

FIRST FEMALE SENATE PAGES
Oral History Interviews with
Ellen McConnell Blakeman
Paulette Desell-Lund
Julie Price

Oral History Interviews

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Preface

In 1971 the Senate broke a 150-year-old tradition when it accepted female appointments to the Senate page program. Nearly a century and a half earlier, Senator Daniel Webster had selected the first male page, Grafton Hanson, the nine-year-old grandson of the Senate sergeant at arms. In 1831, the Senate added a second page—12-year-old Isaac Bassett. Beginning a tradition in which service as a page sometimes became the first step on a Senate career path, Hanson held a variety of increasingly responsible Senate jobs over the next ten years. Bassett, who is well known to students of 19th-century Senate folklore, remained in the Senate's employ for the rest of his long life.

By the 1870s, the Senate required pages to be at least 12 and no older than 16, although those limits were occasionally ignored. Until the early 1900s, pages were responsible for arranging their formal schooling during Senate recesses. In various page memoirs, there runs a common theme that no classroom could offer the educational experience available on the floor of the Senate. At Vice President Thomas Marshall's 1919 Christmas dinner for pages, 17-year-old Mark Trice explained, "a Senate page studying history and shorthand has a better opportunity than a schoolboy of learning the same subjects, because we are constantly in touch with both. We boys have an opportunity to watch the official reporters write shorthand and they will always answer questions that we do not understand, thereby making a teacher almost useless."

Though no Senate rule explicitly forbid the appointment of women, the practice of appointing male pages persisted well into the twentieth century. In the 1960s, senators began to challenge the tradition of "boys only" page appointments. In a 1961 letter to senators, Sergeant at Arms Joseph C. Duke defended the "boys only" policy, citing safety concerns and the physical demands of the job, which included carrying heavy materials and walking and running all day. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination in the workplace on the basis of sex, as well as a grassroots movement to end gender discrimination throughout society, prompted some high school-aged girls to apply for Senate page appointments. The pressure to admit female pages continued to build, and in early 1971 the Senate Rules Committee held hearings to consider the issue.

Senators Jacob Javits of New York, Charles Percy of Illinois, and Fred Harris of Oklahoma testified on behalf of three young women they wished to sponsor. Noting that the Senate did not have a rule explicitly prohibiting the appointment of female pages, Senator Javits argued that the issue was a "question of fundamental human fairness." "I feel that in accepting girl pages to serve in the U.S. Senate," explained Senator Fred Harris, "we would be taking a symbolic step." The Senate should "end discriminatory hiring practices based on sex alone," he urged, to "serve as an example [to] employers at all levels of American industry."

After long debate and delay, the Senate finally approved a resolution allowing for the appointment of female pages on May 13, 1971. Soon thereafter, Paulette Desell, Ellen McConnell, and Julie Price made Senate history when they were sworn in as the Senate’s first female pages. In these interviews, the three women remember what it was like to break the gender barrier—the long waiting period between being selected by their sponsoring members until the Senate formally approved their appointment; the media attention; and their reception by the boy pages and the senators. They recall the members, staff, and other pages they got to know, as well as some of the political and policy debates which defined the era. They reflect on how their experiences as Senate pages shaped their lives.

About the interviewer: Katherine (Kate) Scott is a historian in the Senate Historical Office. A graduate of the University of Washington, she holds an M.A. in history from the University of New Mexico and a Ph.D. in history from Temple University. Scott is the author of *Reining in the State: Civil Society and Congress in the Vietnam and Watergate Eras* (University Press of Kansas, 2013) and various book chapters, including “A Safety Valve: The Truman Committee’s Oversight during World War II,” in Colton Campbell and David Auerswald, eds., *Congress and Civil-Military Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015). Scott serves as vice president of Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region.
