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## Percy E. Sutton, Political Trailblazer, Dies at 89

By [DOUGLAS MARTIN](#)

[Percy E. Sutton](#), a pioneering figure who represented [Malcolm X](#) as a young lawyer and became one of the nation's most prominent black political and business leaders, died in a Manhattan nursing home on Saturday, his family said. He was 89.

Entering politics in the early 1950s, Mr. Sutton rose from the Democratic clubhouses of Harlem to become the longest-serving Manhattan borough president and, for more than a decade, the highest-ranking black elected official in New York City.

Mr. Sutton, whose passion for civil rights was inherited from his father, was arrested as a Freedom Rider in Mississippi and Alabama in the 1960s, yet once described himself as “an evolutionist rather than a revolutionist” in matters of race. “You ought always to keep the lines of communication open with those with whom you disagree,” he said.

He was the senior member of the group of prominent Harlem politicians who became known, sometimes derisively, as the Gang of Four. The other three were [David N. Dinkins](#), New York's first black mayor; Representative [Charles B. Rangel](#); and Basil A. Paterson, who was a state senator and New York's secretary of state. Mr. Sutton was also a mentor to Mr. Paterson's son, Gov. [David A. Paterson](#).

“It was Percy Sutton who talked me into running for office, and who has continued to serve as one of my most valued advisers ever since,” Governor Paterson said in a statement on Saturday night.

In a statement on Sunday, [President Obama](#) called Mr. Sutton “a true hero to African-Americans in New York City and around the country.”

Mr. Sutton was the first seriously regarded black candidate for mayor when he ran in 1977. But after he finished fifth in a seven-way Democratic primary, his supporters saw the loss as a stinging rebuke of his campaign's strenuous efforts to build support among whites. Still, Mr. Dinkins, who was elected in 1989, called Mr. Sutton's failed bid indispensable to his own success.

"I stand on the shoulders of Percy Ellis Sutton," he later said.

Mr. Sutton's business empire included, over the years, radio stations, cable television systems and national television programs. Another business invested in Africa. Still another sold interactive technology to radio stations.

Mr. Sutton had an immaculately groomed beard and mustache, tailored clothing and a sonorous voice that prompted a nickname, "wizard of ooze." Associates called him "the chairman," a nickname more to his liking.

Percy Ellis Sutton, the last child in a family of 15 children, was born on Nov. 24, 1920, in San Antonio and grew up on a farm nearby in Prairie View, Tex. His father, Samuel Johnson Sutton, born in the last days of slavery, was the principal of a segregated high school in San Antonio. His mother, Lillian, was a teacher.

The 12 children who survived into adulthood went to college, with the older ones giving financial and moral support to the younger. (One of the brothers, Oliver C. Sutton, became a State Supreme Court justice in Manhattan.)

His father was an early civil rights activist who farmed, sold real estate and owned a mattress factory, a funeral home and a skating rink — in addition to being a full-time educator.

Percy milked the cows and sometimes helped his father deliver milk to the poor, riding in the same Studebaker that was used for funerals.

At 12, he stowed away on a passenger train to New York, where he slept under a sign on 155th Street. Far from being angry, his family regarded him as an adventurer, he later said.

From an early age, he bristled at prejudice. At 13, while passing out [N.A.A.C.P.](#) leaflets in an all-white

neighborhood, he was beaten by a policeman.

Mr. Sutton attended Prairie View A & M, as well as Tuskegee in Alabama and Hampton University in Virginia, without earning a degree. During college, he took up stunt-flying on the barnstorming circuit, but gave it up after a friend crashed.

When World War II began, he tried to enlist in Texas but was turned away. He finally enlisted in New York, and served as an intelligence officer with the [Tuskegee Airmen](#), the famed all-black unit of the Army Air Forces. He won combat stars in the Italian and Mediterranean theaters.

After the war, Mr. Sutton entered Columbia Law School on the G.I. Bill on the basis of his solid college grades, but transferred to Brooklyn Law School because he worked two jobs — at a post office from 4 p.m. until midnight, then as a subway conductor until 8:30 in the morning. He reported to law school at 9:30. This schedule continued for three years until he graduated.

The punishing pace so annoyed his wife, the former Leatrice O'Farrell, that she divorced him in 1950 — only to remarry him in 1952. In between, he married and divorced Eileen Clark.

Mr. Sutton is survived by his wife, Leatrice; a son from their marriage, Pierre; a daughter from his second marriage, Cheryl Lynn Sutton; his sister, Essie Mae Sutton of New York; and four grandchildren.

After law school, Mr. Sutton made what he called “a major miscalculation” — enlisting in the Air Force because he mistakenly thought he had failed the bar exam.

He served in the Korean War, and in 1953 opened a law practice in Harlem. The initial going was tough; he had to take extra jobs, one of which involved scrubbing floors.

Mr. Sutton threw himself into the civil rights movement, representing more than 200 people arrested in protests in the South. He heard Malcolm X preaching at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue and introduced himself, telling the activist that he was his new lawyer.

