went to Vietnam in January of 1967. And the reason my publisher sent me, there were 80—eighty—American-flag cargo ships stuck in Saigon Harbor because they couldn’t be unloaded because nobody knew how over there. And so I worked with then Teddy Gleason, who was the ILA president, about getting—the ILA being the International Longshoremen’s Association—and Teddy got a crew together and was taking them over. I went about the same time in January. We had a much bigger Merchant Marine at that time than we do today, but still, 80 ships being tied up and the length of time, nobody would know how long.

Undersecretary [Robert] Baldwin, who was Undersecretary of the Navy, came over. I knew him from having done stories with him at the Pentagon. He came over and we took a helicopter ride around, and I said to him, “You’re never going to get these ships unloaded as they are. From here on, you’ve got to use container ships, and you’ve got to have container facilities here.” And with that, they built the Port of Cam Ranh Bay to enable containers to be brought in, dispersed, and returned. It was a whole hell of a mess, and it got worse, as you know.

I came home late in '67 and called Pat Buchanan up and said, “I’m here.” He said, “Meet me in New York on a Saturday morning,” which I did. He was in his pajamas when I knocked on his door. I was going to get my hair done. So we talked, and Pat said, “If you’ll help us, it’ll be great because you know more about this than anybody.” I offered to help. I told him that if the [Hubert] Humphrey people asked me that I would have to help them as well because I was in the media business. I knew the Humphrey people. I had never known the Nixon people, but the [Hubert Horatio Humphrey [Jr.] people never called me. The Nixon—Pat did. I worked with Dick Allen, and Alan, who became our big financial guy. Alan, what’s his name?

WASNIEWSKI: Oh, Greenspan?

BENTLEY: Yes, Greenspan. So, now this is the important part for women. After Nixon was elected, I was called by Ed Luckenbach, who owned a steamship line, who was operating these ships all over the world. But he was on the transition team for Nixon. And I’d known Ed before. Ed said, “Helen”—now this date he called me was February the 4th of 1969—“Helen, how would you like to be maritime administrator?” I said, “That’s what I want.” He said, “You’re

going to have to get the labor unions with you.” I said, “That’s not a problem.” Now I said that because just the night before I had had a dinner in New York with all of the labor union leaders, all of the steamship presidents, and all of the shipyard people saying, “You guys have got to work together or the Merchant Marine is going to go to hell.” So I worked and Jesse Calhoun of the Marine Engineers said he’d support me. Joe Curran, head of the National Maritime Union, said he’d support me. Lungren from the West Coast said he’d support me.

And then I got to Paul Hall, who was head of the Seafarers [International] Union. Now Paul was one of those guys that I met with the day before my big dinner and sat with him for 10 hours in his office. Paul said, “Well, I don’t know, Helen. I got to check it out.” I said, “What the hell do you mean, ‘check it out?’ I talked with you for 10 hours yesterday. I had this big dinner.” “Well, Helen, you know how I am. If I move a broom in my kitchen from that corner to this corner, I make sure that every detail is covered.” I said, “Okay.” Paul never ended up supporting me, so I lost the Maritime Administrator job. They gave it to a man. I’ll come back to Paul.

The next offer I had in the Nixon administration was Assistant Secretary for Communications in the Department of Transportation. Now I knew all about the DOT [Department of Transportation] because I’d covered every detail when it was being formed. I’d written about it. The Undersecretary wanted me. His assistant wanted me because they knew me. But John Volpe, who was then Secretary [of Transportation] said, “A woman can’t handle that job.” And he hired a man. And you know what? Within three months, he had to fire that man. I sat back and chuckled. I figured if anybody was that despicable towards women, I didn’t want to work for him anyhow.

