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Wright, Paul M., "John W. McCormack" (1985). *John M. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies Publications*. 18.

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JOHN W. McCORMACK



Number 3
UMass/Boston Occasional Papers



“A man’s social origin means nothing to me, a person’s name means nothing to me. A person’s religion I respect. But what does mean everything to me is a person’s mind. And when I meet a person with a bigoted mind, I am meeting a person I do not like, a person I have nothing but contempt for.”

— John W. McCormack

quoted in *Time*, January 19, 1962.

JOHN W. McCORMACK



Prepared for the Dedication of
John W. McCormack Hall
at the University of Massachusetts at Boston
April 26, 1985

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The Life and Public Record of



Hon. JOHN W. McCORMACK

The Logical
Democratic Candidate

For CONGRESS

And the Issues of the Campaign

Primaries: Tuesday, Sept. 18, 1928

Polls Open 6.00 A.M. to 4.00 P.M.

JOHN W. McCORMACK

(1891-1980)

Vinton Street in the Andrew Square neighborhood of South Boston is a narrow, curving street of small, wooden two and three-family houses. The houses are packed tightly together, and children play at the curbside, while old folks chat on the modest stoops. The street probably appears much the same today — except for some vinyl siding and parked automobiles — as it did in 1906-07, when the family of Joseph H. McCormack, a mason, and Mary Ellen (O'Brien) McCormack settled down to stay. And Vinton Street resembles any one of the ten or so other streets where the family lived, in and around Andrew Square, after the birth of John William McCormack on December 21, 1891, probably at a residence on East Eighth Street in South Boston.

John W. McCormack was one of twelve children born to Joseph and Mary Ellen McCormack. Of the twelve, it is reported, only three were to survive to adulthood: John, the future Speaker of the House of Representatives, and two brothers, Edward and Daniel. The children's grandparents on both sides had come from Ireland in the 1840's, as so many thousands of others did fleeing the Great Hunger, caused by the potato famine and the tender mercies of the British landlords.

A handful of broken red bricks strewn on a vacant lot on Dorchester Street is all that remains today of the John Andrew Grammar School — the Boston Public School where John McCormack received all his formal education. Named, as is Andrew Square, after the distinguished Civil War governor of Massachusetts, the school was opened in 1876, and was thus barely twenty years old when young John first stepped through its doors. He would remain at the Andrew through the eighth grade, but, as most reports suggest, would not be able to graduate with his classmates. Fate would step in before he could finish school and would cast John McCormack in the role of the family breadwinner at the tender age of thirteen, upon his father's death.

John McCormack had an extensive newspaper route, which he and his brothers worked, bringing in about \$11.00 a week, and he took a job as an errand boy for a brokerage firm in downtown Boston, at a wage of \$3.50 a week. The chance to earn \$4.00 a week as an office boy in the law offices of William T. Way, Esq., was irresistible, and fate again stepped in to bring him into contact with the profession from which he would launch his political career. "Mr. Way, a wonderful man, encouraged me to read law," he told an interviewer for *Yankee*, in 1976, "and he made all the books in his law library available to me." John McCormack never attended law school, but simply "read for the law" in the same time-honored way that John Adams and so many others had before him — something one cannot do today. He passed the examination for the Massachusetts bar at the age of twenty-one, in 1913, just a few months after the death of his beloved mother.

His mother had a major and lasting influence on John McCormack. Reading the law at night after a full day at work could be discouraging. He told *Yankee* in 1976 that, "it seemed like a hopeless task, [but] I would look at my dear wonderful mother, and all my sadness would go away." And she affected his political education as well. As a teenager he attended political rallies at which women's suffrage was a hot issue. He decided that it was right to grant women the vote.

It was the first decision of a political nature I ever made. I would go home [from a rally] and look at my dear mother. I knew she was a citizen — it was only a question of marking a ballot. And I would say to myself, "Who dares tell me that my mother cannot vote as well as any man, and better than most?" — (*Yankee*, 1976)

It is fitting that the woman who made a home for young John and his brothers should have a public housing development, located just a hundred yards or so from Vinton Street, named in her honor.

