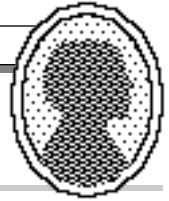


BIOGRAPHY



Patricia Roberts Harris

When President Jimmy Carter sought qualified women for his Cabinet appointments, he did not have to look far. Patricia Harris had already served in two Democratic administrations and she was currently an attorney with a prestigious Washington law firm. In Harris, President Carter found his nominee to head the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

As you read the profile below, think about the determination Patricia Roberts Harris must have had to accomplish what she did.

Patricia Harris's life was marked by a series of firsts—first African American woman to serve as a United States ambassador, first African American woman to head a law school, first African American woman to serve in the Cabinet. Though pleased with such honors, she felt a little regret about them too: “I feel deeply proud and grateful. . . but also a little sad about being ‘the first Negro woman’ because it implies we were not considered before.”

Patricia Roberts was born in Illinois in 1924. “We didn’t have a lot of money,” she would say later, “[but] we believed in education and . . . in reading.” Her deep belief in education motivated her to excel as a student. She graduated *summa cum laude* from Howard University and first in her law school class at George Washington University. Her husband, lawyer William Beasley Harris, had encouraged her to attend law school to expand her professional opportunities. After earning her law degree, Patricia Harris joined the Justice Department and later taught at Howard University’s Law School.

In 1963 President Kennedy appointed Harris co-chair of the National Women’s Committee for Civil Rights, and in 1965, President Johnson named

her ambassador to Luxembourg. When President Carter nominated her Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in 1977, she appeared before a Senate committee to seek confirmation. Noting Harris’s elegant, regal-looking appearance and distinguished career, one senator asked her whether she could be “sympathetic to the problems of the poor.” The next day every newspaper in the country carried her reply:

You do not understand who I am. . . . I am a black woman, the daughter of a Pullman car waiter. I am a black woman who even eight years ago could not buy a house in parts of the District of Columbia. I did not start out as a member of a prestigious law firm, but as a woman who needed a scholarship to go to school. If you think that I have forgotten that, you are wrong.

Patricia Harris won confirmation and later went on to serve in a second Cabinet post, as Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. In 1982 she made an unsuccessful bid for mayor of Washington, D.C. She then returned to George Washington University Law School, where she taught until her untimely death from cancer in 1985.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. (a) How did Patricia Roberts Harris use education as a springboard to her many accomplishments? (b) What “firsts” did she achieve?
2. **Distinguishing Fact from Opinion** What opinion did the senator seem to have about Harris’s life? What facts did she present to correct his opinion?