

IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

Millicent Fenwick

Target Age: High School
Time Period: 20th Century
Featured County: Somerset
NJ 350th Theme: Diversity



Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives,
Rutgers University Libraries

Common Core States Standards for English Language Arts:

R.CCR.1- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

W.CCR.1- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

SL.CCR.1- Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.D.13.c, 6.1.12.D.13.f, 6.1.12.D.14.d

FOCUS QUESTION:

Women made up less than 5% of the total number of Representatives when Millicent Fenwick joined the U.S. House of Representatives in 1974. In 2013, women make up nearly 20% of the total number of both houses of Congress. How did Fenwick help to change the face of politics, during her own time and thereafter?

BACKGROUND:

Millicent Fenwick was born Millicent Vernon Hammond on February 25, 1910 to a politically active family with roots in both New Jersey and the American South. Her early life was one of privilege, but also marked by tragedy. When she was five years old, her mother died when the British liner Lusitania was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland. In 1932, she married Hugh Fenwick, and after a career as a model, writer, and editor, joined the fledging civil rights movement in the 1950s. Her activism led to a new career in politics, culminating in her election to Congress in 1974 as a Republican from Somerset County. She served in Congress until 1983, and then as a U.S. Ambassador to Rome until 1987.

Fenwick was an instant success on Capitol Hill. She smoked a pipe during committee hearings and became known for her keen intelligence and quick wit. She won the respect of her political peers, sometimes grudgingly, for her advocacy on a wide variety of issues, including civil rights, peace in Vietnam, aid for asbestos victims, help for the poor, prison reform, strip-mining controls, reduction of

military programs, urban renewal, political campaign spending limits, gun control and restrictions on capital punishment. And she was not afraid to confront sexism when she encountered it. When a male colleague described women as “kissable, cuddly, and smelling good,” Fenwick replied, “That’s what I’ve always thought about men, and I hope for your sake that you haven’t been disappointed as many times as I’ve been.”

Fenwick ran for the U.S. Senate in 1982 but lost to Frank Lautenberg. She remained in the public eye until her retirement in 1987, touted for her independence, her candor, and her fighting spirit, and died in 1992 at the age of 82.

ACTIVITY:

Walter Cronkite, one of the U.S. best known broadcast journalists, called Millicent Fenwick “The conscience of Congress.” Thomas H. Kean, Former New Jersey Governor and President of Drew University, suggested, “You couldn’t invent Millicent Fenwick....She was unique. The best writers of fiction might have struggled to make her believable but they would have failed.” Ask students to participate in a Think/ Pair/ Share activity.

Think: Ask students to identify and write down details that have made Millicent Fenwick a memorable historical figure. Give them a structured time limit (3-5 minutes).

Pair: After they have finished writing, have students pair up with their neighbor and discuss.

Share: Then direct the students to a full class discussion, and ask students to generate a list of adjectives to best describe her, and to speculate about what she might have been like if they had an opportunity to meet her.

Fenwick once stated that “I have come to believe that the one thing people cannot bear is a sense of injustice. Poverty, cold, even hunger, are more bearable than injustice.” Ask students to consider Fenwick’s ideas about herself and the place of politics in American life in her own words. In 1982, Fenwick sat down with C-SPAN to discuss her life and career. She had just lost the election for senator and was reflecting on what she would do next. She discussed her involvement in civil rights, as well as her thoughts on the impact of money and advertising on political campaigns. The interview is 60 minutes long and available for free at <http://www.c-spanarchives.org/program/ID/66490>. Students can either watch the first ten minutes in class, or watch the full interview as homework. With this new information, ask students to revise and extend their speculation about what it would be like to meet Fenwick, and write a one paragraph response to be shared in class.

FOLLOW-UP:

Fenwick was the inspiration for the cartoon character Lacey Davenport, a “grande dame” of the Republic Party in Garry Trudeau’s *Doonesbury*, a political comic strip in production since 1970. Have students examine the images below. What can they infer about Trudeau’s opinions about Fenwick’s politics and personality? Given the dates, can they determine the historical context and Trudeau’s critique (Reagan and rising homelessness, U.S. financial support of the Nicaraguan Contras, and muck-raking during political campaigning)? The last sample strip was the first in a series that chronicled the death of Davenport’s fictional husband while she was on the campaign trail, and asked readers to consider how best to balance public and private lives.

To expand this activity, ask students to search for more *Doonesbury* comics featuring Davenport, and to consider what issues she is identified with and, by extension, what role she plays in the cartoon. They might also identify other political concerns that Trudeau chronicles. A full archive of *Doonesbury* dating back to 1985 is available online at <http://www.gocomics.com/doonesbury>.

October 3, 1985

http://www.gocomics.com/doonesbury/1985/10/03#.UvjKZ_lXko

June 27, 1986

http://www.gocomics.com/doonesbury/1986/06/27#.UvjPv_lXko

November 1, 1986

<http://www.gocomics.com/doonesbury/1986/11/01#.UvjLEPlXko>

November 3, 1986

http://www.gocomics.com/doonesbury/1986/11/03#.UvjLK_lXko

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Places to Visit

Papers of Millicent Fenwick, Rutgers University:

http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/rul/libs/scua/womens_fa/wfa_e_g.shtml

Statue of Millicent Fenwick, Bernardsville, NJ: <http://newjerseyrealestatefinder.com/bernardsville-nj-real-estate/attachment/dsc00713/>

For More Information

Millicent Fenwick, *Speaking Up* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1982).

“History, Art and Archives: Profile on Millicent Fenwick,” United States House of Representatives:

<http://history.house.gov/People/detail/13066>

Amy Shapiro, *Her Way* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003). The following links take visitors to the book’s site, the introduction by Thomas Kean, and an excerpt from the first chapter.

- <http://www.millicentfenwick.com/index.htm>
- <http://www.millicentfenwick.com/foreword.htm>
- <http://www.millicentfenwick.com/excerpt.htm>

For additional information about women in Congress, see: <http://history.house.gov/Exhibition-and-Publications/WIC/Women-in-Congress/>

CREDIT INFORMATION:

Pg.1: Photograph of Millicent Fenwick with intern. Millicent Fenwick Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

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