Texas congresswoman Barbara Jordan (1936-1996) rose to the national stage from Houston’s largely African-American Fifth Ward, becoming a public defender of the U.S. Constitution and a leading presence in Democratic Party politics for two decades. She was the first black woman elected to the Texas state senate and the first black Texan in Congress. As a member of the House Judiciary Committee, she gave the influential opening speech of Richard Nixon’s 1974 impeachment hearings. She retired after three terms in Congress to become a professor and policy advocate.

BARBARA JORDAN: EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION
Barbara Charline Jordan was born February 21, 1936, in her parents’ home in Houston. Her father, Benjamin Jordan, was a Baptist minister and warehouse clerk. Her mother Arlyne was a maid, housewife and church teacher.

Did You Know? Texas congresswoman Barbara Jordan’s great-grandfather, Edward Patton, was one of several black representatives who served in the Texas legislature during Reconstruction.

Jordan attended the segregated Phyllis Wheatley High School, where a career day speech by Edith Sampson, a black lawyer, inspired her to become an attorney. Jordan was a member of the inaugural class at Texas Southern University, a black college hastily created by the Texas legislature to avoid having to integrate the University of Texas. There Jordan joined the debate team and helped lead it to national renown. The team famously tied Harvard’s debaters when they came to Houston.

Jordan graduated magna cum laude from Texas Southern University in 1956 and was accepted at Boston University’s law school. Three years later, Jordan earned her law degree as one of only two African-American women in her class. She passed the Massachusetts and Texas bars and returned to Houston to open a law office in the Fifth Ward.
BARBARA JORDAN: TEXAS STATE SENATOR
Jordan volunteered for John F. Kennedy’s 1960 presidential campaign, heading a Harris County voter drive that yielded an 80-percent turnout. She twice ran unsuccessfully for the Texas House before winning the 1966 contest for a newly created Texas State Senate district.

In Austin she won the respect of her colleagues and worked to pass a state minimum wage law that covered farmworkers. In her final year in the state senate, Jordan’s colleagues elected her president pro tem, allowing her to serve as governor for a day—June 10, 1972—in accordance with state tradition.

BARBARA JORDAN: YEARS IN CONGRESS
Five months later Jordan ran for Congress as the Democratic nominee for Houston’s 18th District. She won, becoming the first African-American woman from a Southern state to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives. With support from her close advisor Lyndon B. Johnson, Jordan was appointed to key posts, including on the House Judiciary Committee.

On July 25, 1974, Jordan gave the 15-minute opening statement of the Judiciary Committee’s impeachment hearing for Richard Nixon. Her speech was a staunch defense of the U.S. Constitution (which, she noted, had not initially included African-Americans in its “We, the people”) and its checks and balances designed to prevent abuse of power. She said, “I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.”

The impeachment speech helped lead to Nixon’s resignation over the Watergate scandal and won Jordan national acclaim for her rhetoric, intellect and integrity. Two years later she was asked to deliver the keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention—another first for an African-American woman.

While in Congress Jordan worked on legislation promoting women’s rights, supported the Equal Rights Amendment and cosponsored a bill that would have granted housewives Social Security benefits based on their domestic labor.

BARBARA JORDAN: RETIREMENT, HEALTH TROUBLES, FINAL HONORS
Jordan retired from Congress in 1979 to become a professor at the Lyndon Baines Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas. She became an active public speaker and advocate, amassing 25 honorary doctorates. Her vehement opposition helped derail George Bush’s nomination of Robert Bork (who had opposed many civil rights cases) to the U.S. Supreme Court.
Jordan, who had suffered from multiple sclerosis since 1973, was wheelchair-bound by the time she was invited to give her second Democratic convention keynote address in 1992. Until her death she remained private about her illnesses, which finally included diabetes and cancer.

In 1994 Bill Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country’s highest civilian honor. Jordan died of leukemia-related pneumonia on January 17, 1996. Breaking barriers even in death, she became the first African-American to be buried among the governors, senators and congressmen in the Texas State Cemetery.