

Kansas's trailblazing senator Nancy Kassebaum Baker dies at 94

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Special to The Capital-Journal

Aug. 22, 2026, 4:08 a.m. CT

- Nancy Kassebaum Baker, the first woman to represent Kansas in the U.S. Senate, has died at age 94.
- She served in the Senate for 18 years, from 1978 to 1997, and was the only woman in the chamber for her first two years.
- A moderate Republican, Kassebaum Baker was known for her independent decisions and bipartisan work, including co-sponsoring the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).
- She was the daughter of former Kansas governor Alf Landon and later married former U.S. Senator Howard Baker.
- In her later years, she crossed party lines to endorse Democratic candidates for Kansas governor and spoke out against divisive politics.

When Nancy Kassebaum Baker began her first full term in the U.S. Senate in January 1979, she was the only woman among its 100 members. It took awhile for her to adjust to her singular status.

She avoided the Senate members' private dining room because she felt intimidated being surrounded by her male counterparts. At that time, there were no bathroom facilities for women on the Senate Chamber floor; she had to use a restroom on a lower level.

At some point, however, Kassebaum Baker realized being the only woman in the U.S. Senate could be an advantage.

“Everybody was rather curious about hearing and seeing a woman senator at that point,” she recalled in August 2017 during an interview

for the Women of the Senate Oral History Project. “I was invited to give the speeches or talks, which I didn’t do a lot of, but then I was appreciative of an awareness that actually I think was an advantage.”

Nancy (Landon) Kassebaum Baker, part of a Kansas and national political lineage that spanned more than 60years, died Aug. 21, 2026, according to a [statement from her family](#). She was 94 years old.



Nancy Kassebaum Baker: 'I believed I could contribute something'

Kassebaum Baker, who spent her last years living in the century-old stone house at her ranch in Burdick, served in the U.S. Senate from

Dec. 23, 1978, to Jan. 3, 1997 — 18 years and 11 days — before retiring.

She was the daughter of Alf Landon, who was Kansas governor from 1933 to 1937 and the Republican nominee for president in 1936, and the wife of the late Howard Baker, a powerful U.S. senator, ambassador to Japan and White House chief of staff for President Ronald Reagan.

Kassebaum Baker achieved many firsts during her political career: She was the first woman to represent Kansas in the U.S. Senate. She was the only woman in the 100-member U.S. Senate during the first two years of her Senate career. She was the first woman to be elected to a full term in the U.S. Senate who had not succeeded her husband in Congress.

Although Republican, Kassebaum Baker was a moderate who took pride in making independent decisions rather than always towing the party line, especially when it came to women's reproductive rights and health insurance reform. She focused on policies related to reducing the budget deficit, international arms control, reforming liability laws related to general aviation and ending apartheid in South Africa.

"I believed I could contribute something, that I had something to offer," Kassebaum Baker told the U.S. Senate Historical Office in 2017.

Kassebaum Baker's family will have a private memorial for her at a later date. She is survived by sons John Kassebaum Jr., an attorney, and William Kassebaum, of Burdick, an attorney, rancher and former Kansas House member.

She is preceded in death by her second husband, Howard Baker; son Richard Kassebaum, a documentary film editor who died of a brain tumor at age 47; daughter Linda Kassebaum Johnson, a veterinarian who died at age 62; and first husband, John Philip Kassebaum.



The early years

Born Nancy Josephine Landon on July 29, 1932, in Topeka to Gov. Alf Landon and Kansas First Lady Theo Cobb Landon, Kassebaum Baker graduated from Topeka High School in 1950 and earned a bachelor's degree in political science in 1954 from the University of Kansas.