

“A Slow Walk to Greatness: The Harold Washington Story”

This is “A Slow Walk to Greatness: The Harold Washington Story.” Harold Washington was Chicago’s first black mayor. His 1983 mayoral election held global significance. Chicago is a major American city that has always been known for segregation and for political corruption. Washington’s election sent the message that individuals can positively impact politics and that if Chicago could achieve greater equality, than similar cities were capable of the same.

Harold Washington was a native Chicagoan and son of a politician. He grew up on Chicago’s South Side, attended DuSable High School and enlisted in the Army during World War II. Returning home, he earned his undergraduate degree from Roosevelt College, and in 1952 earned a law degree from Northwestern University. He served 15 years in the Illinois State Legislature and one and a half terms in the United States House of Representatives before becoming a candidate in Chicago’s 1983 mayoral race.

Practiced law and served as Chicago attorney 1954 – 1958

Elected successively to:

Illinois House of Representatives 1965 – 1976

Illinois State Senate 1976 – 1980

U.S. House of Representatives 1980 – 1983

Initially, Washington did not want to run for Chicago mayor. A candidate needs 25,000 signatures of registered voters to be on the ballot. Washington asked his supporters to gain 50,000 signatures before he would consider it. They gathered over 100,000 signatures!

In 1983, Washington successfully campaigned for mayor of Chicago on a platform of reform and an end to city patronage. Harold Washington’s election as Chicago’s first black mayor gained national attention. He won with the support of a “rainbow coalition” of blacks, Hispanics, Asians, liberal whites, women, and the elderly.

Washington’s legacy is based on bringing opportunity and inclusiveness to those who had never been favored by city policies or patronage. He opened up city government to all citizens. He increased the number of city contracts awarded to minority businesses, vastly expanded opportunities for women and minorities in public employment, created the first citywide ethics ordinance, and drafted the city’s Freedom of Information Act. He encouraged people to become involved in community operations and neighborhood festivals. Although he often said he wanted to be mayor for 20 years, Washington died at his desk in November 1987-seven months into his second term.

(Choose 3 Artifacts to Highlight)

Blackened-Ashanti Stool

Ghana, Africa

According to legend, it is during the 18th century that the first Ashanti King, Osei Tutu, received from the sky the *Golden Stool*. Elevated to the level of a symbol of the Ghanaian monarchy, it incarnates the collective soul of the people. No one can sit on it, not even the King. During the very rare occasions when the Golden Stool is shown in public, the King must sit behind, on his own stool. Replicas similar to the Golden Stool have been produced for chiefs and upon their death are ceremonially blackened with animal blood, as a symbol of their power for generations.

This stool was given to Harold Washington, and upon his death was ceremoniously painted black to symbolize that a great “chief” had died.

Museum of African American History

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Campaign Buttons

During Harold Washington’s successful bid for mayor in 1983 and again in 1987, there were more campaign buttons or pin-backs used than in any other political race before or since.

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Embroidered Silk

Gathering the support of various ethnic groups living in the City of Chicago, Harold Washington received an outpouring of support from the Asian community. This red embroidered tapestry, signed by over 150 people from the Chinese business community, is from the Chinatown Reception held on February 2, 1987.

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Portrait Bust

Created in the likeness of Harold Washington, it is signed by the artists on the back in Mandarin.

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Model Submarine

On October 13, 1984, the United States Navy commissioned the attack submarine, the “SSN721-Chicago.” This replica was presented to Mayor Washington.

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City Keys and Paper Weights

The success of Harold Washington becoming the first African American mayor of Chicago made national news. As a result, mayors from other cities around the country sent Mayor Washington mementoes as congratulations on his appointment.

Key to the City of Chicago

Key to the City of San Diego, California from Mayor Rodger Hedgecock

Paperweight, from New York, New York Mayor Ed Koch

Paperweight, from Peoria, Illinois Mayor James Maloof
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Dr. Martin Luther King Crystal Glass Etching

Pablo de Leon

This etching was presented to Senator Harold Washington for drafting the bill that made Dr. King's birthday a state recognized holiday ten years before it became a national holiday.

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Statement of Candidacy

This wax-sealed ledger includes the application and community signatures required of Harold Washington indicating his official statement of candidacy for the Illinois House of Representative, March 16, 1982.

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Maori Carving

Koko Wetere

As Mayor, Harold Washington established the Office of Commissioner of Cultural Affairs and art programs flourished under his administration. This carving was given to Mayor Washington by the Minister of Cultural Affairs from New Zealand.

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Proclamation and Curio Cabinet

The calligraphy illuminated proclamation to Mayor Washington and the tooled metal curio cabinet, both from Mexico, were gifts documenting the Latino involvement in the Washington administration. During Washington's first term in office, the percentage of Latino's hired into city government doubled.

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