

= Wendell H. Ford =

Wendell Hampton Ford (September 8 , 1924 ? January 22 , 2015) was an American politician from the Commonwealth of Kentucky . He served for twenty @-@ four years in the U.S. Senate and was the 53rd Governor of Kentucky . He was the first person to be successively elected lieutenant governor , governor and United States senator in Kentucky history . The Senate Democratic whip from 1991 to 1999 , he was considered the leader of the state 's Democratic Party from his election to governor in 1971 until his retirement from the Senate in 1999 . At the time of his retirement , he was the longest @-@ serving senator in Kentucky 's history , a mark which was then surpassed by Mitch McConnell in 2009 .

Born in Daviess County , Kentucky , Ford attended the University of Kentucky , but his studies were interrupted by his service in World War II . After the war , he graduated from the Maryland School of Insurance and returned to Kentucky to help his father with the family insurance business . He also continued his military service in the Kentucky Army National Guard . He worked on the gubernatorial campaign of Bert T. Combs in 1959 , and became Combs ' executive assistant when Combs was elected governor . Encouraged to run for the Kentucky Senate by Combs ' ally and successor , Ned Breathitt , Ford won the seat and served one four @-@ year term before running for lieutenant governor in 1967 . He was elected on a split ticket with Republican Louie B. Nunn . Four years later , Ford defeated Combs in an upset in the Democratic primary en route to the governorship .

As governor , Ford made government more efficient by reorganizing and consolidating some departments in the executive branch . He raised revenue for the state through a severance tax on coal and enacted reforms to the educational system . He purged most of the Republicans from statewide office , including helping Walter " Dee " Huddleston win the Senate seat vacated by the retirement of Republican stalwart John Sherman Cooper . In 1974 , Ford himself ousted the other incumbent senator , Republican Marlow Cook . Following the rapid rise of Ford and many of his political allies , he and his lieutenant governor , Julian Carroll , were investigated on charges of political corruption , but a grand jury refused to indict them . As senator , Ford was a staunch defender of Kentucky 's tobacco industry . He also formed the Senate National Guard Caucus with Missouri senator Kit Bond . Chosen as Democratic party whip in 1991 , Ford considered running for floor leader in 1994 before throwing his support to Connecticut 's Christopher Dodd . He retired from the Senate in 1999 and returned to Owensboro , where he taught politics to youth at the Owensboro Museum of Science and History .

= = Early life = =

Wendell Ford was born near Owensboro , in Daviess County , Kentucky , on September 8 , 1924 . He was the son of Ernest M. and Irene Woolfork (Schenk) Ford . His father was a state senator and ally of Kentucky Governor Earle C. Clements . Ford obtained his early education in the public schools of Daviess County and graduated from Daviess County High School . From 1942 to 1943 , he attended the University of Kentucky .

On September 18 , 1943 , Ford married Jean Neel of Owensboro at the home of the bride 's parents . The couple had two children . Daughter Shirley (Ford) Dexter was born in 1950 and son Steven Ford was born in 1954 . The family attended First Baptist Church in Owensboro .

In 1944 , Ford left the University of Kentucky to join the army , enlisting for service in World War II on July 22 , 1944 . He was trained as an administrative non @-@ commissioned officer and promoted to the rank of technical sergeant on November 17 , 1945 . Over the course of his service , he received the American Campaign Medal and the World War II Victory Medal and earned the Expert Infantryman Badge and Good Conduct Medal . He was honorably discharged on June 18 , 1946 .

Following the war , Ford returned home to work with his father in the family insurance business , and graduated from the Maryland School of Insurance in 1947 . On June 7 , 1949 , he enlisted in the Kentucky Army National Guard and was assigned to Company I of the 149th Infantry Regimental Combat Team in Owensboro . On August 7 , 1949 , he was promoted to Second Lieutenant of

Infantry . In 1949 , Ford 's company was converted from infantry to tanks , and Ford served as a Company Commander in the 240th Tank Battalion . Promoted to First Lieutenant of Armor , he transferred to the inactive Guard in 1956 , before being discharged in 1962 .

