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Ex-U.S. Rep. Gene Snyder, 79, dies
Republican leader served 11 terms, landed projects

By Andrew Wolfson

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The Courier-Journal By Andrew Wolfson

Former U.S. Rep. M.G. "Gene" Snyder, a combative, conservative Republican who represented Kentucky for 11 terms and won funding to build the Louisville beltway that bears his name, died Friday night in Naples, Fla.

Snyder, 79, died at home just before midnight with his wife, Patricia, present, said family friend and former U.S. Attorney Joe Whittle, who lives a few blocks away.

Funeral arrangements are pending through Pearson-Ratterman Brothers Funeral Home in Middletown.

Snyder "was a strong and effective Republican leader for a number of decades," said U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., the Senate minority leader, who got his start in politics in 1963 as a summer intern for Snyder.

"I always appreciated him giving me my first political opportunity."

Snyder had undergone back and heart surgery in recent years and complained last week that he had not been feeling well, said Whittle, who had lunch with him last week.

"You got what you saw with Gene -- if he told you something, you didn't have to worry about him changing his mind," he said.

Outspoken conservative

When Snyder won his first term in 1962, his brand of pugnacious conservatism was markedly different from the politics of Jefferson County's moderate Republican establishment.

Then a Jeffersontown real estate broker, homebuilder and insurance agent who also held a law degree, Snyder extolled "individual initiative" over "creeping socialism." He denounced Washington as "the Puzzle Palace on the Potomac."

Snyder was an avid supporter of Arizona Sen. Barry Goldwater, the party's presidential nominee in 1964, and backed Gov. Ronald Reagan of California long before he was elected president in 1980.

As a campaigner, Snyder was usually contemptuous of his Democratic opponents, dismissing one as a "twerp" and a "marshmallow," and likening another to Porky Pig.

In Congress, Snyder proved to be a tough, skilled legislator who rose to be the senior Republican on the Public Works and Transportation Committee.

And as he gained seniority, he became less strident and more pragmatic.

"I mouthed off some then," Snyder said in a 1983 interview about his early years in Congress. "You get more done if you don't."

Bringing the bucks home

From someone who had repeatedly denounced federal spending early in his career, Snyder evolved into a master at bringing federal funds to Kentucky.

In 1982, he won \$52 million to finish Interstate 265 -- also known as the Jefferson Freeway -- around Louisville. He also won funding for the Falmouth Dam in Pendleton County and engineered federal protection for the Falls of the Ohio.

"I used to kid him that you were supposed to be a true conservative but here you got all this pork," Whittle said. "He said that he voted against appropriations bills, but he was going to get all he could for Kentucky."

Eventually the Jefferson Freeway was renamed the Gene Snyder Freeway.

"This is one of those rare namings where the person something is named for really deserved it," McConnell said.

In the House, Snyder was seen as a tough and effective dealmaker, one who was not to be crossed lightly. His charm was that he never tried to pretend that he was anything but a politician who enjoyed playing the game.

Rise to power

Snyder was an obscure county magistrate in 1962 when Republican leaders tapped him to run against the Democratic incumbent in the 3rd District, Rep. Frank Burke, who would later serve a term as mayor of Louisville.

Snyder's presence on the Republican ticket headed by U.S. Sen. Thruston B. Morton gave it conservative ballast. Morton, a member of a prominent Louisville family, was defending his seat against then-Lt. Gov. Wilson W. Wyatt and needed help pulling the conservative vote.

The strategy worked. Morton won comfortably, and Snyder narrowly defeated Burke,

who was serving his second term.

But just two years later, with Goldwater running for president, Snyder was swept from office. The Democrats had nominated the politically eccentric Charles P. Farnsley, a former Louisville mayor.

With President Lyndon B. Johnson sweeping to a record victory, Snyder was overwhelmed. But he would never lose another race.

In 1966, he returned to Congress when the state's congressional map was redrawn to reflect the 1960 census. The old 3rd District had covered all of Jefferson County, but under the new plan the 3rd took in not much more than the city of Louisville.

The suburbs -- and Snyder's political future -- fell into a new 4th District that extended all the way to Boone, Kenton and Campbell counties in Northern Kentucky.

