



Eva M. Clayton

1934–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1992–2003
DEMOCRAT FROM NORTH CAROLINA

The first African-American woman to represent North Carolina in Congress, Eva Clayton became the state's first black Representative since 1901. From her post on the House Agriculture Committee, Clayton advanced the interests of her rural district in the northeastern part of her state and called attention to the economic inequalities that affected African Americans nationally.

Eva McPherson was born in Savannah, Georgia, on September 16, 1934. She grew up in Savannah and received a bachelor of science degree in biology from Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1955. In 1962, she earned an M.S. in biology and general science from North Carolina Central University in Durham. She originally planned to become a doctor and travel to Africa to do missionary work. Shortly after receiving her undergraduate degree, Eva McPherson married Theaoseus Clayton, who became a prominent lawyer. They raised four children: Theaoseus Jr., Martin, Reuben, and Joanne.

The civil rights movement mobilized Eva Clayton to become active in civic and political affairs. At one point, she even picketed her husband's law office to protest Theaoseus's and his white law partner's ownership of a building that contained a segregated restaurant.¹ As early as 1968, Eva Clayton was recruited by civil rights activist Vernon Jordan to seek election to Congress in a north-central North Carolina district. Though Clayton won 31 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary, incumbent Lawrence Fountain prevailed. However, Clayton's campaign had the intended effect of spiking black voter registration.² "In 1968, the timing wasn't there," she later admitted.³ After the birth of her fourth child, Clayton reluctantly withdrew from law school. "I wasn't super enough to be a supermom," Clayton recalled years later. "I left to be a mom. My husband was supportive, but I

felt enormously guilty. I think I would do it differently now. I think I would know how to demand more of my husband."⁴ In the early 1970s, she worked for several public/private ventures, including the North Carolina Health Manpower Development Program at the University of North Carolina. In 1974 she cofounded and served as the executive director of Soul City Foundation, a housing organization that renovated dilapidated buildings for use as homeless shelters and daycare centers. Two years later, she worked on the successful gubernatorial campaign of Jim Hunt, who later appointed Clayton the assistant secretary of the North Carolina department of natural resources and community development. Clayton served in that capacity from 1977 until 1981. After leaving state government, she founded an economic development consulting firm. In 1982 she won election to the Warren County Board of Commissioners, which she chaired until 1990. Over the next decade, Clayton helped steer more than \$550 million in investments into the county and also successfully passed a bond issue for the construction of new schools.

When Representative Walter Jones, Sr., announced his retirement in 1992, Clayton entered the Democratic primary to fill his seat. Recently reapportioned by the state legislature, the congressional district was one of two in North Carolina that had a black majority. Jones died in September 1992, and his son Walter, Jr., who was considered the favorite in the primary, captured 38 percent to Clayton's 31 but fell two points shy of winning the nomination outright. In the runoff, Clayton secured the support of her other primary opponents and won 55 percent to Jones's 45 percent. In the general election, Clayton ran on a platform of increased public investment and job training for rural areas in the district, which encompassed a large swath of eastern North Carolina including the towns of Goldsboro, Rocky Mount, and





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Greenville. She advocated slashing the defense budget to lower the federal deficit. “We went into the projects and knocked on doors and got people out” to vote, Clayton recalled.⁵ On November 3, 1992, she won the special election to fill the last two months of Walter Jones, Sr.’s unexpired term in the 102nd Congress (1991–1993) and defeated Republican Ted Tyler for a full term in the 103rd Congress (1993–1995). Mel Watt, an African American, also won election from a North Carolina district to the House on November 3, but because Clayton was elected to the 102nd Congress, she became the first African-American Representative from North Carolina since George White, who left Congress in 1901. In her subsequent four bids for re-election, she won comfortably, with 60 percent or more of the vote. She defeated Tyler three times, even in 1998, after court rulings reshaped the district once again by adding 165,000 new constituents and shrinking the African-American majority by 7 percent, effectively dividing the district between black and white constituents. In 2000, the GOP ran Duane E. Kratzer, Jr., who managed just 33 percent of the vote to Clayton’s 66 percent.

Clayton claimed her seat in the 102nd Congress on November 5, 1992, but did not receive committee assignments until the 103rd Congress convened in January 1993. She won spots on the Agriculture and Small Business committees. Clayton eventually became the Ranking Democratic Member on the Agriculture Committee’s Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry Subcommittee. Her Democratic colleagues also elected her the first woman president of the freshman class. In 1995, she was appointed to the Democratic Advisory Committee to formulate party strategy. In the 105th Congress (1997–1999) she dropped her Small Business assignment for a seat on the prestigious Budget Committee. Clayton was also assigned to the Social Security Task Force.

