

Amelia Boynton Robinson, "matriarch of the Voting Rights Act," dies at 104

by [Kevin Truong](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Amelia Boynton Robinson, a pivotal figure in the struggle for civil rights in Selma, Alabama—and whose picture, battered and left unconscious by police on the Edmund Pettus Bridge became an iconic image that publicized the often violent struggle to enfranchise black voters—died Wednesday (August 26) in a Montgomery, Alabama, Hospital.

Selma became a flashpoint in the civil rights movement in large part because of Boynton Robinson's efforts to bring Martin Luther King Jr. to the city and make it a battleground in the fight to grant blacks the right to vote.

"Boynton Robinson, who had met Dr. King in 1954 and been involved with the work of his Southern Christian Leadership Conference ever since, had long opened her house in Selma as a meeting ground for civil rights leaders in the area," the *New York Times* obituary reported.

Boynton Robinson, known as the matriarch of the Voting Rights Act, was one of the organizers of the first march from Selma to Alabama's capital, Montgomery which lives in infamy as the day known as "Bloody Sunday."

During the march on March 7, 1965, state troopers teargassed, clubbed, and whipped the 600 non-violent protesters when they attempted to cross the bridge. Boynton Robinson, who was near the front of the march, was knocked unconscious by the attack, and her image—plastered across newspapers nationwide—helped to galvanize support for civil rights across the country.

In 1965, as a direct outcome of the demonstrations in Selma, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the federal Voting Rights Act into law. Boynton Robinson was invited to the ceremony at the White House as a guest of honor.

As part of the 50th anniversary commemoration of the marches, Boynton Robinson held hands with the nation's first black president as they reenacted the march

across the bridge that now symbolizes the long march for civil rights in the country.

"She was as strong, as hopeful and as indomitable of spirit—as quintessentially American—as I'm sure she was that day 50 years ago," President Obama said in a statement on Wednesday. "To honor the legacy of an American hero like Amelia Boynton requires only that we follow her example—that all of us fight to protect everyone's right to vote."

But while she is most known for her actions in 1965, Boynton Robinson made civil rights activism a cornerstone of her entire life, from pushing to register black voters in the 1930s and '40s on through the decades to being the first black woman to run for office in the state of Alabama. As a young girl she handed out leaflets advocating for the right for women to vote before the passage of the 19th amendment which granted women suffrage.

"The truth of it is that was her entire life; that's what she was completely taken with," Bruce Boynton told the Associated Press of his mother's role in shaping the civil rights movement. "She was a loving person, very supportive—but civil rights was her life."

In 1991, she published a memoir, *Bridge across Jordan*.

In January, Boynton Robinson sat at the State of the Union address as a special guest of Rep. Terri Sewell of Alabama. Sewell is the first black woman to be elected to Congress in Alabama.

"Without her courageous campaign for the 7th congressional district, I know that my election to this seat in 2010 would not have been possible," Sewell said in a written statement. Sewell said she'll carry love and admiration for Boynton Robinson with her and will continue working to honor her life's work.

Rep. John Lewis of Georgia, another leader in the civil rights movement, called Boynton Robinson a persistent and dedicated voice in the struggle for civil rights.

"I am so glad she lived to see Dr. King lead a march from Selma to Montgomery, that she lived to see the Voting Rights Act signed into law, that she lived to see the amazing transformation our work gave rise to in America," Lewis said.

For her part, Boynton Robinson said the violence she endured was a small price to pay in the larger struggle to give the nation the right to vote.

“I wasn’t looking for notoriety,” she told the *New York Post* last year. “But if that’s what it took, I didn’t care how many licks I got. It just made me even more determined to fight for our cause.”

*This report contains material from the Associated Press.*