



CLAUDE PEPPER LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Claude Denson Pepper (1900-1989)

Claude Denson Pepper was born near Dudleyville, Alabama on September 8, 1900. He graduated from the University of Alabama in 1921 and from Harvard Law School in 1924. After establishing a general law practice in Perry, Florida, Pepper began his political career with his election to the Florida House of Representatives in 1929. While working in the State Capitol in 1931 he met his future wife, Mildred Webster outside the Governor's office in Tallahassee. Claude and Mildred were married on December 29, 1936 in St. Petersburg, Florida and for 43 years they were inseparable.

In 1936, Senior Florida Senator, Duncan Fletcher, died while in office and Pepper was elected to the U.S. Senate to fill the vacant seat. He quickly became a leader of the New Dealers in Congress and a friend and confidant of President Franklin Roosevelt. Against what seemed to be overwhelming opposition from conservative isolationists in 1940 and 1941, he was able to lead the fight to pass the Lend-Lease Act which allowed the U.S. to support the Allied effort in World War II. In domestic affairs, he also made a name for himself as somewhat of a "radical" by sponsoring bills for National Health Care, equal pay for equal work for women, cancer and heart disease research programs, and a minimum wage. Senator Pepper was co-author of legislation that established the National Cancer Institute, the first of many National Institutes of Health. Following his defeat for election to a third full term in the U.S. Senate in 1950, Pepper returned to his law practice in offices in Tallahassee, Washington, and Miami. In 1963, he returned to Congress as the Representative of the newly-created 3rd Congressional District of Florida.

Pepper was appointed as the Ranking Democrat on the House Select Committee on Aging when it was created in 1975 and became Chairman of that Committee in 1977. Serving as Chairman of the Committee until 1983, he became known throughout the U.S. as "Spokesman for the Elderly." In this capacity, he crusaded for an end to involuntary retirement, strengthened the Social Security system, fought age discrimination, and pushed for stronger legislation to end abuse of the elderly. He also chaired the U.S. Bipartisan Commission on Comprehensive Health Care, a body created through an amendment of his added to the 1988 Medicare Catastrophic Protection Act, and he worked tirelessly to strengthen the Medicare program.

During Claude Pepper's four decades of public service, he was a strong and effective advocate for millions of Americans in the areas of health care reform and economic security. His numerous achievements will be felt by generations to come: Americans guaranteed a decent wage, or saved from death or illness by breakthroughs in biotechnology, or protected from age discrimination in the work force or presented with a decent retirement income by the Social Security program. He left monuments such as the National Institutes of Health, a strengthened Medicare program, and a strengthened Social Security system. He achieved his goal, "to lighten the burden upon those who suffer," many times over. Senator Pepper died in Washington, D.C. on May 30, 1989.

Biographical Timeline

1900, Sept. 8

Born on a farm near Dudleyville, Alabama to Joseph Wheeler Pepper and Lena C. (Talbot) Pepper.

1904

Moved with his parents to De Leon, Texas (Comanche County), then to Ben Arnold, Texas (Milam County); returned to Alabama after a year.

1910

Moved to Camp Hill, Alabama.

1910-1917

Attended public schools in Camp Hill. At Camp Hill High School, he served as president of the Heflin Literary Society and participated in debating, poetry, editing the school magazine, playing baseball, basketball, and tennis.

1917-1918

His father helped him set up a tiny clothes-pressing business, which later evolved into a hat cleaning and blocking business.

Taught the fifth grade in the Dothan, Alabama public schools. While in Dothan, he also taught a men's Bible class at the First Baptist Church and served as vice-president of the Alabama Baptist Young People's Union.

Worked at a steel mill before being accepted at the University of Alabama.

1918

Served in Students Army Training Corps, University of Alabama. A disability occurred during his brief stint in the military which qualified him for government-subsidized vocational training.

1921

Graduated from the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa.

1924

Graduated from Law School of Harvard University.

1924-1925

Instructor in Law at the University of Arkansas. One of the law students he taught was J. William Fulbright, who later became a U.S. Senator from Arkansas.

1925

Admitted to the Florida Bar and began a law practice in Perry, Florida with his partner, Judge William Barnett Davis. His duties included both civil and criminal law. His law firm prospered, and enabled him to help his parents and send his brothers and sister to college.

1928-1929

Became a member of the Florida State Democratic Executive Committee. It was during this period that he first became aware of Franklin D. Roosevelt, then a New York governor, and his programs to relieve human suffering.

1929-1930

Elected a member of the House of Representatives, Florida Legislature, from Taylor County. He served as Chairman of the Committee on Constitutional Amendments, and was a member of the committees on Banks and Banking, Finance and Taxation, Game, Lumber and Naval Stores, and Public Amusements. He became best known for a bill allowing elderly people to fish without having to pay a license fee. When the bill became law, he achieved his first recognition as a public official willing to become involved in the concerns of older people.