= = Political career = =

Ford was very active in civic affairs , becoming the first Kentuckian to serve as president of the Jaycees in 1954 . He was a youth chairman of Bert T. Combs ' 1959 gubernatorial campaign . After Combs ' election , Ford served as Combs ' executive assistant from 1959 to 1963 . When his mother died in 1963 , Ford returned to Owensboro to help his father with the family insurance agency . Although it was speculated he would run for lieutenant governor that year , Ford later insisted he had decided not to re @-@ enter politics until Governor Ned Breathitt asked him to run against Casper " Cap " Gardner , the state senate 's majority leader and a major obstacle to Breathitt 's progressive legislative agenda . Ford won the 1965 election by only 305 votes but quickly became a key player in the state senate . Representing the Eighth District , including Daviess and Hancock counties , Ford introduced 22 major pieces of legislation that became law during his single term in the senate .

In 1967 , Ford ran for lieutenant governor , this time against the wishes of Breathitt and Combs , whose pick was state attorney general Robert Matthews . Ford defeated Matthews by 631 votes , 0 @. @ 2 % of the total vote count in the primary . He ran an independent campaign and won in the general election even as Combs @-@ Breathitt pick Henry Ward lost the race for governor to Republican Louie B. Nunn . Republicans and Democrats split the state offices , with five going to Republicans and four going to Democrats .

During his time as lieutenant governor , Ford rebuilt the state 's Democratic machine , which would help elect him and others , including Senator Walter Huddleston and Governor Martha Layne Collins . When Governor Nunn asked the legislature to increase the state sales tax in 1968 from 3 percent to 5 percent , Ford opposed the measure , saying it should only pass if food and medicine were exempted . Ford lost this battle ; the increase passed without exemptions . From 1970 to 1971 , Ford was a member of the Executive Committee of the National Conference of Lieutenant Governors .

= = Governor of Kentucky = =

At the expiration of his term as lieutenant governor , Ford was one of eight candidates to enter the 1971 Democratic gubernatorial primary . The favorite of the field was Ford 's mentor , Combs . During the campaign , Ford attacked Combs ' age and the sales tax enacted during Combs ' administration . He also questioned why Combs would leave his better @-@ paying federal judgeship to run for a second term as governor . Ford garnered more votes than Combs and the other six candidates combined , and attributed his unlikely win over Combs in the primary to superior strategy and Combs ' underestimation of his candidacy . Following the election , Combs correctly predicted " This is the end of the road for me politically . "

Ford went on to win the governorship in a four @-@ way general election that included another former Democratic governor , A. B. " Happy " Chandler , who ran as an independent . Ford finished more than 58 @, @ 000 votes ahead of his closest rival , Republican Tom Emberton . With Combs and Chandler out of politics , factionalism in the Kentucky Democratic Party began to wane .

As governor , Ford raised revenue from a severance tax on coal , a two @-@ cent @-@ per @-@ gallon tax on gasoline , and an increased corporate tax . He balanced these increases by exempting food from the state sales tax . The resulting large budget surplus allowed him to propose several construction projects . His victory in the primary had been largely due to Jefferson County , and he returned the favor by approving funds to build the Commonwealth Convention Center and expand the Kentucky Fair and Exposition Center . He also shepherded a package of reforms to the state 's criminal justice system through the first legislative session of his term .

Ford oversaw the transition of the University of Louisville from municipal to state funding . He

pushed for reforms to the state 's education system , giving up his own chairmanship of the University of Kentucky board of trustees and extending voting rights to student and faculty members of university boards . These changes generally shifted administration positions in the state 's colleges from political rewards to professional appointments . He increased funding to the state 's education budget and gave expanded powers to the Council on Higher Education . He vetoed a measure that would have allowed collective bargaining for teachers .

Ford drew praise for his attention to the mundane task of improving the efficiency and organization of executive departments , creating several " super cabinets " under which many departments were consolidated . During the 1972 legislative session , he created the Department of Finance and Administration , combining the functions of the Kentucky Program Development Office and the Department of Finance . Constitutional limits sometimes prevented him from combining like functions , but Ford made the reorganization a top priority and realized some savings to the state .

