

## More than ninety years ago, Rebecca Felton led the way as the first woman senator.

**Donald A. Ritchie** looks at the story of Rebecca Latimer Felton, who at the age of 87 became the first woman to serve in the Untitled States senate. While she only served for one day, she led the way for greater representation of women in the senate.



While I was racing through the tunnels that link the concourses at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, trying to make a tight connection, faces of famous Georgians adorning the walls flashed by. Among them I spotted Rebecca Latimer Felton and wondered how many other travelers might recognize her as the first woman to serve in the United States Senate. Not that her term lasted all that long. When the governor appointed her on 3 October 1922, the Senate was not in session. By the time it convened in November, an election had taken place that chose her successor. Nevertheless, Felton managed to get sworn in as a senator and deliver a speech in the Senate Chamber. Photographs of her at the time show a very elderly lady—she was 87—on the steps of the Capitol. Does she deserve to be memorialized at the airport or remembered at all?

Born near Decatur, Georgia, in 1835, Rebecca Latimer graduated from Madison Female College and married William Felton, a doctor and Methodist minister. During the Civil War they lost their home and both of their children to disease and deprivation. They rebuilt their lives and in 1874, William Felton won election to the House of Representatives. Rebecca Felton accompanied him to Washington as his secretary and clerk, and also publicly campaigned for his reelections—first as a Democrat and then as a Populist. She was so fiery on the political hustings that a newspaper editorial asked “Which Felton is the Congressman and Which the Wife?”

Holding strong opinions, she never hesitated to express her mind in public as a lecturer and for thirty years as a columnist for the *Atlanta Journal*. She crusaded against the use of convict labor and for temperance, compulsory school attendance, and women's rights—most of all the right to vote. Identifying herself as an “independent Democrat,” she was a Georgia delegate to the national convention of Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party in 1912. She often stood against the culture of her times, although not in matters of race. Historians have found her to be a complicated political figure who combined “progressive gender reform” with “reactionary race politics,” and noted that her calls for reform were always tainted by white supremacy. After she was widowed in 1909, she remained politically active, particularly promoting woman suffrage.

In September 1922, Georgia Senator Thomas E. Watson died, and Governor Thomas Hardwick, who planned to run for the vacant seat, made a calculated effort to attract women voters by appointing a woman to fill the vacancy. Watson's widow rejected his first offer, and he turned to Rebecca Felton. Since the Senate was not due back into session until December, Hardwick expected the appointment to be purely ceremonial. The maneuver did not help, however, and Hardwick lost the Senate race to Walter George on 7 November.



Rebecca Felton. Public domain via U.S. Senate Historical Office.



Mrs. Rebecca L. Felton being greeted by prominent political women in Washington, D.C., November 20 1922. Public domain via the Library of Congress.

Meanwhile, across the nation women demanded that Felton be sworn into office. That opportunity came when President Warren G. Harding called Congress into special session on 21 November to deal with ship subsidy legislation. Although Walter George's term began as soon as he was elected, Rebecca Felton traveled to Washington to claim the Georgia Senate seat, having persuaded George to wait a day to present his credentials. Other senators privately fretted over the constitutionality of seating an appointee after her successor had been duly elected. Felton had prepared two speeches, one to make outside the Capitol in case she was rejected, the other to make in the Senate Chamber in case she was seated. As it turned out, no man wanted to oppose her publicly, so she was able to take the oath of office on 21 November. The next day she rose in the chamber to deliver a short but memorable speech.

After thanking the gentlemen for offering a lady a chair, Senator Felton assured her colleagues that she was just the first of the women who would join them. "Let me say, Mr. President," she concluded, "that when the women of the country come in and sit with you, though there may be but very few in the next few years, I pledge you that you will get ability, you will get integrity of purpose, you will get exalted patriotism, and you will get unstinted usefulness." The public galleries, filled with activists from the National Woman's Party and other groups, cheered her remarks. With that, Rebecca Felton ended her short term as a United States senator.

When she died in 1930 there were still no other women senators, but today a record twenty women are serving as senators. Rebecca Felton would likely ask why there aren't more. For leading the way, she earned that spot at the Atlanta airport.

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## About the author

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Donald A. Ritchie is historian of the US Senate, where he conducts an oral history program. A past president of the Oral History Association, he has also served on the councils of the International Oral History Association and the American Historical Association. He is the author of many books, including [Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide](#) (OUP, 2003), [Reporting from Washington](#) (OUP, 2005) and [The U.S. Congress: A Very Short Introduction](#) (OUP, 2010). He is also the editor of [The Oxford Handbook of Oral History](#) (OUP, 2012).



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