While practicing law, John McCormack began his political career. "Politics," he told a *Herald* interviewer in 1970, "were engrained in us in South Boston. It was a natural thing for me to do." First he spoke on behalf of other candidates, standing on tailgates or soapboxes at outdoor rallies, learning his trade in the rough-and-tumble political world of early twentieth-century Boston. Then he entered the fray himself. "I didn't run until I thought I had a 50/50 chance of winning," he told the *Herald*. He was successful, being elected as a delegate to the 1917-18



John W. McCormack in World War I uniform (1918)

Massachusetts Constitutional Convention. Politics was interrupted by America's entry into World War One, however, and John McCormack enlisted in the United States Army, serving at Fort Devens and Camp Lee. He rose quickly through the ranks and was discharged with the rank of Sergeant Major, the highest noncommissioned grade.

In 1920 John McCormack ran for State Representative and won handily. He served there two years and then moved on to the Massachusetts Senate, where he spent four years. He began to become a power in the state Democratic party, and during his last term in the State Senate he was elected minority leader — in those days the Democrats were decidedly the minority party in the state that had nurtured the Free-Soil movement and the Republican party before the Civil War.

The year 1920 was eventful for another reason. In that year he was married to Harriet Joyce, a young woman from a respectable South Boston family. She was famed for her beauty and was pursuing a career as a concert and opera singer — a course that she relinquished upon her marriage. The newlyweds moved into a modest two-family house at 726 Columbia Road, not far from Andrew Square, just over the line into Dorchester. They were to occupy this same residence — except for the part of the year they spent in Washington, D.C., in a residential hotel — until Harriet McCormack's death in 1971. It is part of the lore of Massachusetts politics that in all the years of their married life the McCormacks never failed to have dinner together.

The McCormack house on Columbia Road, built in the fashionable shingle style of the 1890's, stands facing a statue of Edward Everett, antebellum United States senator from Massachusetts and President of Harvard, for whom Edward Everett Square is named. Across the way is the Blake House, one of the oldest houses in Dorchester, erected in 1648 by the early Puritan settlers. The whole ensemble nicely captures and symbolizes the transmission of political hegemony in Massachusetts from the Puritans, to the Yankees and Brahmins, thence to the descendants of the Irish immigrants who came in the nineteenth century.

In 1926, feeling that the incumbent Congressman James A. Gallivan might be vulnerable, John McCormack made his first run for the Twelfth Congressional District — a district that stretched from his native South Boston, out through Dorchester, to parts of Roxbury. He was not able to overcome Gallivan's ward and precinct organization, but he was gracious in defeat and gained in reputation thereby. An editorial in the *Boston Post* praised him:



John W. McCormack and Harriet (Joyce) McCormack, wedding day (1920)

The Democrats of Boston will do well to keep an eye on Senator John W. McCormack. This young man though decisively defeated by Congressman Gallivan, showed himself to be a sportsman and a gentleman as well as a resolute, determined fighter. Senator McCormack accepted his defeat so gracefully and his whole bearing in the campaign was so thoroughly manly and likable that he looms now as perhaps the most promising young political figure in the Democratic party. It is upon the shoulders of such men as Senator McCormack that the future of the party in the city rests.

John McCormack learned lessons about local organization in that race that he apparently never forgot. Among the McCormack Papers at Boston University is a complete set of voter lists, by ward and precinct, up-to-date and ready for a run in 1970.

After this setback he returned to the practice of law, in the partnership of McCormack & Hardy, and became a successful trial lawyer. By 1928 the firm was grossing \$30,000 a year, a considerable income in those days. But with the death of Congressman Gallivan in 1928, the siren song of politics beckoned again, and John McCormack willingly surrendered to his fate. In a move that foreshadowed political practice in the 1960's and 1970's, he helped register 4,127 new voters pledged to his cause. With typical political skill, he defused the opposition by promising to retain his principal opponent, Eugene T. Kinnally, Congressman Gallivan's secretary, as his own secretary. He easily defeated the scattering of other opponents and took the Twelfth Massachusetts Congressional seat in the United States House of Representatives — a seat to which he would be reelected twenty times, serving forty-two years in the House.

