

This Day in History... November 30, 1924

Birth of Shirley Chisholm

Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm was born on November 30, 1924, in New York City. The first Black woman elected to Congress and the first Black woman to seek a major party's presidential nomination, Chisholm built her career on courage, independence, and a fearless commitment to justice.

Shirley Chisholm was born in Brooklyn, New York, to hardworking Caribbean immigrant parents who struggled to support their four daughters during the Great Depression. Because her mother needed to work long hours, Shirley and her sisters were sent to live with their grandmother in Barbados. Although the separation was difficult, Chisholm later credited her five years on the island for giving her a strong academic foundation. She attended a one-room schoolhouse with a strict British-style curriculum that emphasized discipline, reading, and math. When she returned to the United States in 1934, teachers immediately recognized that she was well ahead of most children her age.

Back in Brooklyn, Chisholm attended an all-girls' high school and continued to excel. She was confident, outspoken, and quick-thinking—traits that made her a standout debater. She attended Brooklyn College on a scholarship and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1946. During her time there, she won several awards for debating and was repeatedly encouraged by professors to consider a career in politics. Chisholm doubted that such a career was possible for a young Black woman, but she carried those suggestions with her. In 1949 she married Conrad O. Chisholm.

Determined to further her education, she earned a master's degree in elementary education from Columbia University in 1952. Her early career focused on improving the lives of children and families. She served as director of the Friends Day Nursery from 1953 to 1959, then became an educational consultant for New York City's Division of Day Care. In that role, she worked directly with schools, parents, and community leaders to improve early childhood programs. Her work made her an expert in childhood education and exposed her to the impact government policies had on poor and working-class families. These experiences sparked her interest in public service and a desire to influence change on a larger scale.

Chisholm became active in local political groups, including the Bedford-Stuyvesant Political League and the League of Women Voters. She soon gained a reputation as a sharp thinker who understood the needs of her community. In 1964 she ran for the New York State Assembly and won. From 1965 to 1968, she fought to protect vulnerable workers and expand educational opportunities. She opposed English-only literacy tests for voting, won unemployment benefits for domestic workers, and helped create the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) program, which opened college doors for low-income students.

In 1968 she took an even bolder step by running for the US House of Representatives under the slogan "Unbought and Unbossed." She won, becoming the first Black woman elected to Congress. Once in office, she challenged her initial committee assignment because it did not match the needs of her urban district. She soon secured work that allowed her to help expand the food stamp program and create the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—programs that still support millions today.

In 1971, Chisholm became a co-founder of the Congressional Black Caucus. Despite her achievements, she continued to face discrimination from both men and women. When she ran for the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination, she received limited support from party leaders and organizations. Even so, she campaigned across the country, surviving three assassination attempts. Her unexpected visit to rival George Wallace after he was shot drew national attention and showed her belief in compassion over division. When asked why she ran despite the odds, she answered simply, "I ran because somebody had to do it first."

Chisholm served seven terms in Congress and later became secretary of the House Democratic Caucus. She retired in 1982 to care for her injured husband and returned to teaching, serving on the faculty at Mount Holyoke College until 1987. After retiring to Florida, she was nominated for US ambassador to Jamaica but could not accept due to her health. She died on January 1, 2005. In 2015, she was posthumously awarded the

Presidential Medal of Freedom, honoring her lasting impact on American democracy.



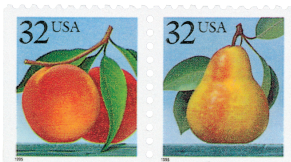
Chisholm was the 37th honoree in the Black Heritage Series.



2014 Shirley Chisholm Imperforate Stamp



Chisholm helped launch some of NYC's first classroom observation programs, giving teachers real-time feedback.



While working in early childhood education, Chisholm pushed for nutritious meals in day care centers—years before federal food guidelines for children were widely adopted.

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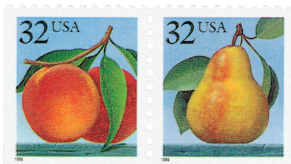
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