



Jessie Menifield Rattley 1929-2001 Newport News, Political Activist

Born in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 14, 1929, Jessie and her family moved to Virginia when she was quite young. Education was a family priority, and Rattley attended Hampton Institute, earning a bachelor's of science degree with honors in 1951. She went on to complete graduate courses at IBM Data Processing School and LaSalle Extension University. In 1952, she founded Peninsula Business College, the region's first business school for black youths.

Frustrated by the living conditions of blacks, she turned to politics. Rattley ran for city council in 1970 and became the first black female to sit on the Newport News City Council.

Rattley's impact on the council was dramatic, and in 1974 she was reelected, winning the most votes of any of the candidates. In 1976, she was elected vice mayor of the city and in 1986, she was named mayor by her council peers. Jessie was once asked about being African-American to which she replied, "I am a Black American." She was the first Black American, and the first woman to serve as mayor of Newport News.

While in office, she called attention to urban blight. She urged the city to revitalize by installing sidewalks, repaving roads, planting trees, developing community parks, and improving housing for the indigent residents. Her work with voter education and registration helped change status quo politics in Virginia and ushered in a new era of elective representation for African-Americans on local, state, and federal levels and in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.

Rattley was elected the first black female president of the Virginia Municipal League in 1978 and the first black female president of the National League of Cities in 1979. Her spirit and determination gained her considerable attention, and the Virginia Press Women named Rattley "Newsmaker of the Year" in 1980. Two years later, she was appointed by Governor Robb to serve on the Commission on the Future of Virginia. She also became a fellow of the Institute of Politics at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University the same year.

After losing her council seat in 1990, she redirected her political skills. Rattley served on numerous state and national commissions. In 1991, she was invited to join Hampton University's Political Science department. The National League of Cities awarded her their highest honor for her dedication to the citizens of Newport News. She was elected chairman of the Virginia Civil Rights Commission in 1992. Three years later, she was named chair of the Virginia State Advisory Committee of the U. S. Commission of Civil Rights. She was appointed by the Governor to the Criminal Justice and Crime Prevention Task Force. Her commitment to education led her to accept an appointment as chairperson on the Board of Trustees for St. Paul's College.

A charismatic fighter, she built bridges between cities, the national government, and the races. It is a measure of her impact that she became the first person in the history of Newport News to lie in state at City Hall when she lost her long battle with cancer on March 3, 2001.