

Frederick Richmond, 96, Dies; Congressman Undone by Corruption

A wealthy House member and a champion of liberal causes as a New York civic leader, he was forced to quit Congress in 1982 in a corruption scandal.

By Katharine Q. Seelye

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Frederick W. Richmond, a New York philanthropist and civic leader who helped save Carnegie Hall from demolition but whose tenure in Congress — and public life — ended abruptly in 1982 when he pleaded guilty to corruption charges, died on Dec. 28 at a nursing home in Manhattan. He was 96.

Gloria Spalding, a longtime friend, confirmed the death and said the cause was pneumonia.

Before his fall, Mr. Richmond had been a successful businessman and a prominent civic participant: a human rights commissioner of New York City, president of the Urban League of New York, a New York State cultural official and a protector of Carnegie Hall when it faced the wrecking ball in the 1960s.

A liberal Democrat, he was elected to the House of Representatives from Brooklyn in 1974 as part of a congressional class of post-Watergate reformers. As a member of the House Agriculture Committee, he helped expand the food stamp program, promoted urban gardens and held hearings to investigate Latin American coffee cartels. Ahead of his time, he grew an organic vegetable garden on the roof outside his House office building.

And with a net worth of \$34 million, he was one of the wealthiest members of Congress.

“He was one of the best we had,” Meade Esposito, the powerful Brooklyn Democratic boss, told Pete Hamill and Denis Hamill, brother journalists who explored Mr. Richmond’s life in *New York Magazine* in 1982. “Somewhere along the line he got lost.”

In April 1978, Mr. Richmond was arrested in Washington for soliciting sex from a 16-year-old boy and an undercover cop. He apologized publicly, saying he had “made bad judgments involving my private life.” He admitted to a misdemeanor morals charge, which was dropped after he agreed to 30 days of counseling. In his campaign for re-election that year, he made hefty donations to local charities and easily won a third term.

But he soon became enmeshed in a financial scandal involving self-dealing with Walco National, a holding company he founded. He had appeared to resign as its president to comply with House rules that barred members of Congress from earning outside income exceeding 15 percent of their House salary. But a federal judge found that he had feigned his retirement in order to collect a pension at the rate of \$100,000 a year while still running the company. He also used Walco employees to do political work for him.

Mr. Richmond asserted his innocence to The New York Times. "I'm not ashamed of anything I've done," he said in 1981. "I've done nothing wrong."

A federal grand jury at the time was investigating him on an array of other charges. In one, he was said to have helped a career criminal from Massachusetts, who had escaped from prison, get a clerical job in the House of Representatives; the convict was arrested while sitting in Mr. Richmond's car and soliciting an undercover police officer for sexual favors.

As rumors swirled, Mr. Richmond blamed the Reagan administration's Justice Department and The Times for his woes.

"If I were a conservative Republican from the Middle West, I don't think I'd have as much trouble as I have right now," he told United Press International. He said The Times had a vendetta against him, noting that the columnist Sydney Schanberg had called him "a one-man crime wave."

But even as federal prosecutors closed in on him, Mr. Richmond continued to run for a fifth term in 1982.

That quest ended in August, when he accepted a plea deal under which he resigned his seat immediately, dropped his bid for re-election and pleaded guilty to three charges: tax evasion, for underreporting his 1980 federal income tax by \$50,000; possession of marijuana, obtained from his Congressional staff; and making an illegal payment to a government employee.

"These acts to which I have pled guilty were irresponsible, unnecessary, foolish and wrong," he said in a statement.

He was sentenced to a year and a day in prison and fined \$20,000.

In a separate settlement with the Securities and Exchange Commission, he agreed to return \$425,000 in improper pension payments that he had received from Walco for faking his retirement.

Mr. Richmond's personal life suffered another blow when a young man whom he had been planning to adopt committed suicide in Mr. Richmond's Sutton Place apartment in Manhattan. Mr. Richmond was in Washington at the time awaiting sentencing.

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Mr. Richmond, at far right, during a New York City Council meeting at City Hall in 1973. He served on the council briefly before he was elected to Congress in 1974 as part of the post-Watergate reform class. Neal Boenzi/The New York Times

Frederick William Richmond was born in Boston on Nov. 15, 1923, to George and Frances (Rosen) Richmond. His father was a lawyer, his mother a homemaker who gave her son piano lessons.

Fred went to Boston University, enrolled briefly at Harvard and enlisted in the Navy during World War II. After the war he returned to Boston University and graduated in 1946. To pay for his education, he formed the Freddie Richmond Swing Band, with himself at the piano.

After college he moved to New York and started a lucrative import-export business. He married Monique Alice Pflieger, a socialite, in 1955. They were divorced two years later. They had one son, William McNeir Richmond, who died last year.

Mr. Richmond's business interests shifted to buying and selling machinery and acquiring companies. He amassed a fortune, and in 1962 he formed the Frederick W. Richmond Foundation, through which he supported liberal causes.

He also became active in Democratic politics. From 1958 to 1960 he was deputy finance chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

Mr. Richmond, who supported programs for the poor, created what he called neighborhood study clubs. He rented out storefronts in Harlem to provide safe spaces for young people to study after school and provided reading tutorials on Saturdays. And as a promoter of the arts, in 1960 he joined the successful campaign, led by the violinist Isaac Stern, to save Carnegie Hall.

With a developer preparing to raze the hall to make way for an apartment building, Mr. Richmond enlisted the help of Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr., who ordered a temporary halt to the project. The city and state then created the Carnegie Hall Corporation to assume ownership of the property, making Mr. Stern the president and Mr. Richmond chairman of the board. He held the position for 18 years.

Mr. Richmond was elected to the New York City Council in 1973 and served there briefly before he was elected to Congress.

Mr. Richmond was released from the Allenwood federal prison in Pennsylvania in 1983 after serving five months of his 12-month sentence and went to Paris. Returning to New York, he resumed work with his foundation. But his public life was over.

As his lawyer had said at his sentencing, Mr. Richmond was “tortured, humiliated, defeated.”