

# MEEK, Carrie P.

1926–2021

OFFICE  
Representative

STATE/TERRITORY  
Florida

PARTY  
Democrat

CONGRESS(ES)  
103rd (1993–1995), 104th (1995–1997), 105th (1997–1999), 106th (1999–2001), 107th (2001–2003)



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## Biography

In 1992 Carrie P. Meek won election to the United States House of Representatives becoming one of the first African-American lawmakers to represent Florida in Congress since Reconstruction. Focusing on economic development and immigration issues important to her district, Meek secured a coveted seat on the House Appropriations Committee as a first-term lawmaker. In the House, Meek worked across the aisle on health care reform and sharply resisted welfare reform efforts during the mid-1990s.

Carrie Meek was born Carrie Pittman on April 29, 1926, in Tallahassee, Florida, the daughter of Willie and Carrie Pittman, and the granddaughter of a woman who had been born enslaved. Meek's parents were sharecroppers; her father later became a caretaker and her mother a laundress and the owner of a boarding house. Nicknamed "Tot" by her siblings, Meek was the youngest of 12 children and lived with her family near the old Florida capitol in a neighborhood called the "Bottom." As a young girl, Meek participated in the Girl Scouts. When the group went to deliver brownies to the state capitol, Meek was barred from entering because of her race. She waited on the sidewalk while her white peers walked in the front door.<sup>1</sup>

In college, Meek starred in track and field while earning a BA in biology and physical education at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee in 1946. Florida banned Black students from attending state graduate schools, so Meek enrolled at the University of Michigan. The state government would pay her out-of-state tuition "if we agreed to get out of Dodge," she later recalled.<sup>2</sup> She graduated in 1948 with a master's degree in public health and physical education.

Afterward, Meek worked at Bethune Cookman University, a historically Black college in Daytona Beach, where she coached basketball and taught biology and physical education. She later taught at Florida A&M. In 1961, as a single mother with two young children, Meek accepted a position at Miami-Dade Community College, where she spent the next three decades teaching and working in college administration.

In 1978 she ran for the Florida state house of representatives and defeated 12 other candidates to win the seat. Her youngest child, Kendrick, remembers her creating campaign materials on a tight budget. Graphic design students from Miami Dade College drew signs "[with] waterproof markers, [writing] 'Carrie Meek.' And then we put a black and white picture [of her] in the middle of it and put a little cellophane over it. That was the sign. There was no printing or union printing or anything like that. Those were the original signs. And the handout was basically something that was typed with her picture on it, and we ran photocopies of it." Meek served in the state house 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 the senate and the first Black legislator to serve there in over a century. A skilled lawmaker who was once called "the conscience of the Florida Senate," Meek passed a minority business enterprise law and other legislation to promote literacy and help students stay in school.<sup>3</sup>

In 1992 Meek declared her candidacy for Congress when incumbent Representative William Lehman, a 10-term Democrat, decided to retire. Meek was 66 years old, and one competitor tried to turn her age into a campaign issue. But Meek saw it as an advantage. "He should continue to say that I'm too old," she said, "because the folks that are going to get out and vote are going to be my age or around my age, and they're told every day they're too old. He's doing nothing but helping us."<sup>4</sup> Meek captured the Democratic nomination for the newly reapportioned district, which ran

through Miami's northern suburbs in Dade County. In the largely Democratic district, she ran unopposed in the general election. Alongside Corrine Brown and Alcee Lamar Hastings, who also won election to the House that November from Florida, Meek became one of the first three African-American lawmakers to serve in Congress from Florida since the mid-1870s.

