

Patricia Roberts Harris



Lawyer, Ambassador, Cabinet Member
Scott # 3371
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Patricia Roberts Harris was born in Mattoon, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago on May 31, 1924. She was the daughter of Hildren and Bert Reynolds. Patricia received a scholarship to Howard University and graduated Summa Cum Laude in 1945. Patricia was active in civil rights demonstrations in Washington D.C. and in 1943 she participated in a student sit-in at a whites-only cafeteria. While at Howard, Patricia met Professor William Beasley Harris. They were married in 1955.

Patricia received her law degree from George Washington University and graduated at the top of her class. She worked briefly for the U.S. Department of Justice before returning to the Howard University School of Law in 1961.

Patricia also served on several federal civil rights commissions and was active in Democratic politics. Soon after meeting with Robert Kennedy in 1963, she was appointed co-chair of the National Women's Committee for Civil Rights. Patricia gave the seconding address for Lyndon Johnson's nomination in 1964 and in 1965 President Johnson appointed her as the U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg. She returned to Howard in 1967 and in 1969 she was named the Dean of Howard's School of Law. Patricia resigned after only one month as the result of a student protest. She had taken a strong stand against the protest and was not supported in her position by Howard's president.

In 1971 Patricia became the first African American woman to serve as a director of a major U.S. corporation when she was appointed to the directorship of IBM.

Patricia was a strong supporter of the Democratic party and she continued to work for the national party while practicing law with a Washington D.C. firm from 1969 to 1977.

President Jimmy Carter nominated Patricia as the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1977. She was a controversial choice due to her establishment connections and during her Senate confirmation hearings she was challenged repeatedly by Republican senators. In reply, Patricia stated, You do not seem to understand who I am. I am a black woman, the daughter of a dining car waiter. I am a black woman who could not buy a house 8 years ago in parts of the District of Columbia. She was the first Black woman to direct a federal department.

Patricia served as Secretary of HUD from 1977 until 1979. As Secretary, she secured additional funding for HUD and dramatically increased the number of available subsidized housing. She promoted grants that increased the number of businesses in blighted neighborhoods. She also supported a program to provide for a wider choice in housing by the poor.

In 1979 President Carter appointed Patricia as the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (This Department was changed to the Department of Health and Human Services during Patricia Harris' tenure). Secretary Harris left government service in 1980 after Ronald Reagan was elected President. In 1982 she ran unsuccessfully against Marion Barry for Mayor of Washington, D.C.

Patricia Roberts Harris died of breast cancer in Washington, D.C. on March 23, 1985

Sources:
Encyclopedia Britannica
Encyclopedia Africana