He also voted against a resolution introduced by a St. Petersburg representative condemning First Lady Lou Henry Hoover's White House invitation to Mrs. DePriest, the wife of the first Black congressman since Reconstruction. This stand contributed substantially to his defeat when he sought another term in 1930.

1930

Moved to Tallahassee, Florida and entered a law partnership with Curtis Waller that lasted until 1937.

1931-1932

Served on the State Board of Public Welfare.

1934

Ran in the Democratic primary election against Park Trammell, a junior Florida Senator. He came in a close second, and lost what most observers felt was a fraudulent run-off election.

1936

Married Mildred Irene Webster of St. Petersburg, Florida, December 29, 1936. Senators Park Trammell and Duncan Fletcher died in office. He ran unopposed in both the primary and general elections, and was elected as a Democrat to the United States Senate.

1937

Delivered his maiden speech in the U.S. Senate, applauded by many of his colleagues and by President Franklin Roosevelt.

Co-authored legislation establishing the National Cancer Institute.

Introduced the controversial Townsend Plan in the U.S. Senate. Developed by Dr. Frances Townsend in 1933, the Plan called for payments of \$200 a month to every citizen 65 years or older.

1938

Re-elected to serve a full term in the U.S. Senate. He ran in the primary and general elections against Mark Wilcox, an incumbent Congressman who opposed him on an anti-

New Deal platform, and Dave Sholtz, a former Florida governor. Authored legislation that established a minimum wage and maximum hours for laborers. As a result, the New Deal fight for a decent minimum wage and an eight-hour workday became a campaign issue that year. Became active in the Inter-Parliamentary Union, an international peace organization, leading delegations and often serving as President or Vice President of the U.S. Delegation. He first represented the United States at The Hague.

1940

With New Dealer Benjamin Cohen, drafted the first lend-lease resolution to provide warplanes to Great Britain in its attempt to fight Hitler's Germany. Lend-Lease legislation ultimately passed the U.S. Senate and House in March, 1941. Hung in effigy in front of the U.S. Capitol by the "Congress of American Mothers." This group denounced him and accused him of treason and war-mongering. Chairman, Florida Delegation, Democratic National Convention.

1943-1946

Named Chairman of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Wartime Health and Education. The subcommittee conducted hearings for three years, and in 1946 issued a report declaring that poor health could be prevented in the future through a federal program of aid for hospital construction and medical insurance programs. It created an awareness that the federal government had to play a major role in financing research aimed at preventing and curing disease. Its major accomplishments included the following:

- Recommended a national health insurance system that would enable everyone to obtain needed health care.
- Recommended home care as an essential component of any future health-care system.
- Recommended the use of a set fee to finance future health care systems.
- Introduced legislation to (1) provide federally subsidized medical care, without a means test, to mothers and children up to 18 years of age, and (2) establish massive federal cancer and heart research programs. These research programs today have evolved into the 13 National Institutes of Health.

1944

Reelected to United States Senate. Chairman, Florida Delegation, Democratic National Convention. Introduced a resolution designating the second Sunday in October as "Old Folks Day."

1945

Issued a public statement commending the U.S. House for passing an anti-poll tax bill. Attempted to establish a Fair Employment Practices Committee, extending equal rights in hiring to blacks and women, but was unsuccessful. His version of what later became known as the Equal Rights Amendment was defeated in a conservative-led filibuster. Met with Soviet Prime Minister Joseph Stalin in Moscow to discuss Russia's future

objectives in domestic and foreign policy.

1945-1950

Established or co-sponsored the National Institute of Mental Health; the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute; the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases; the National Institute of Dental Research; the National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders; and the National Institute of Arthritis, Diabetes, and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

1946

Rooted in his conviction that the United Nations had to succeed, he opposed the Truman Doctrine, which called for sending American troops to Greece and Turkey, with massive infusions of economic aid, to restore their economies and prevent them from being taken over by Soviet-directed Communist governments.

1949

Introduced a bill calling for "adequate health care for all Americans," but it did not pass.

1950

Defeated for re-election to the U.S. Senate by U.S. attorney George Smathers in one of the most bitter campaigns in U.S. history.

Delegate to the Interparliamentary Union from the U.S. Senate, Dublin.

1951

Opened law practices in Tallahassee, Florida (Pepper and Clements) and in Washington, D.C.

Law partner Jim Clements died (March 2, 1951).

1952

Opened a law office in Miami; firm became Pepper, LeFevre, Orr, and Faircloth.

Obtained a charter for the Washington Federal Savings and Loan Association.

1954

Opened a small law office in Daytona Beach, Florida, which closed shortly afterwards.

1955-1956

Became Florida representative for Cravath, Swaine, and Moore, one of the leading New York law firms.