Meek's soft southern accent and grandmotherly demeanor often concealed her ambitious and determined agenda in Congress. In her first term, she lobbied intensively for a seat on the Appropriations Committee, an assignment normally unheard of for a new Member. She met with Speaker Thomas S. Foley of Washington and said, "I just want to share with you that I've served in the appropriations committee in the [state] legislature. I would love to carry out your agenda on Appropriations... Hurricane Andrew just hit my district. They really need me to be on this committee to help rebuild [it]. But I am committed to the things that ... you would like to see happen on the Appropriations Committee." When she left the Speaker's office, Foley told his aide, "Put her on Appropriations."<sup>5</sup>

When 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.

Shortly after arriving on Capitol Hill, Meek sought federal disaster aid for her district which bore the brunt of Hurricane Andrew in August 1992. On Appropriations, Meek worked to expand federal programs to create jobs and provide opportunities for African-American entrepreneurs to open their own businesses. Meek also authored a measure to amend Social Security to cover household workers. On behalf of her district's Haitian community, Meek sought to extend U.S. residence for immigrants and refugees.<sup>6</sup> And in 1999 alone, from her seat on the Appropriations Committee, Meek secured tens of millions in tax breaks for developers working in underserved neighborhoods in her district and millions of dollars more for public housing programs and other community services. Moreover, in order to ensure the 2000 Census was accurate, she submitted a measure to allow welfare recipients in traditionally poor and undercounted neighborhoods to work temporarily for the U.S. Census Bureau without losing their benefits. "I knew what it was like to be treated differently," she said about growing up in segregated Florida. "I wanted to see things changed, and wanted to assist any movement to help with changing it."<sup>7</sup>

Meek served in the minority party for all but her first term in Congress, and on certain national health issues, she reached across the aisle to shape policy. She worked with Republicans to change warnings on cigarette labels to reflect the fact that African Americans suffered from several smoking-related diseases at higher rates than white smokers. And she teamed up with Republican Anne Meagher Northup of Kentucky to increase funding for research on lupus and to provide federal grants for college students with learning disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

On other issues, Meek was not afraid to speak out and challenge national officials. In early 1995, Meek denounced Speaker Newt Gingrich of Georgia on the House Floor amid the controversy surrounding a \$4.5 million advance he received for a book deal. "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*.<sup>9</sup> She also argued that Republican attempts to cut spending and reform the welfare system meant Congress was trying to balance 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."<sup>10</sup>

"We see showboats and we see tugboats," the civil rights icon Representative John R. Lewis of Georgia said about the different legislative styles in Congress. "She's a tugboat," Lewis said of Meek in 1999. "I never want to be on the side of issues against her."<sup>11</sup>

Meek easily won all four of her re-elections.<sup>12</sup> Her son, Kendrick, credited her success to her philosophy on campaigning. "She would always say to me, 'Kendrick, you have a choice. You can run for office for three months and probably get elected, or you can treat every day as though you're running for office and always be re-elected,'" he recalled. "She just worked all the time."<sup>13</sup>

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," she 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."<sup>14</sup>

Kendrick B. Meek, who served in the Florida senate, announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination in her district. Throughout his campaign, he followed his mother's guidance. "When you're in this [election] process it's hard to trust advice," he said. "[But] if you can't trust the advice of your own mother, something's wrong."<sup>15</sup> When he won the November 2002 general election, he became just the second child to directly succeed his mother in Congress.<sup>16</sup> His election also marked just the fifth time a Congresswoman's child was chosen to serve in Congress.

Meek continued to serve as a sounding board for her son during his House career. She offered advice on legislative strategy, campaign techniques, and constituent relations. She also told him stories of her childhood, so he would better understand the history of the district and the state. Years after she retired from Congress, he recalled, "She shared those experiences with me to make sure that I was well-rooted and

understood the experience in Florida, which she, in many ways, was able to use ... as a policymaker. I think that's what made her so powerful."<sup>17</sup>

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> "The Honorable Kendrick Meek Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives (19 March 2019): 4. The interview transcript is [available online \(/Oral-History/Women/Representative-Meek/\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> *Politics in America, 1994* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1993): 310–311. Quotation from Candy Hatcher, "A Voice of Hope for the Hopeless," 18 September 1992, *Palm Beach Post* (FL): 1A.

