William Lehman, a ten-term United States Representative from Florida, was known as much for his personal integrity as for his political achievements. “He was a man of the people, and he had a gift for politics. To those who knew him well and, indeed, to anyone who encountered him even briefly, Mr. Lehman’s humanity and decency radiated like sunshine” (Driscoll 2005). Throughout his political career he “tried to use the power of government not for personal or political advantage but to help the lives of others” (Meek 2005). “The best example of what a true representative of the people should be,” Lehman, unlike most congressmen, staffed his North Miami Beach office with social workers (Barry honors Representative William Lehman 1987).

William Lehman, 1973

Early Years and Family Life
William “Bill” Marx Lehman was born in Selma, Alabama on October 5, 1913, to Corinne Leva and Maurice M. Lehman. Lehman’s father, the founder and owner of the American Candy Manufacturing Company, provided the family with a very comfortable way of life. In 1930, when he was only 16 years old, Lehman graduated from Selma High School. Continuing his education at the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, he received his bachelor’s degree in economics in 1934. The sudden death of his father prevented him from attending graduate school. In 1936, after working briefly for the industrial finance company CIT Corporation, Lehman opened a used car business in Miami, Florida. On August 16, 1939, he married Joan Feibelman of Miami, who later became a well-known sculptress. Together they raised two sons, William, Jr. and Thomas, and a daughter, Kathryn (Kathy). Kathy Lehman Weiner—a teacher, wife, and mother—died of a brain tumor in 1979.

World War II and Subsequent Business Career
On December 8, 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor, Lehman enrolled in the Embry Riddle School of Aviation. After earning a Civil Aeronautics Board Certificate in aircraft mechanics, he worked for Embry Riddle instructing U.S. Army Air Force cadets. In cooperation with the United States Army Air Corps, in late 1943 he transferred to Embry Riddle’s school in San Paolo, Brazil, to train cadets who maintained planes for the Brazilian Air Force. Returning to Miami after the war, he reopened his automobile business and, due to his radio and television advertising, became
known as “Alabama Bill.” He gained a reputation for honesty and integrity. As his highly successful business grew, Lehman added additional dealerships to his company.

Lehman was active in numerous religious, professional, and civic organizations. He served as Director of the Better Business Bureau of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, Secretary of the Board of Trustees of Temple Israel, President of the Miami Independent Automobile Dealers Association, board member of the Urban League of Greater Miami, board member of the Dade County Department of Public Health, board member of the American Jewish Committee, Vice President of the Florida State Society, member of the Board of Governors of the Miami Art Center, and in various other capacities in a variety of organizations.

Seeking greater challenges, Lehman returned to school and obtained a teaching certificate from the University of Miami in 1963. He also undertook additional studies at Barry College, Middlebury College, the University of Edinburgh, Cambridge University, Oxford University, and Harvard University. In November 1963 he was asked to teach English full-time at Miami Norland Senior High School where he taught for nearly a year. When his business interests suffered from his absence, Lehman left his public school position to teach English literature part-time in the evenings at Miami-Dade Community College. Encouraged to run for the Dade County School Board, Lehman obtained a seat on the Board in 1966. Within a few years he became its chairman. In that capacity he became a calm voice during the turbulent period of public school desegregation.

Political Life
Lehman once remarked that one of the reasons that he decided to run for public office was because most of the best initiatives for education came from Washington (Meek 2005). In 1972, he campaigned as a Democrat for the 93rd Congress and won Florida’s newly created 13th Congressional seat. In 1982, after redistricting, he won the 17th District Congressional seat.

During his early years in office Lehman served on the Committee on Education and Labor. He helped to pass the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and to extend the Title One program to the economically disadvantaged. As a member of the Select Subcommittee for Education he focused on environmental education, the elderly, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and special education for the handicapped including learning disabilities. He also was assigned to the Post Office and Civil Service Committee.

Lehman was instrumental in mitigating the condo recreational lease problem that had created financial difficulties for a number of his constituents. In 1974, after realizing the environmental problems that would ensue, he strongly opposed the proposed Jetport in Northwest Dade at Site 14. He was quick to recognize other environmental dangers that arose during the 1980s and fought to protect the Everglades and South Florida’s water supply.

In 1975, Lehman gained a seat on the Select Committee on Intelligence charged with investigating Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) abuses.
He was one of two committee members to vote against exonerating these entities of charges of abuse. He requested and gained a seat on the Budget Committee in 1977. The following year Lehman was appointed by the House of Representatives to serve on the President’s Commission on the Holocaust. Presenting its report to the President on September 27, 1979, the Commission recommended the establishment of a national Holocaust memorial museum in Washington, D.C. Lehman cosponsored the 1980 legislation to establish a permanent U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council Committee with responsibility to plan and carry out the recommendations of the President’s Commission.

When the 1980 Mariel crisis and boatlift brought over 100,000 Cubans to South Florida—overwhelming the U.S. Coast Guard and straining local resources—Congressman Lehman helped secure authorizing funds to reimburse state and local governments for the costs. Title V of the Refugee Education Assistance Act of 1980—the Fascell-Stone Amendment—required that Cuban and Haitian entrants be entitled to the same services as other refugees under the Refugee Act of 1980. Congressman Lehman worked with Senator Lawton Chiles to establish and maintain earmarked funds for Dade County in the Refugee Act of 1980 which authorized domestic refugee programs and reimbursed educational and medical costs. The Lehman amendment to the supplemental appropriations bill appropriated $100 million for Cuban and Haitian resettlement. His attention returned to Cuba in 1988 when he and Mickey Leland (D-TX) traveled there to meet with Fidel Castro to help negotiate the release of three longtime political prisoners.

Lehman became a member of the Appropriations Committee in 1979 and served on the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and the Subcommittee on Transportation. As a member of the Foreign Operations subcommittee, he fought for economic and military assistance to Israel, world-wide refugee assistance, expanded development initiatives, family planning, and fewer restrictions on foreign adoptions. It was, however, as a member of the Subcommittee on Transportation that Lehman became one of Congress’s most powerful members. After obtaining the position as subcommittee chair, he joined other Appropriations subcommittee chairs as a member of the influential so-call “college of cardinals.” Lehman controlled billions of dollars in highway, seaport, and airport funds. An advocate for mass transit, Lehman obtained $800 million for the construction of Dade County’s Metrorail and Metromover systems. He also obtained funds for a Level 1 Trauma Center at Jackson Memorial Hospital.

Lehman underwent surgery in 1983 after being diagnosed with cancer of the salivary glands. Although he sustained damage to his vocal cords and required rehabilitation therapy for his speech, he was able to joke that he was the lone politician who could only talk out of one side of his mouth. Refusing to be limited by his disability, he returned to the House and remained an influential advocate for his constituents. His recovery from a disabling stroke in 1991 was less certain. Although Lehman returned to the legislature, he felt that his reduced physical strength made him less effective. Consequently, after twenty years of service (1973-1993), Lehman announced he would not run for the 103rd Congress. He retired to his home in Florida and, on March 16, 2005, died in Miami Beach. He was 91 years old.
Sources

William Lehman Papers. Special Collections, Monsignor William Barry Memorial Library, Barry University, Miami Shores, Florida.