Then came the Federal Maritime Commission [FMC] openings—two openings—a commission seat and the chairmanship. I was offered the commission seat right off, and right off I said, “No, I want the chairmanship.” “Why?” I said, “Because that guy doesn’t know a [expletive] thing about the waterfront. He’s a political appointee, and you want me to make him look good, and I’m not going to make him look good, so I’m rejecting it.” The next day—this was like early June of ’69—the very next day, four Republican Congresswomen were meeting with the President about female appointees. Peggy [Margaret M.] Heckler—I’m going to have to fill these in. I know them, but I can’t think.

JOHNSON: That’s fine.

WASNIEWSKI: That’s fine.

BENTLEY: Peggy Heckler became their spokesman. Peggy called me up and said, “We want you to take that seat.” I said, “Congresswoman, I’m not taking that seat because the chairmanship is open. They’re giving it to a man from Warren, Ohio. He’s a lawyer who’s never been on a ship, who knows nothing about a ship, or cargo, or trade. And I’m not going to make him look good. I’m not taking it.” She called me up again and I said, “Well, let’s see, the Civil Aeronautics Board [CAB] is open—chair—I’ll take that.” She passed that on to Peter Flanigan, and Peter went, “A woman can’t handle that job. Women can’t do nothing.” So, I said to Peggy when she called me, I said, “Peggy, now you know the discrimination that’s going on.” I said, “I’ve been writing about the CAB and all of the transportation now for several years, and I know as much about them, more so than Peter Flanigan. The answer is no. To him, to

hell with him.” Well then, a reporter, a columnist—Bob K., [Robert Novak]—began hearing about the fights that were going on. Women weren’t getting anywhere, and this penetrated to the White House.

In the meantime, also, I’d been fighting with Humble Oil Company, the predecessor to Exxon, or whatever, about making a trip as a reporter through the Northwest Passage. They had made an ice-breaking tanker to go there. “We don’t have room for a woman.” And I was fighting these literally by myself, but there was some help in the background. On July 31st of 1969, at 10:00 in the morning, I got a call from Humble Oil. “We have found a room for you, and we want you to be ready to go on the trip.” I said, “Fine, thank you. I’ll be ready.” At 3:00 in the afternoon that same day, July 31st, 1969, Peter Flanigan called me up and said, “You want to be chairman of the FMC?” I said, “Yes, Peter. I’ll take it, but not until after I have made my last trip for the *Sun* paper and the industry aboard the *Manhattan*. Thank you, Peter.” And that was it, all of that fighting and aggravation.

So, I made the trip on the *Manhattan* and on one of our . . . in those days, you didn’t have cell phones and all of the satellite stuff, et cetera. If you could get connected somehow to a land phone in the U.S., you were very lucky. Well, we were coming to, it was a day we were writing stories, and then all of a sudden, our phones were shut off. And I got the blame. I was the only woman reporter, remember. So, I got the blame on the alleged accusation that the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] had heard my obscenity to the rewrite man on the *Baltimore Sun* desk After 10 tries to get him to understand the word, something, I finally said, “Oh Al, [expletive].” And out comes the Humble Oil people. Well, I was no good. All the reporters got mad at me because they said nobody can use the phone.

And I got to thinking about that during the evening and I thought, “You know, the FCC does not work that way. The FCC will have a hearing and then they will decide whether they’re going to fine Humble Oil or somebody for this.” So I confronted the Humble Oil master who was in charge of the whole thing. I said, “Who in the hell said that?” I said, “I want to know.” And Humble Oil, after I had been attacked, and criticized, and poked at as the only female reporter, they admitted that they were using me too, and blaming me. There was no problem. They just didn’t want us to use the phone.

JOHNSON: Matt and I read a lot of the articles about that. It was picked up in the press, definitely.

BENTLEY: Yes. So we got home and then I took my oath for chairman of the Federal Maritime Commission. And since I knew everybody at the FMC, I knew all of those who were productive and all of those who were non-productive, and I was able to straighten things out probably faster than the average person going into a government agency.

