

# Marie Turner, 81; Championed Winthrop's interests for decades

By Alli Knothe | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 23, 2012



Mrs. Turner (above) helped change the face of Deer Island, which now has 60 acres of open space and miles of trails.

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As the only woman on the 11-member Massachusetts Water Resources Authority's board of directors, Marie Turner vigorously represented the interests of Winthrop and made ridding Boston Harbor of pollution a priority.

"She was tenacious and passionate about the cleanup of the harbor and about Winthrop," said Fred Laskey, executive director of the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, and she was not to be taken lightly.

“You could never pull a fast one on her,” he said. “She would go toe to toe with the other board members.”

Mrs. Turner, who had served Winthrop in a variety of roles since the early 1960s, from secretary to town clerk to becoming the first woman elected to the Board of Selectmen, died in her Winthrop home July 25. She was 81 and had long been treated for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

For decades, few activities in Winthrop were untouched by Mrs. Turner, who was secretary to the selectmen many years ago. In 1991, at 60, Mrs. Turner was elected by a large margin to serve with the selectmen and later chaired the board.

She also had been a deputy tax collector and assistant treasurer in Winthrop and volunteered with many civic organizations, among them the Winthrop Emblem Club, the Winthrop Improvement and Historical Association, the Winthrop Mixed Lodge of the Sons of Italy, and the Rotary Club.

“I just wanted to do my share,” Mrs. Turner told the Globe in 2003.

Family and friends said Mrs. Turner lived for two things: her family and Winthrop.

“She was such a feisty woman,” said Robert A. DeLeo, speaker of the Massachusetts House, who started working with Mrs. Turner in the late 1970s and had been a friend - ever since. “She had unbelievable knowledge on how the town operates and what are the best ways to run things and make sure things were efficient.”

DeLeo said Mrs. Turner wrote his speeches when he was a member of Winthrop’s Board of Selectman and brought a touch he missed when he was elected state representative. The two stayed in touch after he went to the State House, and she often called him about Winthrop issues.

Laskey said Mrs. Turner brought a first-person perspective to addressing pollution woes that had beset the harbor.

“For much of the summer, she and her neighbors would have to have their windows closed due to the stench,” he said.

She told stories about not being able to swim in the polluted water and being afraid of falling out of a boat.

“When she put our feet to the fire, you could feel the heat of it,” Laskey said. “We made the dirtiest harbor one of the cleanest in the country.”

Laskey also credited Mrs. Turner with helping to change the face of Deer Island, which now has 60 acres of open space and miles of trails that are part of the National Park Service.

In 2004, a Deer Island street was named in her honor, and upon her death the MWRA placed a wreath on the sign for Marie Turner Way.

Rita Driscoll, a lifelong resident of Winthrop and a member on the town’s Council on Aging, had been close friends with Mrs. Turner since the 1970s, when they worked in the town clerk’s office. Driscoll said Mrs. Turner worked on a range of issues to help Winthrop, from helping to find better offices for the Police Department to personally going to a store to buy water for families after a water main break.

Born in East Boston, Marie Ambrose’s family moved to Winthrop when she was an infant. She was one of six children whose father was a milk man, so the family had limited financial means, said her sister Sheila Caggiano of Shrewsbury.

Mrs. Turner often took care of her younger twin brothers or ran errands for their mother, and the family could not afford to send Mrs. Turner to college.

“She was very brave, very smart,” Caggiano said. “No matter what she did, she was good at it.”

Mrs. Turner graduated from Winthrop High School and married Willard Turner Sr., who was the brother of a neighbor. Mr. Turner died in 2001.

“She used to go dancing, and she told him that if he wanted to go out with her he would have to learn how to dance, so he did,” said her daughter Terri Furlong of Winthrop.

After marrying, the Turners moved into a home on Point Shirley. “All they had was enough money to go buy a hotdog to celebrate,” Mrs. Turner’s daughter said.

In 1964, the family moved to Johnson Avenue and then continued about a half mile down the street, settling down for good on Court Road.

As her husband went to work at a fish market, Mrs. Turner stayed home to take care of the children, but medical bills not covered by insurance prompted her to take a job as

a bookkeeper. A few years later, she began working for the town, her daughter said.

Mrs. Turner lived with her two daughters, their children, and a great-grandchild and was determined to be home with them until the end.

“She was the mother hen of us,” her sister said.

A service has been held for Mrs. Turner, who in addition to her sister and daughter leaves her other daughter, Kathleen of Winthrop; a son, Willard Jr. of Worcester; and two brothers, Edwin Ambrose of Winthrop and William Ambrose of New Hampshire.

“She fought hard for the town of Winthrop,” Driscoll said, “and they’re going to have big shoes to fill.”

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