



Alton R. Waldon, Jr. 1936–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE ★ 1986–1987
DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

Upon being sworn in to the U.S. House of Representatives after a heated special election, Alton Waldon, Jr., noted of the U.S. Capitol: “This is a nice place to work for a man whose father had a strong back and not much else. I’m a bit of a romantic, a bit of a dreamer. This is a place that is the repository of the history of America.”¹ Declaring, “I want to devote myself to being a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week, Congressman,” Waldon devoted his short term to protesting apartheid in South Africa.² Though he served in the House for less than six months, Waldon made his mark as the first black Representative elected from New York’s Queens borough.

Alton Ronald Waldon, Jr., was born on December 21, 1936, in Lakeland, Florida. His parents, Rupert Juanita Wallace and Alton R. Waldon, Sr., moved to New York City when their son was six years old, and he grew up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Alton Waldon, Sr., worked as a longshoreman. Waldon, Jr., joined the U.S. Army in 1953 and served until he was discharged in 1959 as a Specialist, 4th Class. He married Barbara DeCosta, a graphic designer, in 1961. They had three children: Alton III, Dana, and Ian. Waldon spent his first few years out of the military pursuing a professional singing career before he joined the New York City housing authority’s police force in 1962. The housing authority police, which provided security for residents of the city’s public housing, was at the time separate from the New York City Police Department. Before leaving the force in 1975, Waldon advanced from the rank of patrolman to captain. He also became chief administrator and commander of the police academy for the New York City housing department. Waldon received a B.S. in criminal justice from John Jay College in New York City in 1968, and earned a J.D. from New York University Law School in 1973. During his time in law school, Waldon won

the prestigious Thurgood Marshall Fellowship, awarded every three years to promising minority law students by the New York state trial lawyers association. In 1975, Waldon was appointed deputy commissioner of the New York state division of human rights. In 1981 and 1982, he served as assistant counsel for the New York state office of mental retardation and developmental disabilities. In 1982, Waldon won election to represent his Queens neighborhood in the New York state assembly, where he served until 1986.

In April 1986, Representative Joseph Addabbo, after a long battle, succumbed to cancer. Addabbo had risen to chair the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee during his 25-year congressional tenure. During that span, his southeastern Queens district grew by about 25 percent, transforming from a primarily white lower- to middle-class neighborhood to a community that was nearly 65 percent black.³ In May 1986, Queens Democrats nominated Waldon to run for Addabbo’s seat in the June 10 special election. If elected in the crowded five-way race, Waldon would be the first black man to represent the overwhelmingly Democratic district in Congress. Three Democrats joined the canvass under third party banners. Floyd Flake, a popular pastor of the Allen African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Jamaica, ran as a Unity Party candidate. New York City health department official Kevin McCabe entered the race as the Good Government Party candidate. State senator Andrew Jenkins, who was runner-up to Waldon for the Democratic nomination, ran on the Liberal Party ticket. Lone Republican-Conservative Richard Dietl also joined the race.

Though he did not have the backing of the Democratic Party, Flake was considered Waldon’s strongest opponent. Flake’s position in the religious community gained him the



support of nearly all of the black ministers in the district. Churches were instrumental in influencing voters, and also provided transportation to the polls.⁴ Flake gained the endorsement of the *New York Times* just five days before the election, though the newspaper also portrayed Waldon favorably.⁵ At the close of polls on Election Day, Flake led by 197 votes (out of more than 40,000 cast), but absentee ballots had yet to be counted. Flake's name did not appear on the absentee ballots because a filing technicality had temporarily eliminated him from the race; by the time his candidacy was reinstated right before the election, it was too late to change the absentee ballots.⁶ The final count put Waldon ahead of Flake by a mere 278 votes. Flake attempted to discard the absentee ballots in court, but a three-judge federal appeals panel ruled in Waldon's favor on July 25.⁷ Waldon was in Washington, DC, visiting Representative Charles Rangel of New York when he received the news of his election. He was sworn in five days later on July 29, 1986. "How sweet it is," he declared. "I'm the son of a man who could not read and write. Only in America could this happen, to have someone to come from abject poverty . . . and sit in this august body."⁸

During his brief term, Waldon received assignments to the Committee on Education and Labor and the Committee on Small Business, but his focus was primarily on U.S. relations with South Africa. Waldon entered Congress at the height of the battle for strict sanctions against South Africa's white-minority government to condemn its apartheid system. Waldon and other black Members led the fight to override President Ronald W.

Reagan's veto of a bill calling for sanctions against South Africa. "America is the cradle of freedom," Waldon declared on the House Floor. "But unless we move with determination and dispatch, the babe of hope will be stillborn in Pretoria."⁹ He also opposed aid to Angolan rebels, who received support from South Africa's white-minority government and called on President Reagan to participate in a summit with the leaders of the nations bordering South Africa.¹⁰ Waldon also submitted legislation combating drug abuse, focusing on reducing the use of crack cocaine. Recalling his father's inability to read and write, he called for a national task force to focus on illiteracy, describing the inability to read as a "corrosive force that is silently eroding the social infrastructure of our Nation."¹¹

Just two months after he took his seat, Waldon found himself battling Flake for re-election. Though Waldon had the benefit of incumbency as well as support from New York Governor Mario Cuomo, Flake returned with his strong base as well as support from New York City Mayor Edward Koch. Waldon lost the nomination to Flake by about 3,000 votes.¹²

Waldon left Congress in January 1987 and received an appointment to the New York state investigation commission, where he served until 1990. The following year, he won a seat in the New York state senate, serving in that body for a decade. In 2000, Waldon accepted a judicial appointment to the New York court of claims in New York City.



FOR FURTHER READING

“Waldon, Alton R., Jr.,” *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=W000038>.

NOTES

- 1 Esther B. Fein, “Warmth and Work Greet Waldon,” 31 July 1986, *New York Times*: B3.
- 2 “Man in the News; After Court Victory, A Congressman-Elect: Alton Ronald Waldon, Jr.,” 26 July 1986, *New York Times*: A31.
- 3 “Good—and Better—in Queens,” 5 June 1986, *New York Times*: A26.
- 4 Dan Jacobson, “Queens Elects First Black Congressman,” 11 June 1986, United Press International.
- 5 “Good—and Better—in Queens.”
- 6 “Election Laws on Trial in Queens,” 20 June 1986, *New York Times*: A30.
- 7 “Man in the News; After Court Victory, A Congressman-Elect: Alton Ronald Waldon, Jr.”
- 8 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (29 July 1986): 17956.
- 9 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (29 September 1986): 27094.
- 10 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (26 September 1986): 26410.
- 11 *Congressional Record*, House, 99th Cong., 2nd sess. (8 October 1986): 29605.
- 12 Esther B. Fein, “Flake Defeats Waldon; Abzug Leading Teicher,” 10 September 1986, *New York Times*: B5.