

First Black Senator in Massachusetts Bill Owens Dies At 84

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State House News Service

The first Black member of the Massachusetts Senate, Bill Owens of Mattapan, died Saturday night after a period of declining health and a recent COVID-19 diagnosis, his family said. He was 84 years old.

A Harvard-educated owner of neighborhood dry cleaning businesses, Owens was first elected to the Massachusetts House in 1972 and worked with Reps. Doris Bunte and Mel King to push for the creation of the state's first majority Black Senate district, U.S. Sen. Ed Markey, who also entered the Mass. House as a freshman in 1972, said. In 1974, Owens was elected to fill that seat in the Senate.

"History may have called on Bill Owens, but he wasn't going to wait for it. From the beginning of his career, he fought to ensure that Black families and workers got the rights and representation denied to them. He fought to become the first Black State Senator just like he fought for housing justice, for reparations, for Roxbury Community College, and for equal opportunity for all people of color. He learned the lessons of our nation's history, rewrote them, and then taught the-powers-that-be from his own textbook on building political and economic power," Markey said. He added, "The first Black State Senator needed to have a loud voice, and Bill Owens's was as resonant and powerful and lasting as history required."

Owens was reelected to the Senate in 1976, 1978 and 1980, but lost his seat to Royal Bolling Sr. in 1982 after having switched his party affiliation and appearing on the ballot as

the Republican candidate. Owens had bested Bolling in the Democratic primaries for the Senate seat in 1974 and 1976. Owens ran as an independent in 1986 but was not able to topple Bolling. Instead, Owens returned to the Senate by virtue of a 1988 Democratic primary victory over Mildred Richardson and would remain a member of the Senate until Dianne Wilkerson defeated him in a 1992 primary contest.

“Until the end of his life, Bill continued to fight for inequities that exist in every corner of our society, and he pushed for reparations for descendants of slaves in the United States,” the late senator’s family said in a statement. “He used his platform to change laws and advocate for equity in housing, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities for everyone.”