Jeannette Rankin

“The First Federally Elected Woman in the United States”
June 11, 1880 – May 18, 1973

Jeannette Rankin was born near Missoula, Montana on June 11, 1880. As a child, Rankin worked on her family’s ranch doing both farm and household chores including maintaining machinery and helping to build various items. Rankin later recalled noticing while men and women worked side by side on the frontier and were equals in that regard, they did not in fact have equal access to voting.

In 1902, Rankin graduated from the University of Montana with a biology degree. She then ended up at the University of Washington, where she became involved with the women’s suffrage movement. She went on to help organize the New York Women’s Suffrage Party and served as a lobbyist for the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Rankin returned to Montana in February of 1911 and became the first woman to argue for women’s suffrage in front of a state legislature.

In November of 1914, six years before the 19th Amendment, Montana granted unrestricted voting rights to women. In 1916, Jeannette Rankin again made history when she became the first woman in US history elected to the House of Representatives, a remarkable feat at the time considering that most women would not have the right to vote for another four years. A member of the Republican Party, Rankin was the first federally elected woman in the United States, elected at the age of thirty-six as one of Montana’s two congressional representatives.

On April 6, 1917, just four days after being sworn into office, Rankin voted against American intervention in World War I. “I wish to stand for my country,” Rankin declared, “but I cannot vote for war.” This vote generated a considerable amount of ill will and cost her reelection in 1918. During her term, she did have the opportunity to cast a vote to give American women access to voting.

After leaving Congress, Rankin moved to Georgia where she continued to work for peace, giving speeches for organizations such as the Women’s Peace Union and the National Council for the Prevention of War. Additionally, Rankin worked for social change, fighting to ban child labor and to provide for better welfare of women and children.

In 1940, at age sixty, Rankin again ran for Congress and won a seat in the House of Representatives, where she was appointed to the Committee on Public Lands and the Committee on Insular Affairs. On December 8, 1941, Rankin again voted against war, casting the only vote in Congress against the country’s declaration of war on Japan. “As a woman I can’t go to war and I refuse to send anyone else,” she stated.

Again, her vote against war cost her reelection. After leaving Congress again, Rankin returned to private life, emerging again in January of 1968 to lead a march against the Vietnam War that ended on the steps of the US Capitol building, Rankin’s consistent devotion to peace earned her the moniker of “the original dove in Congress.”

Rankin, who never married, died in 1973. In Missoula Cemetery, a memorial stone to Rankin stands, and she left her entire estate to help “mature, unemployed women workers.”

Sources
https://www.nps.gov/people/jeannette-rankin.htm
https://history.house.gov/People/Listing/R/RANKIN,-Jeannette-(R000055)/