

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

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BARBARA LAWTON

1951-2018

City: Algoma, Green Bay, Hales
County: Brown, Dane, Kewaunee,
Milwaukee, Racine

Barbara Lawton, forty-third lieutenant governor of Wisconsin, was the first woman to be elected to that position.

Peggy Ann (“Peg”) Lautenschlager was born in 1955 in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Her parents were both public school teachers. She was valedictorian of her graduating class at Goodrich High School, graduated summa cum laude from Lake Forest College in 1977, and went on to the University of Wisconsin Law School. After she graduated from law school in 1980, Lautenschlager began practicing law in Oshkosh, specializing in family and domestic abuse law. She was also an adjunct faculty member at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, Ripon College, and the University of Wisconsin Law School.

Lautenschlager ran for Wisconsin State Assembly in 1984, but did not win. She was appointed district attorney for Winnebago County in 1985, though, and then was elected to that position the next year. She was the first woman to serve in that position, which she held until 1988, when she ran for Assembly again and won—the first Democrat to represent the Fond du Lac area in 75 years. She was re-elected in 1990. She served on many Assembly committees, including those dealing with utilities and mining, elections and constitutional law, judiciary, natural resources, and criminal justice. In addition, she was the vice-chair of the legislative counsel committees on drug enforcement and review of sexual assault laws and chaired the Select Committee on Drug Enforcement, Education, and Treatment.

Lautenschlager ran for U.S. Congress in 1993, but her Republican opponent won by a small margin. That same year, President Bill Clinton appointed Lautenschlager as U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Wisconsin. In that role she reported to Janet Reno, the first female U.S. Attorney General, whom she admired. In 1996 Lautenschlager became the first Wisconsinite to serve on the prestigious Attorney General’s Advisory Committee. Lautenschlager stepped down as a U.S. Attorney when President Clinton’s presidency ended in 2001.

In 2003, Lautenschlager was elected as Wisconsin’s Attorney General—the first and, so far, the only woman to hold this position in charge of the state’s Department of Justice. In this role she championed the enforcement of open records and open meetings laws by creating a public integrity unit. She also sued drug manufacturers for overcharging for medications. In 2006, she opposed a Wisconsin referendum to invalidate gay marriages.

Lautenschlager’s term as Attorney General ended in 2007, but she continued to be involved in public service. She provided pro bono legal services to young people in Fond du Lac, worked with the Service Employees International Union, and, in 2011, fought for public access to the state capital during the Act 10 protests. In 2016, she was appointed chair of the newly formed State of Wisconsin Ethics Commission; she resigned in 2017.

Peg Lautenschlager was seen as a trailblazer for women in Wisconsin politics. She was involved in many organizations, both political and not, such as the Democratic National Convention, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, the Girl Scouts, and the Governor’s council on Domestic Abuse. She was also a member of the board of directors of the Western Wisconsin Bar Association and the Oshkosh Rape Crisis Center.

Lautenschlager died of cancer in 2018.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/barbara-lawton