<sup>4</sup> "Meek Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian: 16.

<sup>5</sup> "Meek Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian: 16.

<sup>6</sup> Haitian Refugee Fairness Act, H.R. 3663, 103rd Cong. (1993); To Provide for Adjustment of Immigration Status for Certain Haitian Children, H.R. 3364, 103rd Cong. (1993); To Provide for Adjustment for Status of Certain Haitians, H.R. 986, 103rd Cong. (1993).

<sup>7</sup> Hurricane Andrew Supplemental Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 1993, H.R. 2027, 103rd Cong. (1993); Homestead, Florida, Community Adjustment and Economic Diversification Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 1994, H.R. 2028, 103rd Cong. (1993); *Almanac of American Politics, 2000* (Washington, DC: National Journal Group, Inc., 1999): 409; Decennial Census Improvement Act, H.R. 683, 106th Cong. (1999); House Committee on Government Reform, *Decennial Census Improvement Act of 1999*, 106th Cong., 1st sess., H. Rept. 104 (1999). Quotation from Andrea Robinson, "U.S. Rep. Carrie Meek Is No Pushover," 26 September 1999, *Miami Herald*: 3B.

<sup>8</sup> *Politics in America, 2002* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 240; Katharine Q. Seelye, "House Panel Defies Clinton on Budget Bill," 15 July 1998, *New York Times*: A13; Jonathan Allen, "Retiring Florida Rep. Meek's Son Likely to Inherit Seat," 8 July 2002, *Congressional Quarterly Daily Monitor*: n.p.; Lupus Research and Care Amendments of 2000, H.R. 762, 106th Cong. (1999).

<sup>9</sup> Karen Foerstel, *Biographical Dictionary of Women in Congress* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999): 184.

<sup>10</sup> *Politics in America, 2002*: 240–241.

<sup>11</sup> Robinson, "U.S. Rep. Carrie Meek Is No Pushover."

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives, "[Election Statistics, 1920 to Present \(/Institution/Election-Statistics/\)](#)."

<sup>13</sup> "Meek Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian: 27.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Robinson and Tyler Bridges, "Carrie Meek to Retire: She Made History from Tallahassee to Capitol Hill," 7 July 2002, *Miami Herald*: A1.

<sup>15</sup> "Meek Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian: 33.

<sup>16</sup> James Kee of West Virginia, who succeeded his mother, Maude Elizabeth Kee, in 1965 was the first.

<sup>17</sup> "Meek Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian: 5.

[View Record in the Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress \(http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000628\)](http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000628)

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## External Research Collections

### 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 her career in the U.S. House of Representatives and includes campaign materials, legislation, constituent correspondence, press releases, programs, calendars, photographs, videotapes, and museum collection. The collection will not open for research until processing is completed, however, part of the museum collection is open.

### The HistoryMakers

Chicago, IL

**Oral History:** 2001, amount unknown. An oral history interview of Carrie Meek conducted on June 19, 2001.

**Yale University Library**  
**Divinity Library Special Collections**

New Haven, CT

**Papers:** In the Washington Office on Africa, Addendum B Records, ca. 1970-1996, 35 linear feet. Persons represented include Carrie Meek.

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## Bibliography / Further Reading

"Carrie P. Meek" in *Black Americans in Congress, 1870-2007*. Prepared under the direction of the Committee on House Administration by the Office of History & Preservation, U. S. House of Representatives. Washington: Government Printing Office, 2008.

"Carrie P. Meek" in *Women in Congress, 1917-2006*. Prepared under the direction of the Committee on House Administration by the Office of History & Preservation, U. S. House of Representatives. Washington: Government Printing Office, 2006.

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## Committee Assignments

- House Committee - Appropriations
- House Committee - Budget
- House Committee - Government Reform and Oversight

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