BRIEF BREAK

I was very cognizant of what had happened to me as a woman trying to get in there and the past battles that women had. At the FMC, I had four male commissioners, and I can tell you they were snotty and resentful that a woman was chair. I let them be. I wouldn’t let them—when they were nasty . . . we had one automobile with a chauffeur. I cut them off. I decided two can play at this game. And then I went on to learn what I hadn’t known—

more about the ports and what needed to be done. And after I left the commission, which was because Senator [Charles McCurdy] Mathias [Jr.]—and if you want a fill in, I'll give you a fill in—wanted to nail me.

I went back home and I began looking at the port again, and I said, “The Port of Baltimore needs a 50-foot channel or it’s going to die up here in the upper part of the bay.” So that became my challenge for a campaign and also that the sitting Congressman [Clarence Dickinson Long] then was not only elderly, but he showed it, and I decided to take him on. Now the Republicans were not well-organized at that time in the Second District, but I was pleased with the support that came to help me. Clarence Long was the sitting Congressman, and he had played mockery in that district for 10 or 11 terms. Well, I ran the first time, and I was not pleased with the outcome, of course. I lost, and that was in '80. In '82, I ran again. And this was after redistricting had taken place and I had a better potential as a Republican. So, I had all of my, I'd say, quarters in line and we ran. I lost by two percentage points. I decided, “I'm going once more.” And this time I pushed the issue of the 50-foot channel and the need for it. And I really acquired a much larger volunteer support and more money. But, am I still on the second time I ran?

WASNIEWSKI: You're on the third time.

BENTLEY: Third time.

WASNIEWSKI: Eighty-four.

BENTLEY: Okay. I had a nasty challenge in the primary. [Sentence redacted.] Now, of course, his attacks on me were I was a two-time loser, get out. [Sentence

redacted.] So his claim was that since he'd been born there, although he had never lived there, he was as entitled to run in that district as I was. Well, who knows? This comes later. I had my little red [campaign] buttons, and I ran. I ran hard.

JOHNSON: In any of those campaigns, did you receive support from any women's groups or organizations?

BENTLEY: No. I did not. Women's groups at that time were not active in Maryland. I received help from the maritime people, mostly. I had a limited amount from women, not as groups. We did not have—who were the ones then? Who are the ones today?

JOHNSON: Like NOW? The National Organization for Women?

BENTLEY: No. Now, there are others.

WASNIEWSKI: EMILY's List?

BENTLEY: But there were none of those active and doing money for women. You had to do it on your own, and that's where I went. Fortunately, I had the support of labor. I had the support of workers, and even though I had the support of labor—not the union heads, but the Members who lived in my district were very supportive and they voted for me. And because they voted for me, I was elected. It may have had something to do with the coattails of [Ronald] Reagan, too. I don't know, but it helped.

WASNIEWSKI: Was there any one key moment in that election in '84 that you felt like you had turned a corner? Was there an event that happened or—

BENTLEY: Not really. We just kept day in and day out on the issue, and we never let an hour pass that we weren't pushing. I should have mentioned—no, that comes later.

JOHNSON: I had a question if that's okay. How important was gender in all these campaigns—you as a woman candidate?

BENTLEY: Well, gender helped to a degree. But I think the fact that I had had 15 years of television, and I'd had 29 years writing for the *Sun* paper, and I knew my issues, I think that was my foundation more than just being a woman. But I certainly never forgot the fact of how women were being discriminated against, and still are. And "my friend," [name redacted]—quote, quote—was sneering at me as a woman, and I just wouldn't put up with that. It was more a nasty male perception and reaction to me than anything else. That's the way I'd interpret it.

WASNIEWSKI: You want to move on to the campaign objects?

JOHNSON: Sure.

BENTLEY: Today we have women's groups. We have women raising money. We didn't have that then.

WASNIEWSKI: You had just picked up that picture of the campaign button. We're just curious to know if there's a story behind that button or another piece of campaign memorabilia that you recall?

