

...Widow's Succession

Throughout the nation's history, 47 women have succeeded their dead husbands in the US Congress – eight in the Senate and 39 in the House on Representatives. The most heralded example is Margaret Chase Smith, a Maine Republican who served more than three decades in both the House and the Senate.

Since 1975, five California women have succeeded their husbands in the House: Republicans Shirley Pettis and Mary Bono, and Democrats Sala Burton, Lois Capps and Doris Matsui. Nearly a century ago, two other California women, both Republicans, paved the way.

In 1923, Mae Nolan accomplished a number of firsts – she was the first woman elected to Congress from California, the first woman to chair a House committee, and the first to succeed a dead husband. John Nolan had just won his fifth term in the House, but he died after a long illness before he could be sworn in. His political supporters urged his wife to run in a special election both to fill out the remaining weeks of his term and to serve the following two years. Campaigning to continue the politics of her late husband, Mae Nolan defeated six other candidates. “I owe it to the memory of my husband to carry on his work,” she said, taking the lead on minimum wage, child-labor, and education legislation. During her term, she chaired the Committee on Expenditures in the Post Office Department, becoming the first woman to chair a House committee.

Nolan never believed that her gender hindered her ability to serve. “A capable woman is a better representative than an incapable man, and vice versa,” she said in a 1925 interview. But after serving one term, she declined to run for reelection and claimed, “Politics is a man's business.” The same year Nolan left the Congress (1925), another San Francisco woman became California's second representative as Florence Kahn won election to succeed her late husband.

Kahn, the nation's first Jewish congresswoman, would go on to serve six terms. She believed that women needed to be politically active. She once told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “It's not just any woman that has to be aroused, it is the woman who sits at a bridge table, shakes her head and says, ‘My, my. Conditions are certainly terrible. I'll make it four spades.’”

Kahn was the first woman appointed to the powerful appropriations committee and the first woman on the military affairs committee. She is credited with securing legislation to build the San Francisco Bay Bridge, funding for Hamilton Air Force and a new Naval Air Depot in Alameda. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover once called her the “mother of the federal bureau of investigation” because of her efforts to boost the agency's funding.

Whereas Mae Nolan never gave a speech on the House floor, Florence Kahn was known for her wit and speaking ability. She reportedly once said that she would support birth control “if it was retroactive.” When she died in 1948 at the age of 82, the Associated Press noted there was a favorite quip about her during her years in Congress: “You always know how Florence Kahn is going to vote, but only God has the slightest inkling of what she's going to say.”

Sources: *Modesto Evening News*, Jan. 24, 1923; Associated Press, *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, Nov. 17, 1948; *San Francisco Examiner*, Nov. 10, 2000