1958

Campaigned for U.S. Senate, but was defeated by Florida Senator Spessard Holland.

1961-1974

Under his influence, five more institutes of health were established: the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; the National Institute of General Medical Sciences; the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences; the National Eye Institute; and the National Institute on Aging.

1962

Elected as a Democrat to the 88th Congress as a member of the United States House of Representatives.

1964

Appointed by House Speaker John McCormick to the House Rules Committee, which controls the flow of legislation and determines how much time will be allowed for debate.

1965

Influential in the passage of Medicare and Medicaid.

1968

Chairman, Florida Delegation, Democratic National Convention.
Worked to create the Housing and Urban Development Act.

1969-1975

Appointed (1969) to head the U.S. House Select Committee on Crime. His Committee held hearings and compiled studies on organized crime, street crime, white-collar crime, drug crime, crimes against the elderly, and other issues. It was also instrumental in investigating the Securities and Exchange Commission, and in investigating prison riots after the Attica uprising. Some of its accomplishments included the following:

- Recommended that the simple use of marijuana should be treated as a misdemeanor rather than a felony.
- Demonstrated that the problem of drug abuse by teenagers was not confined to large urban areas but existed in small and medium-sized communities all over the United States.
- Recommended better riot-control techniques.
- Introduced a bill, that was later adopted, authorizing the Federal Aviation Agency to install weapon detection devices at all commercial airports in the United States.

1972

Chairman, Florida Delegation, Democratic National Convention.

1974

Formed the House Select Committee on Aging, of which he became Chairman in 1977. This extremely active committee was involved in holding hearings, conducting research, publishing its findings, and developing legislation. At this point, Claude Pepper truly became the nation's spokesman for older Americans. Among the Committee's significant accomplishments were the following:

- Defeated mandatory retirement laws.
- Strengthened Social Security and Medicare.
- Helped enact the Older Americans Act.
- Drew national attention to fraud against the elderly and elderly abuse.
- Made nursing home and board and care facilities safer.
- Worked to assure adequate health care for the nation's elderly.
- Made it illegal to discriminate in employment because of age.

1975-1986

Chairman, U.S. House Subcommittee on Health and Long-Term Care.
Represented the United States at the IPU Conference in Belgrade.

1976

Chairman, Florida Delegation, Democratic National Convention.

1977-1983

Became Chairman, U.S. House Select Committee on Aging (1977). He enlarged the Committee's staff, held hearings, and conducted research into the problems of older Americans. Some of the Committee's accomplishments included expansion of home care for the elderly, reform bills to reduce abuses against patients in nursing homes, increased funding for geriatric training for the senior nutrition program, an attack on consumer frauds such as medical quackery, and an agenda for reform in housing and income security. Elements of this agenda called for:

- Creation of a national health security system.
- Federally funded home health care.
- Medicare and Medicaid coverage for annual checkups, professional and nutritional counseling, eyeglasses, hearing aids, dentures, medical appliances, and diagnostic services.

- Nursing homes audits for abuses of the elderly by staff.
- Expansion of nutrition programs.
- Congressional grants to permit airlines to offer standby and other discount airfares to the elderly.
- Meeting housing needs of elderly Americans.
- Improved security against elderly crime victimization and con games.
- Increased funding of jobs under the Older Americans Act earmarked for the elderly.
- An end to discrimination in employment because of age.
- Establishment of a single national retirement income policy.

1978

Authored legislation abolishing mandatory retirement at any age for federal government workers and raising from 65 to 70 the age at which nonfederal employees could be forced out.

Hearings held by Select Committee on fraud and abuse in the sale of Medicare supplemental insurance (Medigap).

1979, Mar. 31.

The death of Mildred Pepper.

1981

White House Conference on Aging. Opposed Reagan administration proposed cutbacks in Social Security, and rallied seniors to his support.

1982

Democratic Party appointee to the bipartisan National Commission on Social Security, which had two major objectives: to keep Social Security as a social insurance program, and to insure its solvency for at least the next 75 years. Although it resulted in the taxing benefits of individuals and couples over certain income levels, which he opposed, Social Security was strengthened, with \$160 billion in new funds and taxes secured by the time "baby boomers" will become eligible for benefits.

1983

With the help of former Tennessee Senator Albert Gore, Jr., introduced legislation to establish 20 research centers in the United States to seek a cure and provide treatment for Alzheimer's disease; 10 centers were ultimately established.
Became Chairman of the House Rules Committee (until 1986).

1986

With the support of the House, secured an amendment establishing the National Institute on Arthritis, an organization exclusively devoted to arthritis research.
The final step outlawing mandatory retirement became law, signed by President Reagan at a Rose Garden ceremony.

1989, May 30.

Claude Pepper dies in Washington, D.C.