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FRIDAY, APRIL 11, 2025

Friday, April 11, 2025
(Local Session)

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Indicates New Matter

The Senate assembled at 11:00 A.M., the hour to which it stood adjourned, and was called to order by the ACTING PRESIDENT, Senator GRAHAM.

Remarks by Senator MATTHEWS

I would request, Mr. PRESIDENT, that Senator SABB join me at the podium. My esteemed colleagues, you all know I have been coming forward to share some of what I have learned during this Women's History Month. I have sat over on the other -- I say other with a deeper tone, side of the room for this session. In so doing I have been looking up at a picture of a woman. I will be the first one to tell you, I did not totally appreciate who that woman was or the impact she had on women's history and on this Senate. I would ask that you join me in looking at the picture of the first female to run for the Senate and to win.

I want to just say a little about her, then I will explain why I have asked Senator SABB to join me. As more and more women enter the political arena, it seems fitting to tell the story of South Carolina's first female senator, who was born in little Williamsburg County. I did not know that, no one told us that. She represented Jasper County in the South Carolina Senate, I did not know, Senator DAVIS, did you know, the first woman represented a county we represent, Jasper County? Although she represented Jasper County, every Williamsburg County citizen should be proud of Mary Gordon Ellis as Senator Ellis. Back when she was elected did you know they wouldn't call her Senator? They called her Mary G. The men refused to allow her that title.

She was one of ten children born to Alexander McKnight Gordon and Mary Lee Gambrell Gordon. McKnight is a big name in that area. Mary Gordon was always interested in public service. The Gordons moved to Kingstree when she was a young girl. The story goes on to say one day when she was thirteen years old, she slipped away from the family farm and her father found her later that afternoon, I love this the most, curled up on one of the back benches in the courthouse of Williamsburg County listening intently to the arguments on a case that was being tried. She was one of seven in the 1909 graduating class of Kingstree Graded and High School. After teaching a year in Sutton, she decided to further her education, guess where, Senator CLIMER? Mary Gordon Ellis

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graduated from Winthrop College. She graduated there by catching a train and going there two hours a day. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1913. She accepted a position of teaching as a teaching principal at a small school in Jasper County. Much to the surprise of many in Kingstree, she quietly married Junius Gather Elliot at her home in Kingstree. Mary continued to teach after her marriage even after her three children, two daughters and one son were born. This was not unusual in that era, but she had the backing of her husband and felt the children of Jasper needed someone with her drive to provide better education. The first position she ran for was Superintendent of Education. This was in 1924. Most of you, I know you know your history. Pursuant to the 19th Amendment women didn't get a chance to vote until when? 1920. She came along to implement improvements to the school system and closed many of the one-room schoolhouses, consolidating them into larger schools. Senator HEMBREE, I know you like this. She insisted that teachers continue their own education so that they could keep up with the new trends in teaching, much to the dismay of many of the teachers who felt they had adequately equipped themselves -- equipped children without extra courses forced upon them. Thank you, Senator Ellis. She encouraged building a teacherage, I have never heard of that, so teachers she recruited would have a place to live and risked the ire of taxpayers when she insisted students at a distance be bused to school.

That was the beginning, and it quickly became apparent Mary Gordon Ellis believed everyone should have access to a good education, no matter the color of their skin. When the Rosenwald grant money became available to build schools for African American children, she worked tirelessly to raise matching funds so that Jasper could become part of the project. She hired Mary Alice Miller to oversee the black schools and insisted those that dealt with her call her Mrs. Miller. A thing unheard of at the time. She also insisted that African American schools have new textbooks and not depend on the hand-me-downs from the white schools that were often tattered and missing papers. She made it clear that black children had just as much right to be bused to school as white children. Busing any children to school but especially bussing African Americans to schools angered many white taxpayers. At their expense, Superintendent of Education was changed from elected to an appointed position. When Mary Ellis did not resign her position, she was fired. Mary Ellis was a fighter. She decided this was unacceptable. Within minutes of being fired, guess what she did? She ran for the State Senate.

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She ran for the State Senate in 1928. With the margin of 150 votes and a run-off, she won. She won that election by beating the man who fired her as superintendent. I love this woman. The campaign was hard-fought. She found herself fighting many battles once she reached the Senate. For her part, she was more interested in working on issues directly related to Jasper County residents and on education. Her fellow Senators eventually settled on calling her Mary G. because they didn't want to call her Senator Ellis. She continued to fight.

Soon after getting to the Senate -- and I told you she had three children -- she was also a bookkeeper for her husband's turpentine farm in Jasper County and a bookkeeper for her family's farm in Williamsburg County. She had three children, and she came to the Senate and fought hard. She ended up getting cancer and continued to serve and travel -- taking the train from Columbia to Florence. That was the only place that would give her radiation treatment for her uterine cancer. After she left the Senate, she would go there for treatment. All the while she was running the State Senate and pursuing economic issues for Jasper County, she was battling this life-threatening disease and helping run her family's businesses. As she continued to deteriorate, her children went to school and she still made sure they had tutors. Her next election came up in 1932. She was pondering whether she should run. Purty, the guy who she had beaten, who was once in the House and the Senate, Purty ran against her. She dropped out of the race because they told her the radiation treatment was not working. Her thirteen-year-old son -- I thought this was great -- Jake, accompanied her to Kingtree. Her daughters Beth and Mickey in high school in Savannah stayed with relatives while her husband continued to run the family farm and turpentine business. They visited as much as possible during her final months. In April of 1970 Ellen Foxworth related a story about young Jake. He arrived at the door of a teacher who was tutoring him one afternoon and asked for extra help in studying for an exam he was to take that evening. He said to his teacher, "Momma is dying, she just has to know that I passed this exam before she dies." On September 9, 1934, Mary Gordon Ellis's battle ended. She is buried in the Gordon Family plot at the cemetery in Kingtree. Involved until the end, she cast her absentee ballot for the 1934 Election on that day before her death.

Ladies and gentlemen, I didn't know that much about her, but she is my new hero. I'm going to take it as a special mission of us Senators, because I looked at her picture and I didn't know the history. The plot that she has is simply a block plot. You know those cement plots. That

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is all to represent her life. I just think we need to do more for someone who was a pioneer only four years after women even had the chance to vote. Thank you, very much.

On motion of Senator DAVIS, with unanimous consent, the remarks of Senator MATTHEWS were ordered printed in the Journal.

ADJOURNMENT

At 11:04 A.M., on motion of Senator JACKSON, the Senate adjourned to meet next Tuesday, April 15, 2025, at 12:00 P.M.

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