



Carrie P. Meek

1926–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1993–2003
DEMOCRAT FROM FLORIDA

Carrie P. Meek won election to the House in 1992 as one of the first African-American lawmakers to represent Florida in Congress since Reconstruction. Focusing on the economic and immigration issues of her district, Meek secured a coveted seat on the House Appropriations Committee as a freshman Representative. While able to work with Republicans on health issues, she sharply criticized welfare reform efforts during the mid-1990s.

Carrie Pittman, the daughter of Willie and Carrie Pittman, was born on April 29, 1926, in Tallahassee, Florida. Her grandmother was born and raised in Georgia as a slave. Carrie Pittman's parents began their married life as sharecroppers, though her father later became a caretaker and her mother a laundress and the owner of a boarding house. Nicknamed "Tot" by her siblings, Carrie was the youngest of 12 children, and a tomboy. The Pittman family lived near the old Florida capitol in a neighborhood called the "Bottom." Carrie Pittman starred in track and field while earning a bachelor of science degree in biology and physical education at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee in 1946. She enrolled at the University of Michigan graduate school because blacks were banned from Florida graduate schools, though the state government would pay her out-of-state tuition "if we agreed to get out of Dodge," she later recalled.¹ She graduated in 1948 with an M.S. degree in public health and physical education. Afterward, Pittman taught at Bethune Cookman, a historically black college in Daytona Beach, where she coached basketball and taught biological sciences and physical education. She later taught at Florida A&M. In 1961, as a divorcée with two young children, Carrie Pittman Meek moved to Miami-Dade Community College, where she spent the next three decades teaching and administrating, eventually serving as a special assistant

to the vice president of the college. In 1978, she won election to the Florida state house of representatives, defeating 12 candidates. She served from 1979 to 1983, chairing the education appropriations subcommittee. From 1983 to 1993, Meek served in the Florida senate. She was the first African-American woman elected to that body and the first black to serve there since Reconstruction. Earning a reputation as a particularly effective legislator, she passed a minority business enterprise law and other legislation to promote literacy and reduce the dropout rate.²

In 1992, when incumbent Representative Bill Lehman (a 10-term Democrat) decided to retire, Meek captured the Democratic nomination for his newly reapportioned district, which ran through the northern Miami suburbs in Dade County. She ran unopposed in the general election. Since Meek essentially clinched the seat by winning the September primary in the heavily Democratic district, she later claimed to be the first African American elected to represent Florida in Congress since Reconstruction. Democrats Corrine Brown and Alcee L. Hastings, who prevailed over opponents in the November general election in two other Florida districts, were sworn in with Meek on January 3, 1993.

Meek entered Congress at age 66 and immediately launched into an ambitious agenda that contrasted with her soft southern accent and grandmotherly demeanor. "Don't let her fool you. She is not a little old lady from the ghetto," noted a Florida political observer at the time of her election. "Carrie Meek is a player."³ Meek lobbied intensively—and successfully—for a seat on the Appropriations Committee, an assignment that was virtually unheard of for a freshman legislator. When the Republicans took control of the House in 1994, Meek was bumped off Appropriations and reassigned to the Budget Committee and the Government Reform and



Oversight Committee. In 1996, she returned to the Appropriations Committee and eventually served on two of its subcommittees: Treasury, Postal Service, and General Government and VA, HUD, and Independent Agencies.

Meek focused on the needs of her district, which included issues arising from unemployment, immigration, and a natural disaster. Shortly after arriving on Capitol Hill, Meek sought federal aid for her district, which encompassed Homestead, Florida, and bore the brunt of the devastation caused by Hurricane Andrew in August 1992. However, Meek used her Appropriations seat principally to try to expand federal programs to create jobs and provide initiatives for African Americans to open their own businesses. Meek also authored a measure to modify Social Security laws to cover household workers. On behalf of her district's Haitian community, Meek sought to extend U.S. residence for immigrants and refugees who were excluded from two 1997 bills addressing Central American immigration. In 1999, she strove to obtain more-accurate census counts in her district by providing a measure whereby welfare recipients who were familiar with their poor, traditionally undercounted neighborhoods could work temporarily for the U.S. Census Bureau without losing their benefits.⁴

On national issues Meek developed a cooperative and congenial style that was punctuated by partisan episodes. For instance, she worked with Republicans to change the warnings on cigarette labels to reflect the fact that more African Americans than whites suffer from several smoking-related diseases. She also worked with Republican Anne Northup of Kentucky to increase funding for research on lupus and to provide federal grants for college students with poor reading skills due to learning disabilities.⁵ But

in early 1995 Meek denounced Speaker Newt Gingrich on the House Floor amid the controversy surrounding a \$4.5 million advance for his book. "If anything, now, how much the Speaker earns has grown much more dependent upon how hard his publishing house hawks his book," Meek said. "Which leads me to the question of exactly who does this Speaker really work for. . . . Is it the American people or his New York publishing house?" Republicans shouted Meek down and struck her remarks from the *Congressional Record*.⁶ She also charged that by gutting the welfare system, Republicans were balancing the budget on the backs of America's working poor, elderly, and infirm. "The spending cuts that the House approved today fall mainly on the weakest members of our society, on the sick and on the elderly," she said in June 1997. "Tomorrow we will be voting on tax cuts that mainly favor the wealthy. . . . Today, the House voted to rob from the poor so that tomorrow the majority can help the rich."⁷

In 2002 Meek declined to seek certain re-election to a sixth term, citing her age. "I wish I could say I was tired of Congress," Meek told the *Miami Herald*. "I love it still. But at age 76, understandably, some of my abilities have diminished. I don't have the same vigor that I had at age 65. I have the fire, but I don't have the physical ability. So it's time."⁸ Her youngest child, 35-year-old Kendrick Meek, who served in the Florida senate, announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination in her district. When Kendrick Meek won the November 2002 general election, he became just the second child to directly succeed his mother in Congress.⁹ His election also marked just the sixth time a Congresswoman's child was chosen to serve in Congress.

FOR FURTHER READING

“Meek, Carrie P.,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000628>.

MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

Florida A&M University, Carrie Meek–James N. Eaton Southeastern Regional Black Archives Research Center and Museum (Tallahassee, FL). *Papers*: ca. 1993–2003, 250 cubic feet. The Carrie Meek Collection documents Meek’s career in the U.S. House of Representatives and includes campaign materials, legislation, constituent correspondence, press releases, programs, calendars, photographs, videotapes, and a museum collection. The collection will not open for research until processing is completed; however, part of the museum collection is open.

NOTES

- 1 William Booth, “The Strong Will of Carrie Meek; A Florida Sharecropper’s Daughter Takes Her Stand on Capitol Hill,” 16 December 1992, *Washington Post*: C1.
- 2 “Carrie P. Meek,” Associated Press Candidate Biographies, 1992; *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 310–311.
- 3 Booth, “The Strong Will of Carrie Meek.”
- 4 *Almanac of American Politics, 2000* (Washington, DC: National Journal Inc., 1999): 409.
- 5 *Politics in America, 2002* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 240.
- 6 Karen Foerstel, *Biographical Dictionary of Women in Congress* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999): 184.
- 7 *Politics in America, 2002*: 240–241.
- 8 Andrea Robinson and Tyler Bridges, “Carrie Meek to Retire: She Made History From Tallahassee to Capitol Hill,” 7 July 2002, *Miami Herald*: A1.
- 9 James Kee of West Virginia, who succeeded his mother, Maude Kee, in 1965, was the first.