Mr. Sutton represented Malcolm X beyond his assassination in 1965, when cemeteries refused his body. Mr.

Sutton arranged for burial in Westchester County.

“Had it not been for Percy, I don’t know where Malcolm would have been buried,” Mr. Dinkins said.

In the 1950s, Mr. Sutton worked in political campaigns, both for others and for himself. He lost seven times in 11 years in challenges to established Democrats for a State Assembly seat, finally winning by a slim margin in 1964.

In 1966, the Manhattan borough president, [Constance Baker Motley](#), was appointed to a federal judgeship, and the [City Council](#) chose Mr. Sutton to replace her. He was elected that fall to serve the remaining three years of her term, then was re-elected twice, in 1969 and 1973. When the Beame administration, engulfed in the fiscal crisis, could not come up with the \$20,000 needed to expand the [New York City Marathon](#) into a five-borough race in 1976, Mr. Sutton solicited \$25,000 from Lewis and Jack Rudin, the real estate executives..

In 1973, Mr. Sutton threw his support to [Abraham D. Beame](#), who faced a strong challenge from Representative Herman Badillo. Mr. Sutton hoped that, in return, Mr. Beame would support him in 1977 in the race for mayor of New York.

Mr. Sutton saw his path to victory as combining minority support with that of the white liberals and organization Democrats who had elevated Mr. Beame. But the mayor delayed making a decision on running for re-election, causing Mr. Sutton to tell The New York Times, “It’s rather castrating to be waiting on others for your future.”

Mr. Beame finally decided to run again, and Mr. Sutton embraced a strategy of appealing to whites by taking strong anti-crime stands and championing white ethnic neighborhoods. But polls suggested that many New Yorkers saw mainly the color of his skin. This, to Mr. Sutton, was “the most disheartening, deprecating, disabling experience.”

As the Democratic primary grew more crowded, with seven candidates running, Mr. Sutton eventually switched tactics and tried to shore up his black support. It was not enough, though the eventual victor, [Edward I. Koch](#), later called Mr. Sutton “one of the smartest people I have met in politics or outside of politics.”

Mr. Sutton blamed the news media as much as his opponents for his defeat. “It’s racism pure and simple,” he declared.

Mr. Sutton began investing in media companies in 1971, while he was Manhattan borough president, and he was part of a group that bought The New York Amsterdam News, New York’s largest black newspaper. Later that year, the same group’s purchase of an AM station, WLIB, made it the first black-owned radio station in New York.

Critics said the borough president was using the weekly to further his own political career, but he insisted he wanted to “liberate” blacks by expanding their influence in the media.

(Skeptics could not help noting that an Amsterdam News writer wrote that he had never seen “a more diligent or competent public official” than Mr. Sutton.)

Mr. Sutton sold his stake in the paper in 1975, calling it “a political liability.”

In 1974, he and his investors bought WBLS-FM, and the group, Inner City Broadcasting, grew to own, at various times, 18 radio stations in other cities and cable franchises in Queens and Philadelphia.

In 1981, Inner City, of which Mr. Sutton was chairman, bought the Apollo, the celebrated Harlem theater, at a bankruptcy sale for \$225,000. He presided over a \$20 million renovation, which included building a cable television studio used to produce the syndicated television program “It’s Showtime at the Apollo.” The theater reopened in 1985.

In 1992, a nonprofit foundation took over the theater after Mr. Sutton said he could no longer afford to run it. Some years later, Mr. Sutton became a defendant in a lawsuit by the state attorney general, [Dennis C. Vacco](#), that accused the foundation, of which Mr. Rangel was chairman, of failing to collect \$4 million from Inner City. Mr. Sutton denied wrongdoing, and the suit was eventually settled. When Inner City began producing a program called “Showtime in Harlem” in 2002, the theater accused the company of violating the Apollo trademark and filed suit.

Feuds and controversies materialized in Mr. Sutton’s political career, as well. There was bitterness between

him and Mr. Badillo over the 1977 mayoral race — when the supporters of each accused the other of splitting the black and Hispanic vote — as well as the 1985 race, when Mr. Sutton and other Harlem leaders refused to endorse Mr. Badillo. They instead backed Assemblyman [Herman D. Farrell Jr.](#)

In 1970, Mr. Sutton was criticized when he helped Mr. Rangel unseat Representative [Adam Clayton Powell Jr.](#) Ebony magazine said Mr. Sutton’s actions “did little to endear him to blacks in New York and across the nation.”

Mr. Sutton sometimes recalled how his father would not let his children play in a segregated San Antonio park on the one day of the year that they were allowed in — on June 19, the anniversary of Texas’s implementation of the Emancipation Proclamation.

But Mr. Sutton also remembered something else he had learned from his father: “Suffer the hurts, but don’t show the anger, because if you do, it will block you from being able to effectively do anything to remove the hurts.”

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