On March 21 , 1972 , the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its ruling in the case of *Dunn v. Blumstein* that found that a citizen who had lived in a state for 30 days was resident in that state and thus eligible to vote there . Kentucky 's Constitution required residency of one year in the state , six months in the county and sixty days in the precinct to establish voting eligibility . This issue had to be resolved before the 1972 presidential election in November , so Ford called a special legislative session to enact the necessary corrections . In addition , Ford added to the General Assembly 's agenda the creation of a state environmental protection agency , a refinement of congressional districts in line with the latest census figures and ratification of the recently passed Equal Rights Amendment . All of these measures passed .

Despite surgery for a brain aneurysm in June 1972 , Ford attended the 1972 Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach , Florida . He supported Edmund Muskie for president , but later greeted nominee George McGovern when he visited Kentucky . The convention was the beginning of Ford 's role in national politics . Offended by the McGovern campaign 's treatment of Democratic finance chairman Robert Schwarz Strauss , he helped Strauss get elected chairman of the Democratic National Committee following McGovern 's defeat . As a result of his involvement in Strauss ' election , Ford was elected chair of the Democratic Governors ' Conference from 1973 to 1974 . He also served as vice @-@ chair of the Conference 's Natural Resources and Environmental Management Committee .

During the 1974 legislative session , Ford proposed a six @-@ year study of coal liquefaction and gasification in response to the 1973 oil crisis . He also increased funding to human resources and continued his reorganization of the executive branch , creating cabinets for transportation , development , education and the arts , human resources , consumer protection and regulation , safety and justice . He was considered less ruthless than previous governors in firing state officials hired by the previous administration , and expanded the state merit system to cover some previously exempt state workers . Despite the expansion , he was criticized for the replacements he made , particularly that of the state personnel commissioner appointed during the Nunn administration . Critics also cited the fact that employees found qualified by the merit examination were still required to obtain political clearance before they were hired .

Ford united the state 's Democratic Party , allowing them to capture a seat in the U.S. Senate in 1972 for the first time since 1956 . The seat was vacated by the retirement of Republican John Sherman Cooper and won by Ford 's campaign manager , Walter " Dee " Huddleston . Ford 's friends then began lobbying him to try and unseat Kentucky 's other Republican senator , one @-@ term legislator Marlow Cook . Ford wanted lieutenant governor Julian Carroll , who had run on an informal slate with Combs in the 1971 primary , to run for Cook 's seat , but Carroll already had his eye on the governor 's chair . Ford 's allies did not have a gubernatorial candidate stronger than Carroll , and when a poll showed that Ford was the only Democrat who could defeat Cook , he agreed to run , announcing his candidacy immediately following the 1974 legislative session .

A primary issue during the election was the construction of a dam on the Red River . Cook opposed the dam , but Ford supported it and allocated some of the state 's budget surplus to its construction . In the election , Ford defeated Cook by a vote of 399 @, @ 406 to 328 @, @ 982 , completing his revitalization of the state 's Democratic party by personally ousting the last Republican from major

office . Cook resigned his seat in December so that Ford would have a higher standing in seniority in the Senate . Ford resigned as governor to accept the seat , leaving the governorship to Carroll , who dropped state support for the project , killing it .

In the wake of the rapid ascent of Ford and members of his faction to the state 's major political offices , he and Carroll were investigated in a corruption probe . The four @-@ year investigation began in 1977 and focused on a state insurance kickback scheme alleged to have operated during Ford 's tenure . In June 1972 , Ford had purchased insurance policies for state workers from some of his political backers without competitive bidding . State law did not require competitive bidding , and earlier governors had engaged in similar practices . Investigators believed there was an arrangement in which insurance companies getting government contracts split commissions with party officials , although Ford was suspected of allowing the practice for political benefit rather than personal financial gain . In 1981 , prosecutors asked for indictments against Ford and Carroll on racketeering charges but a grand jury refused . Because grand jury proceedings are secret , what exactly occurred has never been publicly revealed . However , state Republicans maintained that Ford took the Fifth Amendment while on the stand , invoking his right against self @-@ incrimination . Ford refused to confirm or deny this report . A federal grand jury recommended that Ford be indicted in connection with the insurance scheme , but the U.S. Department of Justice did not act on this recommendation .