BENTLEY: I had a lot of great brochures. You'll have to, I'll send you some. I hope I have them. I had buttons. I was called the "Iron Lady." What's her name was alive at that time—Margaret Thatcher—and I knew I had to do well because I couldn't afford not to, and I just kept plugging and working hard. It's not a playpen. A campaign is tough work, and I admire anybody who goes into it. Right now, we have a candidate on the Republican side for the U.S. Senate open seat, and I am in touch with her, Kathy Szeliga, almost every other day. The things I hear. We've got to help our candidates who are running, not just putting a woman in because she's a woman—a capable woman. And that's what I keep stressing.

When I got in, when I was elected, my two chiefs of staff—one ahead of the other—were both women. My legislative person was a man, an old friend from way back who was excellent at that. But I had several women on my staff and I had women running my district offices—two women. And we worked together as a team.

JOHNSON: Did you think that your earlier career as a reporter, and as you talked about being the chairman of the commission [FMC], because you were one of the few women, do you think that helped prepare you for your career in Congress?

BENTLEY: Absolutely it did. Absolutely it did. Because when I went into the FMC, I really had never managed anything. I'd been a key person on the *Sun* paper

staff at that time, but you know that was me and I had two assistants. But all of that prepared me to run a respectable and honorable office. It's often quoted that my constituent service was second to none because I knew what the constituents were calling in about because I asked for every case at the end of every day, and I followed up on that—made sure my staff was following because in my opinion at that time—and I told my staff—the largest part of the constituency didn't really care about my votes over here. But they did care if I responded to a constituent's request. And that's what we had to pay attention to.

Now I'm not saying that it's that way today because today we have cell phones, we have satellites, we have 24/7 constant looming on top of us. You're never a minute away from the television and the news. It's a different world today, and you have to be prepared for it. But you need a foundation. I'm amused. All of a sudden somebody appears in a campaign, "I'm running for the Senate." I said, "Oh. What's your background? Have you ever run before?" "No." "Well, what makes you think you can handle the Senate?" "Well, I just know I can." I said, "Do you have any idea what you're getting into?" I said, "Why don't you start with the state legislature and move up?" And I think that is very important. People have no idea, if the person is serious, how stressful a campaign can be.

My second campaign for re-election was against Kathleen Kennedy Townsend. And I'll put the end before the meat in between. I was the first one to ever beat a Kennedy. And I did in that election, but I had the whole Kennedy family against me. I can remember the night before that election, there was a certain street corner in my district in Dundalk—and this is Merritt Boulevard and Wise Avenue—and we're down there with our street

signs the night before, and the whole Kennedy clan shows up. Well, we just had to out-Bentley them. And we did. We finally got them out of there. But that was one hell of a night, I can tell you. That's still my favorite street corner.

WASNIEWSKI: When you came to the House in 1985, there were just 23 women in the House, total. Did you find that because there were so few women at that point that women tended to gravitate towards each other, across party lines even in the House?

BENTLEY: To a point, to a point. One of my best friends today is Marcy [Carolyn] Kaptur, a Democrat from Ohio. Marcy and I have remained very close friends because she thinks like I do. If we don't have jobs in America, there's going to be an economic drop down. And just today, I had a call from a businessman who had read something about the lack of jobs somewhere, and he said, "Helen, if they had listened to you 20 years ago, we wouldn't be having this problem." I said, "I know, but they all thought I was crazy at that time and I wasn't."

JOHNSON: Of that small number of women that Matt just referenced, there were quite a few from Maryland.

BENTLEY: At that time, there were four of us.

JOHNSON: Right. So, did a special bond emerge between you?

BENTLEY: We're close. I mean, any of us can call each other up if there's a need or they want something—and we have. We still occasionally have lunch together or

something. I'm the Republican, Barbara [Ann] Mikulski is a Democrat, Beverly [Barton Butcher] Byron is a Democrat, Marjorie [Sewell] Holt is a Republican, and Connie [Constance A.] Morella is a Republican. We're still all here, and I think we're all sad that there hasn't been a woman outside of Barbara in the House for some time now.

JOHNSON: When you first came to Congress, was there anyone that served as a mentor or offered you some valuable advice?