When John McCormack went to the House of Representatives he came under the tutelage of two strong and able Texans, John Nance Garner, who would become Franklin Delano Roosevelt's first Vice-President, and Sam Rayburn, who would be Speaker of the House from 1940 (except for years when the Republicans controlled the House) until John McCormack succeeded him. They took a shine to the tall, handsome, feisty Boston Irishman, who could tell a political anecdote with the best of them, and who loved good cigars and a rowdy poker game as much as anyone. This alliance of the urban, progressive Northeast and the rural, conservative South and West foreshadowed the New Deal coalition to



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John W. McCormack, and members of Congress

which these men would contribute so much. John McCormack served the House leadership as a loyal and effective lieutenant, and he was rewarded with an unprecedented appointment to the powerful Ways and Means Committee after only two terms in office.

Late in his life reminiscing for *Yankee*, he said, "My life was in the U.S. House of Representatives. I was a legislator, and mighty proud of the fact. That was the life I loved. I miss it very much." John McCormack was absolutely right. He was perfect for the House and it for him, and during the New Deal years and the World War II era he came into his own. He was known as a tenacious debater and famed for his cutting wit. Of a colleague for whom he had little respect, he is reported

to have remarked: "I hold the esteemed congressman in minimum high regard." But he possessed the essential parliamentary skills of negotiation and compromise. To the *New York Times* in 1963 he said:

If I am engaged in a great fight and if I know what I am fighting for is likely to be beaten, but by reasonable compromise we can get it through, I believe in that. I believe that sometimes progress is through reasonable compromise.

These skills were tested to the limit as he helped carry the New Deal legislative program through the gauntlet of opposition. "We started Social Security, unemployment compensation, the minimum wage, and low-cost housing. Why some people even called me 'the Bolshevik' because I was fighting for these things," he told *Yankee*. Far from being a Bolshevik, however, he considered himself a moderate progressive — especially in domestic matters, where his record bears him out. He rejected such terms as "liberal" or "conservative," which were too ideological for this profoundly pragmatic man.

Much has been said of John McCormack's style of operation in the House. During the days when he was majority leader he would spend his time walking the floor and corridors of the House — sometimes miles and miles a day — talking with every congressman and staff member he met. For each conversation he would make a note on a slip of paper and stuff it in the appropriate pocket — perhaps right coat for defense matters, inside vest for public-works appropriations, and so on. This became known over the years as the "McCormack filing system." At the end of the day he would dispose of each slip methodically, dictating a short letter, dashing off a handwritten note, making a quick telephone call, until his pockets were empty. He knew and acted on the knowledge that politicians never forget a favor or a promise, and that reciprocity is the cardinal rule of the game.

During the World War II years he fought to keep the Selective Service Act in operation on the eve of Pearl Harbor, carrying the House by a slim one-vote margin. He helped manage the hidden appropriations for millions of dollars, requested by FDR for the Manhattan Project that produced the atomic bomb. In the post-war years he was an outspoken anticommunist — seeing Soviet totalitarianism as little different from that of the Nazis — and he advocated massive investments in science and research to keep the nation ahead of its adversaries. John McCormack was the first chairman of the House Science and Astronautics



John W. McCormack, the "fighting Irishman from Boston"



John W. McCormack and Speaker Sam Rayburn

Committee, and in 1958 he sponsored the bill creating the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the agency that put the first men on the moon.

In 1961, Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the House and John McCormack's long-time mentor and friend, fell ill, and Congressman McCormack was



Harriet and John McCormack, and Richard Cardinal Cushing

elected Speaker *pro tempore* in August to fill out the session. Sam Rayburn died shortly after this. When the 87th Congress reconvened, in January 1962, John McCormack was elected Speaker, the first person of the Roman Catholic faith to be so selected, coincidentally during the term of the first Roman Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, a fellow



President Harry S. Truman, John W. McCormack, and Carl Hayden, Inauguration Day, 1949

Irish-American Bostonian. The tragic assassination of President Kennedy, on November 22, 1963, meant the elevation of Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson, also a protege of Sam Rayburn, to the Presidency, and placed Speaker McCormack next in line of succession. This was a position in which he was never comfortable, often acknowledging that he prayed nightly for President Johnson's continued good health.

