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Dave Powers, Kennedy aide and Camelot defender, dies at 85

By ALISON FITZGERALD
Associated Press

BOSTON — Dave Powers, the Boston Irishman who was John F. Kennedy's famously devoted aide every step of the way to the White House and served after JFK's assassination as the keeper of the Camelot legend, died Friday, March 27, 1998, at 85.

Powers came to be known as Kennedy's "coatholder" and "Sancho Panza" because he spent his life tending to JFK's career, his widow and children, and finally his legacy, as curator of the John F. Kennedy Library museum.

"Jack loved Dave Powers like a brother, and so did all of us in the Kennedy family. Jack couldn't have had the New Frontier without him, and we will miss him very much," Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., said in a statement.

The man who called himself "just a newsboy who met a president" had been sought out by the wealthy Kennedys in the early days of JFK's political career because he was closely connected to Boston's blue-collar Irish-American families.

The child of Irish immigrants, Powers had an Irish-Catholic upbringing in the Charlestown section of Boston. He hawked newspapers on the waterfront, spent Sundays at the church assisting at five Masses, and knew everyone in the neighborhood.

Because of that, a campaign worker directed Kennedy to Powers' door when the future president was campaigning for Congress in 1946. Powers had been supporting the rival candidate, but he was so taken by the young Kennedy that he changed camps forever.

Powers initiated JFK into the rough and tumble of Boston campaigning and in how to deal with the ordinary folk of the city. At one rally, he persuaded Kennedy to improve the impact of a high-toned speech by emphasizing that his parents were natives of the district.

In later years, Powers traveled thousands of miles with Kennedy on various campaigns and missions.

After Kennedy was elected president in 1960, the man who called himself a "three-decker Irishman," referring to the houses of Boston's Irish-American enclaves, became a special assis-

tant in the White House.

Powers served as an unofficial greeter at White House functions and as a full-time friend to the president.

Kennedy, he said, "was the greatest man I ever met and the best friend I ever had."

Powers, a leprechaun-like figure with twinkly eyes, was known for his humor and his indifference toward those with lofty titles. He once told the visiting shah of Iran, "I want you to know you're my kind of shah."

Friends said Powers remembered all of Kennedy's campaigns so well he could rattle off the

exact number of votes JFK got in each election.

On Nov. 22, 1963, Powers was riding in the presidential motorcade in Dallas when Kennedy was shot. When the president's limousine reached Parkland Hospital, Powers helped remove Kennedy and put him on a stretcher.

That afternoon he accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy back to Washington, next to the casket on Air Force One.

Powers recalled the trip back to Washington in an article for Life magazine.

"On that long, sad ride home, Jackie sat next to the casket. She was so brave on the trip back to Washington. At one point she turned to me and said, 'Oh, Dave, you've been with him all these years. What will you do now?'" recalled Powers. "I choked up — I couldn't answer her."

In "Johnny, We Hardly Knew Ye," the book Powers wrote with Kennedy appointment secretary Kenneth P. O'Donnell in 1972, the writers recalled Powers was so upset he "drew the priest aside when they were leaving the trauma room and asked Father Huber to hear his confession. He thought he was having a heart attack."

Following the assassination, Kennedy's widow sought solace for her son by having Powers come to her house in Georgetown every day for lunch with John F. Kennedy Jr.

"Dave Powers was a loyal and devoted friend whom my mother and father adored," said JFK's daughter Caroline Kennedy, President of the Kennedy Library Foundation. "I will always be grateful for his personal kindness and for his tireless efforts on behalf of the Kennedy Library."

Powers went on to help in former Sen. Robert F. Kennedy's campaigns. He also began work assembling records and memorabilia for the JFK Library in 1964. He served as its museum curator from its opening in 1979 until he retired in 1994.