BENTLEY: Not really. Not really. I had—during my FMC days, my newspaper days, et cetera—I had become very close to the three Democrat male Congressmen from the city of Baltimore. And that was rare that three chairmen of committees were from the same area: George [Hyde] Fallon, head of Public Works, Eddie [Edward Alexander] Garmatz, head of the Merchant Marine Committee, and Sam [Samuel Nathaniel] Friedel, the House Operations.

WASNIEWSKI: Government Operations Committee?

BENTLEY: Yes, and I learned a lot from them because I would take the train from Baltimore to Washington with them, sit on the train, listen to them, ask them questions. You asked me if I had a mentor. Those were my three guys. They were very helpful in my early days. And as a reporter, they were very helpful.

WASNIEWSKI: How would you describe the atmosphere of the House when you arrived? Was it very welcoming for women?

BENTLEY: Let me put it this way. They didn't roll out the red carpet, but they also didn't shut the door. That's the best way I can describe it.

JOHNSON: Were there particular areas that might have been more difficult for you to gain access to because you were a women Member?

BENTLEY: Particular area that I'm what?

JOHNSON: That was difficult to gain access to? You know, a lot of the deals that take place in Congress are behind the scenes—golf games or at the gym. Was that an obstacle for you?

BENTLEY: I never tried any of those. My concern was my constituents, and as soon as the House ended here, I was back in my district. Which now very few Congresspeople can do that, because they're not all in a Washington neighborhood. But I was, and I went back. I did what I had to do here in Washington, and then I went back there. On a weekend, I probably would do 21 events between Saturday and Sunday. Frequently, in the evening, you'd go . . . and I think Mr. [C. A. (Dutch)] Ruppertsberger is following some of this. I don't know that he does 21 in a weekend, I haven't followed him. {laughter} But the constituents want to see their Member, and that's important.

JOHNSON: Should we take a break here since we are about an hour in?

WASNIEWSKI: Absolutely.

END OF PART ONE ~ BEGINNING OF PART TWO

JOHNSON: What are your memories of the Congressional Women's Caucus?

BENTLEY: I never was a member.

JOHNSON: Okay.

BENTLEY: I'm not going to be much help on women's—I hired them. I still hire them. I pay them well, but I've never been a—EMILY's List and that, I'm not part of.

JOHNSON: Okay, that's fine.

WASNIEWSKI: How about your committee service? We're curious to know how you obtained your initial committee assignments on Merchant Marine and Fisheries and Public Works and Transportation, and how important were these to your district?

BENTLEY: They were very important to my district at the time. The Public Works [Committee] dealt with the port and the dredging. And I wanted to get my 50-foot channel in there early on, and I did in the first year. It was the last bill of the 99th Congress [1985–1987].

WASNIEWSKI: And important to show progress to constituents, too.

BENTLEY: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: What were your impressions of the longtime chairman of Merchant Marines, Walter [Beaman] Jones [Jr.]?

BENTLEY: I was very fond of Walter. He and I became—we're good friends. I had known him before when I was a newspaper person, so I knew Walter from

way back and I liked him. He was a good chairman, and he was all for the Merchant Marine.

WASNIEWSKI: How about the Ranking Republican Member, Robert [William] Davis?

BENTLEY: Bob was okay. Unfortunately, the Republicans—and I'm not saying every one, I'm not—the Republicans as a whole did not feel that we needed a subsidy for the maritime industry, and they were always knocking it and cutting it down. President Reagan had reduced or eliminated the subsidy and that didn't help that industry at all. I did not agree with what they did.

JOHNSON: In your last term in Congress, you served on the Appropriations Committee which, of course, is a very influential committee to be on. How were you able to get that assignment?

BENTLEY: I guess you would say that I made sure the leadership knew that I wanted it badly. At that time, I was running for governor, which was a mistake, and I needed their help to get it. And I got it.

JOHNSON: What was the reception like from the Members of that committee because there weren't many women?

BENTLEY: The reception was okay because I knew most of the other members and had known them. And there was no animosity at that time.

