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Hattie Harrison, longest-serving Md. delegate

State delegate and political matriarch won friends in Baltimore and Annapolis in her years of public service

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By Jacques Kelly, The Baltimore Sun
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Hattie Harrison, the matriarch of East Baltimore politics who often greeted colleagues as "Baby" and was known for her signature curled hair and Southern cooking, will be remembered at a funeral at noon Feb. 9.

Mrs. Harrison died of heart disease complications Monday at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. She was 84.

Appointed to the House of Delegates representing the 45th District in 1973 and re-elected thereafter, she was the oldest member of the General Assembly. She was also the longest-serving member of the House of Delegates and the first African-American woman to chair a major committee, Rules and Executive Nominations.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake said, "She was a true champion for the communities of East Baltimore and the city as a whole. ... Her calm but stern demeanor and her matriarchal standing in the community foiled even her most ardent political opponents, who, in the end, came to respect her greatness."

Hattie Harrison (Barbara Haddock Taylor, The Baltimore Sun 1993 / October 6, 1994)

Born Hattie Neal Stewart in Lancaster, S.C., she came to Baltimore with her parents as a

child. She dropped out of school at 15 to marry Robert Harrison, an Edgewood Arsenal employee and auto mechanic. They initially lived in the Frederick Douglass Homes in East Baltimore. She earned a high school diploma as an adult in 1963 and later earned a bachelor of science degree at Antioch College.

Mrs. Harrison soon immersed herself in local issues.

"They closed our recreation center," she explained in a 1981 Evening Sun article. "The kids had to cross Orleans Street, a busy street, to get to any center." The article said that she set up a meeting with the public housing manager and won permission to reopen the center provided she do it on her own, with the help of friends.

The article said the recreation center needed money and more staffing. "I was a registered voter," she said in the article, explaining that she signed up more voters in what had been an area of low registration and turnout. She won the funds and befriended Clarence "Du" Burns, who would go on to be Baltimore's first African-American mayor. The two worked together for decades.

Friends said her door was always open and the fact that she was an accomplished cook made her many friends.

In 1960, she, her husband and two sons moved to East Baltimore's Mura Street, where Mr. Burns also lived. As some racial barriers began to fall during the 1960s, and African-Americans became a voting force, she became chair of the Paul Laurence Dunbar Community Council and in 1969 chaired a Paul Laurence Dunbar charette steering committee.

Baltimore City Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young said in a statement: "I will personally remember her as a larger-than-life figure who nurtured and educated generations of young children growing up in East Baltimore."

Her son, Robert L. "Skip" Harrison of Baltimore, said his mother had been president of the Dunbar PTA and was "deeply committed to being a community activist." He said she began substitute teaching at Dunbar only after he and his brother were older.

"She believed she needed to be home to make sure we had everything we needed," he said.

In the 1970s, she ran for the state's Democratic Central Committee and won. She was involved with the



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formation of the Eastside Democratic Organization and gained political respect. Former Gov. **Marvin Mandel** appointed her to fill a vacancy in the House of Delegates after one of its members met his death in what was a celebrated news story.

"On July 13, 1973, Maryland Delegate James A. 'Turk' Scott, an accused drug dealer, was gunned down in a Baltimore apartment building," said the 1981 Evening Sun article. "Three weeks later, Mrs. Harrison was sworn in to replace him."

She also continued her community work. When a new Dunbar High opened in 1974, with room in the school for human services offices, she became director of the Paul Laurence Dunbar Center and was Mayor **William Donald Schaefer's** representative at the Dunbar City Hall office.

"Hattie was the glue that held the Eastside Democratic Organization together," said City Council member **Carl Stokes**. "People loved to meet at her house on Mura Street. She was a great cook. She was always prepared, too, and had the food ready. The politicians did their business and they ate, too. She may have played a hostess, but Hattie was every bit the equal of all the men there."

Mr. Stokes recalled how she would greet people on the street with, "How are you doing, baby?" He said that many saw her "as a mother figure."

A 1981 Sun account called her "the practitioner of the gently thrown hardball," and the first black woman to "successfully climb a ladder that for decades has been reserved for whites only."

She led a successful fight against a planned state prison on East Biddle Street in an old Continental Can factory.

U.S. Sen. **Barbara A. Mikulski** said in a statement, "She wielded power as the first African-American woman to chair a legislative committee as if she were born to do it. ... Chairwoman Harrison will be remembered for her pioneering work on behalf of public education, control of assault weapons and economic and social justice for women and minorities."

Del. **Talmadge Branch** said Tuesday that Mrs. Harrison's curled and frosted hair was her signature.

"Her Saturday hair appointment was a legend," he said. "She was like clockwork. Under no circumstances would she miss it."

He called her "a great leader in **Annapolis**" and a "sensitive woman whose eyes could tear up in a moment when comforting a friend or constituent."

Mr. Branch said she schooled him in the ways of Annapolis and advised him "to always keep your word."

A funeral will be held at noon Feb. 9 at the United House of Prayer for All People, 3401 Edgewood Road. Her body will lie in state Feb. 7 in Annapolis. On Feb. 8, Mrs. Harrison's body will lie at the East Baltimore United House of Prayer, 1515 Ashland Ave.

In addition to her son, survivors include another son, Philip Albert Harrison, also of Baltimore; a sister, Luevinia Cameron of **Washington, D.C.**; three grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren. Her husband died in 2003.

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