In 1975, JFK's legacy came under serious fire when Judith Campbell Exner claimed that she had been both Kennedy's White House mistress and the girlfriend of a Chicago mobster and that Powers had arranged meetings between her and the president. Powers denied knowing Exner and once said "the only Campbell I know is chunky vegetable soup."

Powers served in the Army Air Force in China, Burma and India during World War II. Before going into politics, he worked in publishing and was director of the Boston Housing Authority's recreation department in South Boston. He later became a member of the State Housing Board.

Powers died at a hospital in suburban Arlington.

He is survived by his wife, Jo, a son, two daughters and three grandchildren.

Funeral arrangements were incomplete.

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Dave Powers, JFK's Loyal Aide

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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came a special assistant in the White House. He served as an unofficial greeter at White House functions and as a full-time friend to the president. Kennedy, he said, "was the greatest man I ever met and the best friend I ever had."

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Funeral Services for Kennedy Aide Dave Powers

REUTERS

Boston — The Kennedy clan gathered yesterday to remember the "keeper of the flame," Mr. Dave Powers, a former aide to President John F. Kennedy.

Mr. Powers, the first curator to the late president's library in Boston, died last week at age 85 from heart disease complications.

In an eulogy at a closed funeral in the Boston neighborhood of Charlestown, Sen. Edward Kennedy said Mr. Powers was "like a brother, a close friend and adviser who will be deeply missed."

He added, "In a very real sense, Jack's library became Dave's library too. The torch may have been passed but Dave Powers was always the keeper of the flame."

Members of the Kennedy family, including the president's children, John Kennedy Jr. and Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, and Rep. Joseph Kennedy and his wife Beth, joined about 250 mourners at St. Catherine of Siena Church in Charlestown.

Mr. Powers was an unemployed veteran living with his widowed sister and her 10 children when he first met Kennedy after World War II.

The man who would become president was looking for help in running his first political campaign for the House of Representatives.

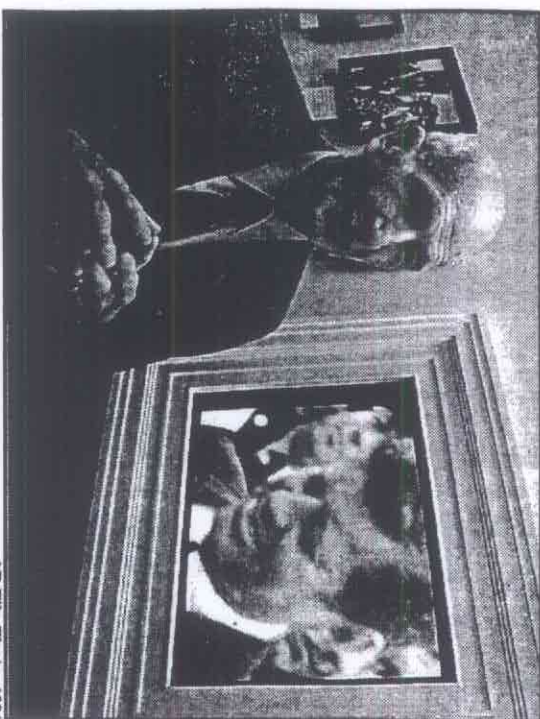
Mr. Powers signed on and campaigned with Kennedy in every political contest. When Kennedy won the presidency, Mr.

Powers went to Washington as his special assistant.

It was Mr. Powers who was instrumental in making arrangements for Kennedy's state funeral after the assassination in November, 1963. In 1965 he became curator of the John F. Kennedy Library, a post he held until 1994.

Mr. Powers was buried at Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Arlington.

He is survived by his wife, Jo, two daughters, a son and three grandchildren.



AP File Photo, 1994
 Dave Powers, a former Kennedy aide, was the first curator of the late president's Boston library, a position he held until 1994.



AP Photo
 Eunice Kennedy Shriver, left, Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg, center, John Kennedy Jr., and Sen. Edward Kennedy, leave Powers' funeral yesterday.

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