



### **Mae Ella Nolan (1886 – 1973)**

As the first woman to succeed her husband in Congress, widow Mae Ella Nolan set a precedent by championing the legislative agenda of her late husband, John I. Nolan. Congresswoman Nolan's example influenced many future widows. But her career, which included the distinction of being the first woman to head a congressional committee and all the attendant media attention, proved short-lived.

Mae Ella Hunt was born on September 20, 1886, to Irish immigrants in San Francisco, California, and grew up in its working-class neighborhoods. She attended the public schools in San Francisco, St. Vincent's Convent, and Ayers Business College of San Francisco. After earning a certificate in stenography, she went to work at Wells Fargo Express. In 1913, she married John I. Nolan—a former iron molder and

labor activist—shortly after he was elected to the 63rd Congress (1913–1915) on the Bull Moose Party ticket.

The Union Labor Party nominated Mae Ella Nolan to succeed her husband after his death in 1922. She also received the support of the executive committee of the California Women's Republican League. While campaigning, Nolan embraced a platform that called for relaxing Prohibition laws and supported labor interests. She was elected to the remainder of the 67th Congress (1921–1923) and the full term in the 68th Congress (1923–1925) on January 23, 1923, out-polling her nearest opponent, by more than 4,000 votes. Nolan was an immediate novelty because she was the first widow to serve in Congress.

In the 67th Congress, Nolan was appointed to the Committee on Woman Suffrage. When the 68th Congress convened in late 1923, she received an assignment on the Committee on Labor. Nolan also was appointed to chair the Committee on Expenditures in the Post Office and received national press attention as the first woman to chair a congressional committee.

Claiming that the workload with her additional assignments was too much, she dropped the Woman Suffrage Committee assignment. It was a convenient moment for Nolan to distance herself from the women's rights movement with which she had a relatively cool relationship, largely because her core labor constituency was unsupportive. In particular, the American Federation of Labor vigorously denounced the Equal Rights Amendment (introduced in Congress during Nolan's first year) because of perceptions that it would erode Progressive Era workplace protections for women in industrial jobs. As the only woman in the 68th Congress, Nolan minimized gender differences. "A capable woman is a better representative than an incapable man, and vice versa,"

In her one complete term in Congress, Congresswoman Nolan also gained passage of several bills related to her district, including one transferring the Palace of Fine Arts from the federal government's Presidio to the city of San Francisco and another authorizing construction of a federal building.

Representative Nolan declined to run for re-election to the 69th Congress (1925–1927), citing the time-consuming workload and her responsibilities as a single parent: "Politics is entirely too masculine to have any attraction for feminine responsibilities." Mae Ella Nolan retired from Congress and returned to San Francisco. In later years, she moved to Sacramento, California, where she died on July 9, 1973.