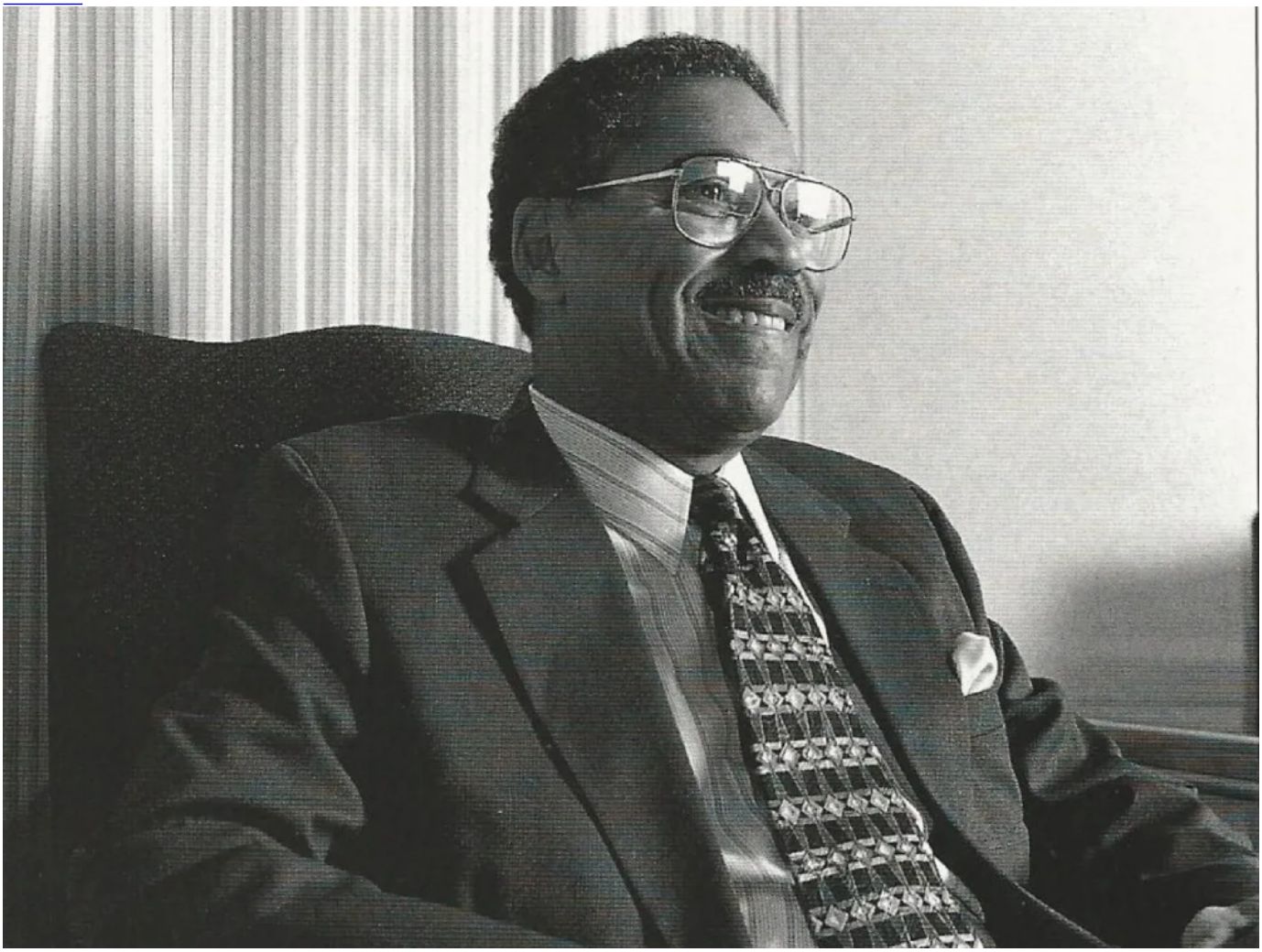
News



Then-U.S. Rep William Lacy “Bill” Clay Sr. in an undated photo. (Wiley Price)

Nate Tinner-Williams

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July 28, 2025

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William Lacy "Bill" Clay Sr., the first Black congressperson from Missouri and patriarch of a St. Louis political family, has died in Maryland after a period in hospice care. Clay, who was raised Catholic, was 94, and no cause of death was released.

Clay's family announced his passing on July 17, the day after his death.

"The Black community, almost overwhelmingly, looked at him as a fighter for them," Clay's son and congressional successor Lacy Clay Jr. told STLPR on Thursday.