JOHNSON: How important do you think it was to have women on committees like that—on Appropriations?

BENTLEY: I think it's important to have women on every committee because they provide a good balance. And in the present era, women no longer feel intimidated if they speak up at such a committee or take positions, and that is a much better atmosphere than what we used to have.

WASNIEWSKI: I have to ask about Barbara [Farrell] Vucanovich. You served together on Appropriations.

BENTLEY: We did.

WASNIEWSKI: And we're just wondering—she's a Nevadan, too. What was your relationship like with her?

BENTLEY: Barbara and I were good friends. As you said, we both had come from Nevada. And if she needed votes for Nevada, she always could count on me. And if I ever felt I needed her support, I could always count on her. She was quite a nice, quite a lady.

WASNIEWSKI: Do you remember any particular piece of legislation that you worked on together?

BENTLEY: I'm trying to think.

BRIEF BREAK

Barbara and I worked on the Yucca Mountain. As you recall, there were people in the country who wanted to pour all of the nuclear waste into Yucca Mountain in Nevada. And Nevada didn't want it, and the people didn't want it, and Barbara didn't want it, and so I didn't want it. And I stood strong

with her during those debates. She came over on occasion to any fundraisers that I had in my district to give me support.

JOHNSON: I know we don't have much time left, but there was one particular women's piece of legislation I wanted to ask you about—the Equal Rights Amendment [ERA]—and what your thoughts were for that about the importance of having the ERA.

BENTLEY: That was during the Nixon administration. And President Nixon was for it. I supported it, and I can't tell you who else supported it. But we passed it as I recall, didn't we?

WASNIEWSKI: It passed in the House. Then it went to the states.

JOHNSON: But not enough states ratified it.

BENTLEY: And the states didn't do it, yes. But we did do it—pass it. What a bunch of bums.

WASNIEWSKI: Where do you want to go? Here? Okay.

JOHNSON: What were your feelings about the importance of having women in leadership? When you were in Congress, Lynn [Morley] Martin on the Republican side, was one of the leaders.

BENTLEY: Yes.

JOHNSON: So how important do you think that was?

BENTLEY: I was very glad to see Lynn there. Again, it opened the door for other women, and I think that was important. She did a great job in her position, and she helped other women.

JOHNSON: Did you ever have any leadership aspirations?

BENTLEY: No, I did not.

JOHNSON: Why is that?

BENTLEY: Too much work. I had enough work.

WASNIEWSKI: Did you serve as a mentor to any women during your career—any of the younger Members?

BENTLEY: Let me say this. No, not Members here, but I have been sighted frequently by young ladies in my district who come up to me and say, “You were my mentor.” And I hear that frequently still. They tell me that what I have done and accomplished, they were following me. Let me tell you something—just happened the other day—the *Baltimore Sun* is kicking off a Maryland Hall of Fame for business, and there are 12 of us. I’m one of the 12 people. And I can tell you, in the financial arena, I don’t belong there. I don’t belong there, but I’m happy to be there because it is a real privilege that they, as the *Sun* paper, selected me for what I’ve done over the years for the port and the industry.

JOHNSON: Congratulations!

WASNIEWSKI: That's great.

BENTLEY: Thank you.

JOHNSON: You mentioned that some of the women—the younger women—in your district that have come up to you. A lot of the women that we've talked to have mentioned that they felt like they weren't just representing women in their district, but across the country, and the world. Was that something you felt, too?

BENTLEY: Yes, right. It is. The younger women . . . when I was coming through, there was nobody that I could reach out to because they weren't there. They weren't there. I had to bust [fist-punching motion] my way myself.

JOHNSON: And so, has that been a big change that you've seen over your life?

BENTLEY: I have three young ladies, college students, working for me now. They've been there three or four years. They're all working their way through. I tell them, I say, "You guys don't know how [expletive] lucky you are because you have no idea of what it was like 40 or 50 years ago." That's it. I've got to cut this.