= = = United States Senate = = =

Ford entered the Senate in 1974 and was reelected in 1980 , 1986 and 1992 . In the 1980 primary , Ford received only token opposition from attorney Flora Stuart . He was unopposed in the 1986 and 1992 Democratic primaries . Republicans failed to put forward a viable challenger during any of Ford 's re @-@ election bids . In 1980 , he defeated septuagenarian former state auditor Mary Louise Foust by 334 @,@ 862 votes . Ford 's 720 @,@ 891 votes represented 65 percent of the total votes cast in the election , a record for a statewide race in Kentucky . Against Republican Jackson Andrews IV in 1986 , Ford shattered that record , securing 74 percent of the votes cast and carrying all 120 Kentucky counties . State senator David L. Williams fared little better in 1992 , surrendering 477 @,@ 002 votes to Ford (63 percent) .

Ford seriously considered leaving the Senate and running for governor again in 1983 and 1991 , but decided against it both times . In the 1983 contest , he would have faced sitting lieutenant governor Martha Layne Collins in the primary . Collins was a factional ally of Ford 's , which influenced his decision . In 1991 , Ford cited his seniority in the Senate and desire to become Democratic Senate whip as factors in his decision not to run for governor .

Early in his career , Ford supported a constitutional amendment against desegregation busing . He also floated a proposal to put the federal budget on a two @-@ year cycle , believing too much time was spent annually on budget wrangling . This idea , based on the model used in the Kentucky state budget , was never implemented . During the Ninety @-@ fifth Congress (1977 ? 1979) , he was chairman of the Committee on Aeronautical and Space Sciences .

From 1977 to 1983 , Ford was a member of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee . He first sought the post of Democratic whip in 1988 , but lost to California 's Alan Cranston , who had held the post since 1977 . Ford got a late start in the race , and a New York Times writer opined that he overestimated his chances of unseating Cranston . Immediately after conceding his loss , he announced he would be a candidate for the position in the next election in 1990 . He again faced Cranston in the election , but Cranston withdrew from the race due to a battle with prostate cancer . Ford maintained that he had enough commitments of support in the Democratic caucus to have won without Cranston 's withdrawal . When majority leader George J. Mitchell retired from the Senate in 1994 , Ford showed some interest in the Democratic floor leader post . Ultimately , he decided against it , choosing to focus instead on Kentucky issues . He supported Christopher Dodd for majority leader .

During the Ninety @-@ eighth Congress (1983 ? 1985) , Ford served on the Select Committee to Study the Committee System , and he was a member of the Committee on Rules and Administration

in the One Hundredth through One Hundred Third Congresses (1987 ? 1995) . In 1989 , he joined with Missouri senator Kit Bond to form the Senate National Guard Caucus , a coalition of senators committed to advancing National Guard capabilities and readiness . Ford said he was motivated to form the caucus after seeing the work done by Mississippi Representative Sonny Montgomery with the National Guard Association and the National Guard Bureau . Ford co @-@ chaired the caucus with Bond until Ford 's retirement from the Senate in 1999 . The Kentucky Army Guard dedicated the Wendell H. Ford Training Center in Muhlenberg County , Kentucky in 1998 . In 1999 , the National Guard Bureau presented Ford with the Sonny Montgomery Award , its highest honor .

Missouri senator Thomas Eagleton opined that Ford and Dee Huddleston made " probably the best one @-@ two combination for any state in the Senate . " Both were defenders of tobacco , Kentucky 's primary cash crop . Ford sat on the Commerce Committee , influencing legislation affecting the manufacturing end of the tobacco industry , while Huddleston sat on the Agriculture Committee and protected programs that benefited tobacco farmers . Both were instrumental in salvaging the Tobacco Price Support Program . Ford got tobacco exempted from the Consumer Product Safety Act and was a consistent opponent of cigarette tax increases . He sponsored an amendment to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade that limited the amount of foreign tobacco that could be imported by the United States .

