

# New Name Celebrates First Mayor

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Former D.C. mayor Walter E. Washington was a man of his times, a black leader who took the reins of a city in the wake of the civil rights era. Yesterday, his name was officially assigned to the city's convention center, one of its most ambitious and expensive projects -- and in a way a symbol of how far the District has come since those years.



"Walter E. Washington stood in the center of the city," [D.C. Council Chairman Vincent C. Gray \(D\)](#) said, drawing parallels between the former mayor and the \$850 million building. The convention center, he added, is physically in the middle of the District.

Washington (D) belonged to a wave of black leadership that swept through major cities in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The same month he was sworn in as appointed mayor of Washington, [Carl B. Stokes \(D\)](#) was elected mayor of [Cleveland](#).

Yesterday, four years after his death, about 175 of Washington's relatives, friends and even former political foes attended the renaming ceremony to honor the man who steered the city during some of its most difficult times, including the 1968 riots after the assassination of the Rev. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

He was the first African American to head a major city and the first mayor elected under the District's Home Rule Charter. But he was honored yesterday "not just for being first," said Del. [Eleanor Holmes Norton \(D-D.C.\)](#). "He's the role model for other mayors. . . . This is a mayor that stands apart, with all due deference to my friends."

The crowd was a who's who of Washington, including local political power brokers such as Jim Hudson and former city leaders such as one-time council chairman [Linda W. Cropp \(D\)](#).

"I don't think you'll ever see this group of people gathered like this again," Gray said in an interview. He was standing in a sea of hugs and handshakes as the city's political elite gathered in front of a display of Washington photos.

Set up near the photographs were Washington's desk and his worn leather chair. A candy dish held peppermints, his favorite.

Washington, who died in 2003 of heart and kidney failure, was appointed mayor in 1967 by [President Lyndon B. Johnson](#), and he was elected mayor in 1974 after Congress approved Home Rule for the city. His daughter, Bennetta Jules-Rosette, recalled asking him whether he had voted for himself. "Yes, of course I did, because I'm the best candidate," she remembered him saying, sharing the wry humor for which he was known.

Washington was born in Dawson, Ga., and raised in [Jamestown](#), N.Y. He moved to the District to attend [Howard University](#). Later, as the director of the local housing authority, he built a reputation strong enough that Johnson tapped him for the job of appointed mayor.

[Mayor Adrian M. Fenty \(D\)](#) talked about the responsibility of leading a city through political and cultural change. Washington "set the tone" for the city, Fenty said.

"Walter Washington started from scratch," he said. "He set a standard of performance in this government. . . . Everyone else now stands on his shoulders."

Like other big-city mayors of his era, Washington was tested by racial unrest. On April 4, 1968, he refused requests from some members of Congress to shoot looters.

But Washington had his bumps. Plagued by poor management of social service agencies, he lost the Democratic mayoral primary in 1978 to [Marion Barry](#), who promised to reform city government.

Through the years, younger politicians still turned to Washington for counsel. "His sage advice, to stay honest, caring and focused on what was best for the city, served me and others well," Cropp said.

His wife, Mary Burke Washington, told the crowd: "It never occurred to him that this building would be named for him. He thought what he had already received from the people here was enough. That is their respect and their love."

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/05/AR2007110500925.html>