



1990/STAFF PHOTO

William S. James served three terms as state treasurer.

William S. James ruled Md. Senate for 12 years

By Albert Sehlstedt Jr.
Staff Writer

William S. James, the deft and erudite president of the Maryland Senate for 12 years and a key legislator in helping to modernize the governance of the state, died yesterday morning at the Lorien-Riverside Nursing Home outside Aberdeen. He was 79.

The cause of death was not disclosed, but Mr. James had been bedridden since August.

A gentleman farmer from Harford County with an enormous capacity for hard work and a reputation in Annapolis as a man of rectitude, Mr. James served seven years in the House of Delegates and 21 in the Senate.

He also served three terms as state treasurer before retiring in 1987 to his Old Bay Farm, overlooking the Susquehanna River near Havre de Grace.

The James tenure as Senate president was especially well remembered by veteran colleagues, who said he brought a grace and style to his leadership that could quell arguments on the floor, help soothe tempers and gently return battling legislators to the business at hand.

While in Annapolis, he also played important roles in the restructuring of the General Assembly to represent the citizenry more fairly and backed legislation for public education, water pollution control and natural resources protection.

In 1960, he was named top legislator in Annapolis by the Maryland Legislative Correspondents Association.

Mr. James, known to his friends as "Billy," also brought to his public life a wry commentary on the vicissitudes of politics and the foibles of the people who played leading roles in Maryland's government.

Of the late Gov. Theodore Roosevelt McKeldin, he observed: "He was elected on a platform of eliminating the sales tax. Running for his second term, he recommended it be increased. Said it was a sign of progress."

Of himself, he once remarked that, like Winston Churchill, he got into politics "because of ambition" and stayed in "because of anger."

In praise of the honesty of a quiet Eastern Shoreman, former Gov. Harry R. Hughes, he once said: "I don't think he ever made what is known as a deal. Of course, honesty in government is not a very exciting thing."

Margaret C. Schweinhaut, a Democrat from Montgomery County and member of the Senate since 1961, said she remembered Mr. James as "such a gracious gentleman" who was nonetheless "a strong president" of the Senate.

Senator Schweinhaut said she could recall some excellent Senate presidents, but "no one had ever matched Billy James . . . in the grace with which he presided over that body."

When arguments on the floor became heated, "he always seemed to have the perfect phrase from the classics," she said. Then, "the whole thing [argument] would die down."

For his part, Mr. James spoke of legislative bodies with admiration.

"The thing that distinguishes our form of government is the democratically elected legislature," he said after retirement. "The unique character of our government lies in the independent legislature."

For many years, he recalled, governors dominated the General Assembly. Legislators had no offices or staff and lacked the information to analyze the policies of the governor or those of his departments. That changed with the creation of the Department of Fiscal Services in 1968, he said.

Speaking generally of strong executives in an article in *The Sun* in 1964, Mr. James wrote of legislative bodies:

"In spite of the natural fascination of the 'strong executive,' the rights and liberties which distinguish our democracy cannot exist without a reasonably honest and competent legislature. . .

"A serious review of their role in policy formation should win legislators a measure of respect both from the press and the citizens of Maryland."

His reputation for hard work often centered on one of the more time-consuming and tedious exercises in representative government — analyzing proposed budgets.

"He probably spends as much time over there in that Senate Office Building studying the budget and other legislation as any two other senators," said then-Delegate W. Dale Hess of Harford County in 1961.

William Smith James was a member of a family that settled in Harford County soon after the Civil War. His father, E. Roy James, was a road builder and dairy farmer and built the family house on the banks of the Susquehanna.

Mr. James attended the nearby Tome School and the University of Delaware, and received his law degree from the University of Maryland in 1934.

Rejected for military service in World War II because of a "bum arm," as he put it, Mr. James decided to run for the House of Delegates in 1942 and publicized himself around the county by nailing up posters and handing out his cards to voters. He lost.

After practicing law for four years, he tried again for a House seat and won, beginning his long legislative career. From 1946 until he took the appointed post of state treasurer, he never lost an election.

His retirement to private life from the treasurer's post in 1987 was apparently not voluntary.

Mr. James said at the time he suspected that the then-new, do-it-now governor, William Donald Schaefer, sent word to the legislature, "Anybody but James."

At that time, the Harford countian was planning a fourth term as treasurer. Appointment to the post is the prerogative of the legislature, but it is a position that entitles the holder of the office to a seat on the powerful state Board of Public Works, along with the governor and the comptroller.

Mr. James seemed at odds with the aggressive former mayor of Baltimore soon after Mr. Schaefer's 1986 election to his first term.

Even before Mr. Schaefer took office, Mr. James was expressing concern about where the state would get the \$400,000 that, he said he had been told, would be needed to pay for 31 new jobs on the Schaefer staff during the final five months of the 1986 fiscal year.

After leaving the treasurer's post, Mr. James alleged that the governor's staff was loaded with sycophants whose positions were a waste of the taxpayers' money.

Services for Mr. James will be held at 11 a.m. Tuesday at St. John's Episcopal Church in Havre De Grace.

Mr. James is survived by his wife of 39 years, the former Margaret Higinbotham; a son, Robert Higinbotham; a daughter, Mary-Dulany James Feeney of Joppa; three sisters, Mary Rolfe Cronin of Springfield, Va., Cynthia James Riddick of Suffolk, Va., and Jocelyn James Butler of Whiteford; and a granddaughter.

The family suggested memorial contributions to the Harford Educational Foundation, 401 Thomas Run Road, Bel Air, Md. 21015-1698.