He served President Johnson as loyally as he had his predecessors in the White House. Using the considerable powers of the Speaker's office, he helped carry through the programs of the Great Society. And he remained steadfast in support of the administration's policies in Southeast Asia, despite the growing opposition both inside and outside Congress. Praise for his subtle skill as Speaker — where he was rarely heard in debate on the floor, but often operated effectively from his lunch table — came from both sides of the political spectrum. Lyndon Johnson,

himself a considerable legislative force during his years in the Senate, said of John McCormack in 1967:

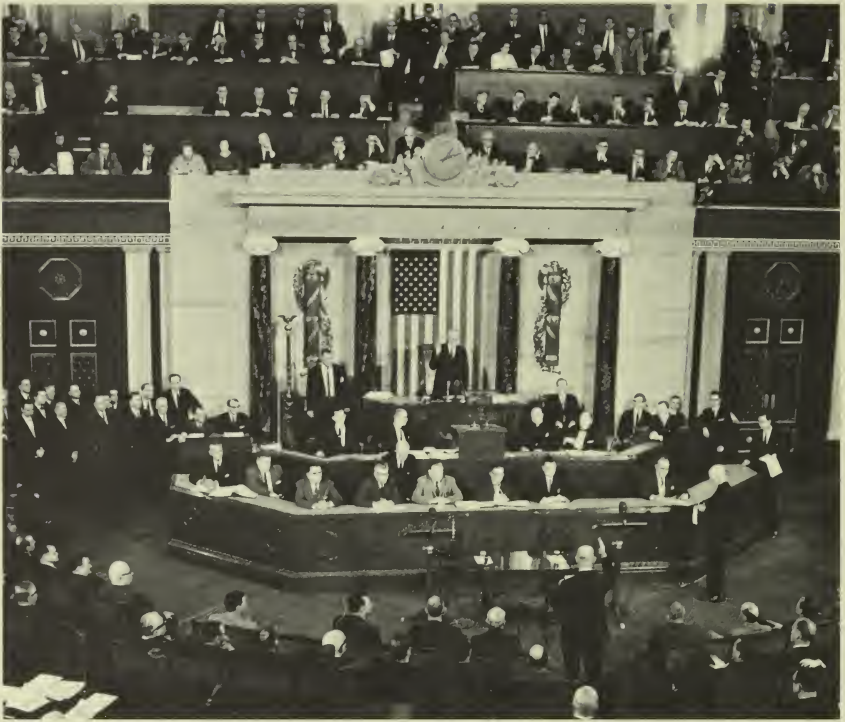
If ever an American could say his life was devoted to the creative use of politics, it is this man. When the Speaker of the House is compassionate, things happen. When he is not, all the king's horses and all the President's horses too can't make things happen. In all the decades of this century, two speakers have shown that compassion — have made things happen — Mr. Sam Rayburn and John W. McCormack.

And Gerald Ford, at the time House Minority Leader, said in 1970: "When the major issues were at stake John McCormack never shunned a battle and never lost one. . . . The Speaker is today the preeminent legislator of the world."

John McCormack retired from the House and left the Speaker's chair in 1970. He was seventy-eight years old and ready to come home to Boston. Harriet McCormack, who was several years older than her hus-



John Fitzgerald Kennedy, John W. McCormack, Adlai E. Stevenson, Edward J. McCormack, Jr., and John B. Hynes



John W. McCormack taking the Oath of Office as Speaker (1962)

band, passed away in 1971, and he gave up the old house on Columbia Road, moving to a small apartment in Jamaica Plain. But he remained active in his retirement, keeping an office and regular hours in the John W. McCormack Federal Post Office Building in Boston, where the door was open for all who wished to talk with the Speaker. He spoke every year at the John W. McCormack Middle School near Columbia Point in Dorchester. On at least one of those occasions he visited the Harbor Campus of the University of Massachusetts at Boston to address the McCormack School's graduating class. He talked to a reporter for the campus paper, the *Mass Media*, saying, "What a beautiful place this is. . . . And you're lucky to have the Kennedy Library."