> Missouri Reps. Wesley Bell and Emanuel Cleaver, joined by the state's bipartisan delegation on the House floor, paid tribute to the late former St. Louis Democratic Rep. William "Bill" Clay Sr., who died at age 94. He was Missouri's first Black congressman and one of founding… pic.twitter.com/64BIc8zU0E
>
> — Craig Caplan (@CraigCaplan) July 18, 2025

Born in 1931 in St. Louis, Clay joined the predominantly Black St. Nicholas Catholic Church with his family in the 1940s. He graduated from the parochial elementary and high school and matriculated to Saint Louis University shortly after it first admitted Black students. He graduated with a degree in history and political science in 1953 before joining the Army. After a two-year stint, in which he protested against military-sponsored segregation, he worked as a bus driver and real estate broker.

Clay entered politics in the late 1950s, running successfully for city alderman to represent the predominantly Black 26th ward. He also served simultaneously as a labor union official. Near the end of his five-year tenure as alderman, he was arrested for his participation in a civil rights demonstration, serving three and a half months in jail.

After three years with the city employees' union, Clay worked as an education coordinator for a steamfitters' local from 1966 to 1967 before prepping a run for the U.S. House of Representatives, which had never before seen a Black lawmaker from Missouri. St. Louis' Black population had been steadily increasing, leading to a newly redrawn 1st Congressional District mandated by the Supreme Court in 1964.

Clay defeated five opponents in the Democratic primary to succeed Frank M. Karsten , who chose not to run for the seat under its new demographics. In the 1968 general election, Clay faced a Black Republican in Curtis C. Crawford, winning in a landslide.

During his time in Washington, Clay became known for his forthright stance on civil and labor rights, cofounding the Congressional Black Caucus in 1971. He spearheaded major legislation such as the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1990 and the Hatch Act reforms of 1993 on political endorsements from government employees, and also supported raising the minimum wage and need-based college grants.

"He fought tirelessly to open doors of opportunity and to protect the rights of working people across our nation," the CBC said in a statement.

"His voice carried the strength of conviction and the clarity of purpose that helped shape a more inclusive nation."

> It is with deep respect and profound sadness that we mourn the passing of former Congressman Bill Clay Sr. — a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus.
>
> May he rest in peace. pic.twitter.com/s2rDciJnwn
>
> — The Black Caucus (@TheBlackCaucus) July 17, 2025

In the final decade of his 32-year career in Congress, Clay authored a number of nonfiction books, including "To Kill or Not to Kill," a meditation on capital punishment and "Just Permanent Interests: Black Americans in Congress," drawn from his experience during the boom of Black lawmakers in Washington following the Civil Rights Movement.

After his retirement from the House in 2001, Clay authored "Racism in the White House"; a memoir, "Bill Clay: A Political Voice at the Grass Roots"; and "The Jefferson Bank Confrontation," covering his civil rights protest and arrest in 1963. A second memoir, "Power of Principled Politics," was released in 2011, and his final book, "Clarence Thomas: A Black Knight in Tainted Armor," arrived in 2015.

Since his election to Congress, Clay has been the subject of numerous honors, including a building renaming in 1996 at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, the

renaming of the Poplar Street Bridge between St. Louis and East St. Louis, Illinois, in his honor in 2013, and a star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame in 2006. The William L. Clay Sr. Early Childhood Development Center was dedicated at Harris-Stowe University, St. Louis' local HBCU, in 2009.

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Clay's alma mater, SLU, awarded him an honorary degree in 2018, and the university's Pioneer Award in 2023. The school also established the William L. Clay Sr. Institute of Civic Engagement and Economic Justice in early July, just weeks before his death.

At the time of his death, Clay was a resident of Adelphi, Maryland, with his daughter, Vicki Jackson. He was predeceased by his wife of 72 years, Carol Johnson Clay, and a brother, former St. Louis city alderman Irving Clay Jr. He is survived by his children, including a second daughter, Michelle Clay Rorie, and his son Lacy, who succeeded him in Congress and served until 2021; a sister, Flora Everett; five grandchildren, including Belleville, Illinois' first Black police officer and police chief, Col. William "Bill" Clay III; and two great-grandchildren.

A visitation for Clay has been scheduled for Thursday, July 31, at Hines-Rinaldi Funeral Home in Silver Spring, Maryland, at 11am ET. A funeral service will follow at 12:30pm, with burial to take place at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. A public memorial service in Missouri will be announced at a later date.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to the William L. Clay Scholarship and Research Fund, which supports underserved college students from Missouri's 1st Congressional District.

This story was originally published in Black Catholic Messenger.