Later in his career , Ford split with Huddleston 's successor , Mitch McConnell , over a proposed settlement of lawsuits against tobacco companies . Ford favored the package as presented to Congress , which would have protected the price support program , while McConnell favored a smaller aid package to tobacco farmers and an end to the price support program . Both proposals were ultimately defeated , and the rift between Ford and McConnell never healed .

As chairman of the Commerce Committee 's aviation subcommittee , Ford secured funds to improve the airports in Louisville , northern Kentucky , and Glasgow . The Wendell H. Ford Airport in Hazard , Kentucky is named for him . A 1990 bill aimed at reducing aircraft noise , improving airline safety measures , and requiring airlines to better inform consumers about their performance was dubbed the Wendell H. Ford Aviation Investment and Reform Act for the 21st Century .

Of his career in the Senate , Ford said " I wasn 't interested in national issues . I was interested in Kentucky issues . " Nevertheless , he influenced several important pieces of federal legislation . He sponsored an amendment to the Family Medical Leave Act exempting businesses with fewer than fifty employees . He was a key player in securing passage of the motor voter law in 1993 . He supported increases to the federal minimum wage and a 1996 welfare reform bill . A supporter of research into clean coal technology , he also worked with West Virginia senator Jay Rockefeller to secure better retirement benefits for coal miners . Never known as a major player on international issues , Ford favored continued economic sanctions against Iraq as an alternative to the Gulf War . He voted against the Panama Canal Treaty , which he perceived to be unpopular with Kentucky voters . Despite having chaired Bill Clinton 's inaugural committee in 1993 , Ford broke with the administration by voting against the North American Free Trade Agreement .

As he had as governor of Kentucky , Ford gave attention to improving the efficiency of government . While serving on the Joint Committee on Printing during the One Hundred First and One Hundred Third Congresses , he saved the government millions of dollars in printing costs by printing in volume and using recycled paper . In 1998 , Virginia senator John Warner sponsored the Wendell H. Ford Government Publications Reform Act of 1998 ; Ford signed on as a co @-@ sponsor . The bill would have eliminated the Joint Committee on Printing , distributing its authority and functions among the Senate Rules Committee , the House Oversight Committee , and the administrator of the Government Printing Office . It would also have centralized government printing services and penalized government agencies who did not make their documents available to the printing office to be printed . Opponents of the bill cited the broad powers granted to the printing office and concerns about the erosion of copyright protection . The bill was reported favorably out of committee , but was squeezed from the legislative calendar by issues related to the impending impeachment of Bill Clinton . Warner did not return to his chairmanship of the Joint Committee on Printing in the next congress , Ford retired from the Senate , and the bill was not re @-@ introduced .

= = Later life = =

Ford chose not to seek a fifth term in 1998 , and retired to Owensboro . He worked for a time as a consultant to Washington lobbying and law firm Dickstein Shapiro Morin & Oshinsky . At the time of his retirement , Ford was the longest @-@ serving senator in Kentucky history . In January 2009 , Mitch McConnell surpassed Ford 's mark of 24 years in the Senate .

In August 1978 , the US 60 bypass around Owensboro was renamed the Wendell H. Ford Expressway . The Western Kentucky Parkway was also renamed the Wendell H. Ford Western Kentucky Parkway during the administration of Governor Paul E. Patton . In 2009 , Ford was inducted into the Kentucky Transportation Hall of Fame .

Later in life , Ford taught politics to the youth of Owensboro from the Owensboro Museum of Science and History , which houses a replica of his Senate office . On July 19 , 2014 , the Messenger @-@ Inquirer reported that Ford had been diagnosed with lung cancer .

Ford died on January 22 , 2015 , at the age of 90 from lung cancer , and was buried at Rosehill Elmwood Cemetery .