On Saturday afternoon, November 22, 1980 — seventeen years to the day after the death of John F. Kennedy — John W. McCormack followed his compatriot into the hereafter. His nephew Edward J. Mc-



Boston Public Schools
John W. McCormack
SCHOOL

Sunday, October 15, 1967

2 P.M.

Mt. Vernon Street
Dorchester, Massachusetts

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Dedication Program, John W. McCormack School (1967)

Cormack, Jr., told the newspapers that his uncle's time was an easy one. "He went quietly to sleep after lunch and stopped breathing. He was awake and alert to the very end. He went very peacefully."

The words of praise were immediate and heartfelt. Perhaps John Joseph Moakley, who had been elected to John McCormack's seat in the



Leverett Saltonstall and John W. McCormack

House, knew of the Speaker's love for the Horatio Alger stories. "Those books should be a must for all children," the Speaker told the *Herald* in 1970. "They appeal to the constructive side, they build character. They made an impression on me." Congressman Moakley knew his man and said to the *Boston Globe*: "Speaker McCormack was the Horatio Alger of politics. He started out as a young boy in South Boston, put himself through school and then followed the steps up the political ladder. . . . He made a great, great mark not only on Massachusetts but on the entire country."

The funeral was held in St. Monica's, the modest red-brick Roman Catholic parish church that serves the Andrew Square neighborhood. From the front steps of St. Monica's, a visitor, if he or she knows where to look, can see the lower end of Vinton Street. This visitor, if he or she knows how to look, might see the shadow of a newsboy with papers

under his arm heading out or a determined young man with a load of lawbooks heading home. Every half hour a shuttle bus runs through Andrew Square, down Preble Street past the end of Vinton, makes the corner at St. Monica's, and heads down Old Colony Avenue — a railroad right-of-way in 1891 — loaded with students heading for UMass/Boston. Is it too much to imagine that a future Speaker of the House is among them?



John W. McCormack and Eamon de Valera, Dublin (1972)



Humberto Cardinal Medeiros and John W. McCormack

At the funeral mass, on Tuesday, November 25, 1980, Humberto Cardinal Medeiros, Archbishop of Boston, was the principal celebrant, and moving eulogies were delivered by Massachusetts State Senate President, William Bulger, and by Thomas P. O'Neill, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. Senator Bulger, who represents today the same area that John McCormack represented in the 1920's, spoke first:

People of South Boston will forever recall with affection your clarion call, "From Andrew Square to the Speaker's Chair." We of this community are especially grateful, Mr. Speaker, for the example of integrity, of fidelity to your words, of generosity to those in need, of compassion for the disadvantaged and the oppressed, of your unswerving devotion to the ideals of social justice.

Speaker O'Neill, who followed John McCormack to the Speaker's post, followed with these words:

John McCormack was understanding, compassionate, kind. Although I once saw him silence a critic by saying, "I always try to be kind, but don't ever mistake kindness for weakness." Each day, immediately before he left to open a session of the House, John McCormack would hold his news conference, and when the clock would approach the time for him to leave, an aide would say, "It's time Mr. Speaker." Well, it's time, Mr. Speaker. It's time for you to leave us.

On behalf of your city, your state, your nation, and particularly, on behalf of those who were privileged to serve with you in government and were enriched by your friendship, inspired by your example, and assisted by your generosity, I say thank you, and pray that the good Lord will take a liking to you, Mr. Speaker. It's time, Mr. Speaker.

Now John McCormack is with his beloved Harriet in St. Joseph's Cemetery in West Roxbury. Yet his name lives on in federal and state office buildings in Boston, in a Boston public school, and in a classroom building devoted to the pursuit of academic excellence at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

April 1985

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Source Note

The following sources were consulted for this publication:

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Acknowledgments

The photographs illustrating this publication are from the McCormack Papers, Special Collections Department, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, and are reproduced with permission. Dr. Howard Gotlieb, Director of Special Collections, and Mr. Charles Niles of the Special Collections staff were especially helpful. — PMW

Printed for the
University of Massachusetts at Boston
by
Thomas Todd Company, Printers
Boston, Massachusetts
April 1985

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Front Cover: John W. McCormack announcing that he will not seek reelection (1970)