Clayton became a staunch defender of the rural and agricultural interests of her district, which comprised 20 counties with numerous peanut and tobacco growers. Along with Missouri Republican Jo Ann Emerson, she revived the Rural Caucus and rallied more than 100

Members to pledge continued federal aid to farmers, new rural jobs, and technology initiatives. In 1993 and 2000, respectively, Clayton voted against the North American Free Trade Agreement and Permanent Normal Trade Relations with China, insisting that both would adversely affect the agricultural industry and eliminate low-wage jobs from her district. “Must eastern North Carolina lose in order for the Research Triangle to win?” she asked, alluding to the state’s booming high-tech corridor to the west of her district.⁶ Although Clayton advocated smaller defense budgets, she remained supportive of naval contracts for projects at the nearby Newport News shipyards, which provided jobs for her constituents. From her seat on the Agriculture Committee—in contrast with many of her Democratic colleagues—Clayton supported extending tobacco subsidies to farmers at a time when critics attacked the program. “This is not about smoking,” Clayton said. “This is about discriminating against the poorest of the poor of that industry. . . . They really are attacking the small farmer.”⁷ She also fought successfully to preserve Section 515 of the Agriculture Department’s affordable housing program, which provided federal loans for multi-unit housing projects in rural areas.⁸

Clayton’s district suffered a major natural disaster in 1999 when Hurricane Floyd dumped rains on the state, submerging parts of eastern North Carolina under 14 feet of water from swollen rivers. Clayton and other Members of the state delegation secured billions in relief aid. Clayton also obtained \$1.5 million in federal money to reconstruct a dike along the Tar River in Princeville, one of the nation’s first towns chartered by African Americans. She also assembled a volunteer force of more than 500 people, to help flood victims throughout eastern North Carolina.

As she gained seniority and prestige in the House, Clayton created a high profile for herself as an advocate for programs to help economically disadvantaged African Americans. Throughout her career, she stressed the importance of job training. “The issue of equity in jobs and fairness of opportunities is paramount,” Clayton said.



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“Job opportunities combined with a fair wage are key to strengthening families and communities and increasing our quality of life.” With fellow North Carolinian Mel Watt, Clayton, as chair of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, organized a campaign to help 1 million African Americans buy homes by 2005. In 1996 she also played a key part in fighting GOP efforts to cut summer job programs for young people. Declaring that she intended “to wake up” the House, Clayton said that the programs helped more than 615,000 youths in 650 cities and towns: “This is the first opportunity many of these young people have to get a job.”¹⁰

In November 2001, Clayton declined to seek renomination to a sixth term in the House. She had been involved in intense bargaining with state legislators to ensure that her predominantly African-American district was “protected” during reapportionment after the 2000 Census. “My heart is leading me somewhere else,” Clayton said. “I don’t know exactly where that is, but I do want to have another opportunity for public service before I really hang it up.”¹¹ Clayton was succeeded by an African-American, Frank Ballance, Jr., in the fall 2002 elections. After retiring in January 2003, Clayton returned to her home in Littleton, North Carolina.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Clayton, Eva M.,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=C000494>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

Johnson C. Smith University, James B. Duke Memorial Library (Charlotte, NC). *Papers*: Eva Clayton’s papers have not yet been processed.

NOTES

- 1 Rob Christensen, “Clayton to Retire in 2002,” 21 November 2001, *Charlotte News and Observer*: A1.
- 2 Christensen, “Clayton to Retire in 2002.”
- 3 Scott Mooneyham, “Clayton Announces She Will Retire From Congress,” 20 November 2001, Associated Press.
- 4 Marian Burros, “Rep. Mom: Even in Washington’s Watershed Year, Laundry Still Needs Doing,” 20 June 1993, *Chicago Tribune*: woman news section, 12.
- 5 “Eva M. Clayton,” Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1998.
- 6 *Almanac of American Politics, 2002* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 2001): 1139–1140.
- 7 *Politics in America, 2002* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 738–739.
- 8 *Current Biography, 2000* (New York: H. W. Wilson and Company, 2000): 121–124.
- 9 “Eva M. Clayton,” *Contemporary Black Biography, 1998*, Volume 20 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Inc., 1998).
- 10 “Congresswomen Lead Campaign for Summer Jobs for Black Youth,” 15 April 1996, *Jet*: 39.
- 11 John Mercurio, “Going Home: Clayton Will Retire; But North Carolina Map Expected to Alter 1st District Only Slightly,” 26 November 2001, *Roll Call*.