It was thus anchored at each end by conservative suburbs that tended to vote Republican despite their Democratic registration.

Democrats had a good shot at Snyder only twice -- in 1974, the year in which the Watergate scandal and the subsequent pardon of former President Richard Nixon took its toll on GOP ranks, and in 1984, when he struggled to survive despite Reagan's second-term landslide.

In 1974, Snyder had been weakened by a highly publicized divorce and by accusations that he was profiteering in office by representing electric utilities in real-estate transactions within his district.

His opponent was Kyle Hubbard, a Louisville lawyer and the brother of then-U.S. Rep. Carroll Hubbard. Snyder dismissed Hubbard, saying the voters of his district would never elect a man to Congress who looked like Porky Pig.

They almost did. Hubbard carried all but two of the 4th's eight counties but lost the Jefferson County portion of the district by about 7,000 votes. Snyder won by 4,000 votes.

Wealth targeted

Snyder's business dealings were also at the center of the 1984 campaign. While a member of Congress, Snyder's personal wealth had grown considerably through his business interests.

By the time he left Congress, he reported his assets were \$1.5 million to \$3.5 million -- making him by far the wealthiest Kentuckian in the U.S. House. But Snyder brushed aside the complaints of Democrats, saying his constituents appreciated a man who could make his way in the business world.

Democrat Pat Mulloy, the Louisville lawyer who would later serve in Gov. Brereton Jones' cabinet, ran a well-financed campaign in 1984, aggressively arguing that Snyder, through his business interests, had violated House rules.

Snyder, who had come close to retiring, won with just 53 percent of the vote, despite Reagan's huge Kentucky margin. Three months into his 11th term, Snyder said he would not run again.

Snyder signed on as a lobbyist in Washington shortly after leaving office and maintained his real-estate office in the Louisville suburbs.

In 1987, Congress voted to name the federal district courthouse in downtown Louisville for him. He took special pleasure in the fact that the Gene Snyder courthouse stands just across Sixth Street from the building that houses his old political nemesis, The Courier-Journal.

When former Courier-Journal Publisher Barry Bingham Jr. died last April, Snyder, who often criticized the newspaper's liberal editorial position, said, "I wished he'd been on the other side, but he was always honest and straightforward."

Early life

Snyder was born Jan. 26, 1928, in Louisville to Marion Gustavus and Lois E. Snyder. He graduated from duPont Manual High School.

He attended the University of Louisville and got a law degree from the old Jefferson School of Law. While in college, Snyder became active in politics, working as a precinct captain before he was old enough to vote.

He graduated from U of L with a combined bachelor's and law degree, Whittle said.

Snyder married Mary Louise Hodges of Harlan County in 1951 and they had one son, Mark. They were divorced in 1974.

His second wife, Patricia, has two children, Chris and Ginger, Whittle said.

"There was nothing sophisticated about him," Whittle said.

When Snyder came back to the district from Washington, "he would go to barber shops and country stores, not to see the big wheels," Whittle said. "Those were the people he knew and related to."

Reporter Andrew Wolfson can be reached at (502) 582-7189.

Former Courier-Journal political reporter Bob Johnson contributed to this report.

GENE SNYDER

1928 — Born in Louisville.

1950 — Graduated from the Jefferson School of Law (now part of the University of Louisville School of Law). Also admitted to the bar and started his law practice.

1954 — Began political career when elected Jeffersontown city attorney for four-year term.

1962 — Elected to Congress from the 3rd District.

1964 — Defeated in re-election bid.

1966 — Elected again to Congress, this time from the 4th District. In all, he served 11 terms in the House.

1986 — Declined to seek re-election. The Jefferson Freeway was renamed in his honor. The next year, the federal courthouse in downtown Louisville was renamed the Gene Snyder Courthouse and Customhouse.



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U.S. Rep. Gene Snyder attended the renaming of the Jefferson Freeway in his honor in 1986, his last year in office. He had secured funding in 1982 for the road's completion. (1986 Courier-Journal file photo by Adrienne Helitz)



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In an undated photograph, Snyder, left, and his then-wife, Mary Louise, right, met Lyndon Johnson and his wife, Lady Bird, when Johnson was vice president.