

# Martha Griffiths

Martha Griffiths was one of Michigan's most prominent female political trailblazers. Born Martha Wright in 1912 in Pierce City, Missouri, she studied literature at the University of Missouri. She married Hicks Griffiths, then earned a law degree in 1940 from the University of Michigan, at that time the only law school in the country that admitted women.

Following several years in private practice, Griffiths was elected as a Democrat to one term in the Michigan State House of Representatives, followed by an appointment to Recorder's Court in Detroit. In 1955 she began a 20-year career in the United States House of Representatives, where she was the first woman to serve on the powerful Ways and Means Committee.

While in Washington, D.C., she championed the Equal Rights Amendment, which was passed by Congress but ultimately fell three states short of ratification. Griffiths returned to Michigan in 1982 and successfully ran for lieutenant governor, serving two terms in James Blanchard's administration. She retired to Armada, Michigan, where she died in 2003.



# Martha Griffiths' Detroit

Detroit roads were free of streetcars in 1956 for the first time in more than 90 years. Many of the retired coaches were sold to Mexico City and replaced with General Motors buses. It would be decades, though, before most of the tracks were finally removed.

In 1959 Rosa Parks moved to Detroit and Berry Gordy, Jr. recorded the first tracks for his new label. Little Caesars Pizza Treats opened in Garden City, followed the next year by Domino's.

Throughout the next two decades, Detroit remained the fifth-largest city in the nation. New buildings on the skyline included Cobo Hall, the Pontchartrain Hotel, the headquarters for the Michigan Consolidated Gas Co. and First Federal Bank. The Renaissance Center opened in 1977, followed by Hart Plaza two years later.

Social changes were dramatic. Women took an increasingly active role in government and business affairs. Efforts to relieve the tensions between Detroit's polarized racial communities proved largely unsuccessful and the region became one of the most segregated in the nation.



# Hero?

Martha Wright Griffiths was hailed by both her supporters and critics as an unpretentious and fiercely independent politician, one who would stop at nothing to advance the cause of equality of the sexes under U.S. law.

Early in her political career, Griffiths won the respect of Michigan representatives, senators and judges as a woman with a reputation for studious attention to the law and a keen political mind. Her judicial contemporaries claimed that she left a lasting impression on them. Griffiths, propelled to the national stage as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, was successful in earning the support of colleagues from both sides of the aisle.

Her admirers, including President Lyndon B. Johnson, appreciated her grasp on local, state and national fiscal and civil rights issues. Her sharp-tongued logic and willingness to fight for a cause, no matter how unpopular, helped to convince her fellow legislators to include the word “sex” in the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, pass welfare and Social Security reform measures and move the stalled Equal Rights Amendment out of committee and onto the floor of the House and Senate.

Her supporters included Governor G. Mennen Williams, President Gerald R. Ford, and Wilbur Mills, chairperson of the House Ways and Means Committee. Her most loyal supporter, Hicks Griffiths, was her mentor, campaign manager, constant companion and husband.



# Villain?

Despite her achievements, Martha Wright Griffiths was one of the most loathed female political figures in the last half of the 20th century. Although she was considered a civil rights pioneer by many, to others she was an ambitious, greedy woman who wanted to destroy the American family.

At various times throughout her career, Griffiths alienated her constituents, the Michigan Democratic Party, powerful union leaders, fellow politicians and the American public. From her willingness to subvert traditional party politics to her admitted manipulation of others to achieve her own agenda, few of her colleagues in Michigan or in the national arena found her to be a woman whom they believed they could trust. Even though they may have agreed with her stance on issues and appreciated her passion, many of them decried her tactics.

The American public, including Christian fundamentalist groups, union leaders affiliated with the AFL-CIO and the women's organization Stop ERA, were unforgiving of Griffiths' behind-the-scenes manipulation of the political process. Her mischief, they feared, would lead to the erosion of the American family, the degradation of women and the acceptance of homosexual marriages, while also giving women the right to an abortion on demand.

