

## Collins, former U.S. Rep.

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CHICAGO (AP) — Cardiss Collins, the first African-American woman to represent Illinois in Congress, died of complications from pneumonia at a Virginia hospital, according to a family friend.

Mel Blackwell said this week that Collins died Sunday evening at a hospital in Alexandria, Va., after suffering a stroke and spending time in a nursing home.

“She was a groundbreaking congresswoman,” Blackwell said.

Collins originally was elected to fill the seat left vacant when her husband, Congressman George W. Collins, who represented what was then the 7th District, was killed in a 1972 airplane crash. In 1994, the last year she ran for office, she was re-elected with 79 percent of the vote.

Chicago Democratic Rep. Danny Davis, who succeeded Collins, said that during her more than 24 years in Congress, Collins led efforts to curtail credit fraud against women, advocated gender equity in college sports and worked to reform federal child care facilities. She chaired the Government Activities and Transportation Sub-Committee.

Cardiss Hortense Robertson was born in St. Louis, Mo., on Sept. 24, 1931, before her family moved to Detroit. She attended Northwestern University and was a secretary, accountant and auditor for the Illinois Department of Revenue before she entered politics.

In 1958 she married George Washington Collins and campaigned with him in his races for alderman and Democratic Party ward committeeman. They had one son, Kevin.

In 1970, George Collins won a special election to fill a U.S. House seat made vacant by the death of Rep. Daniel J. Ronan.

Shortly after winning a second term in Congress, George Collins was killed in a plane crash near Chicago's Midway Airport.

Cardiss Collins later said she never gave politics a thought for herself and after her husband died was in too much of a daze to think seriously about running, even when people started proposing her candidacy. She later overcame her reluctance to represent the largely black district on Chicago's West Side.

Although eager to continue the work begun by her husband in Congress, Collins admittedly had much to learn about her new job. Her lack of political experience, highlighted by entering office midterm, led to unfamiliarity with congressional procedures.

Initially, Collins was not a presence in Congress, relying in her early years on her colleagues to learn the rules of the body. However, after several years she overcame her reserved personality.

"She was a quick study and became a forceful member of Congress," Davis said, adding that issues affecting inner cities and women were a key focus of her energy.

"She was not a flame thrower, but when she spoke, she spoke with knowledge and authority," Davis said. "She left a mark. The mark was the raising of urban issues in a significant way."

Collins became the chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus in 1979, and at one time expressed the growing disillusionment of black members of Congress, saying they will “no longer wait for political power to be shared with us; we will take it.”

She voiced disapproval of President Jimmy Carter’s civil rights record and criticized the president for not working hard enough to get congressional support to pass legislation making the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. a federal holiday.

The holiday was created during the administration of President Ronald Reagan.

“A pioneer of her time, she was an effective policymaker and representative, where she set the benchmark for many members of Congress to emulate,” said Chicago Democratic Rep. Bobby Rush.

In addition to Kevin Collins, she is survived by granddaughter Candice Collins.