

William S. James

In his quiet way, Billy James left a real mark on Maryland. Long before he died Saturday at age 79, there was a William S. James Senate Office Building in Annapolis, and a William S. James Elementary School in his native Harford County. These are appropriate memorials, for the General Assembly and public education were two of Mr. James's great interests, but the legacy of this studious and far-sighted man to his state will outlast anything made of bricks and mortar.

He was a lawyer, a historian, a conservationist, and of course a politician. He served 41 years in public office without a break, from 1946, when he was elected to the House of Delegates from Harford County, until 1987, when he completed his third four-year term as State Treasurer. He spent five terms in the state Senate, the last three as its president.

As a legislator, his initiatives led to the creation of the Maryland Environmental Trust, the state community college system, the Maryland Historical Trust, and the imaginative and wildly successful Program Open Space, which used a small tax on real estate transfers to fund the acquisition of parkland throughout Maryland.

Over the years, in the General Assembly and as treasurer on the Board of Public Works, Mr. James often found himself colliding with governors, in-

cluding William Donald Schaefer. He generally kept his good humor throughout these encounters, even when Mr. Schaefer refused to back him for a fourth term as treasurer.

What made Mr. James such an unusual public official, especially for Maryland, was as much what he didn't do as what he did. He never used his office to enrich himself. He was a lawyer, but he turned away any client who might have represented a conflict of interest, and as he was so involved in so many issues this virtually guaranteed that his practice would remain very small.

Neither did he speculate in real estate. He lived on the farm overlooking the Susquehanna Flats he had inherited from his father, a farmer and horse trader, and often said wryly that keeping it up was quite a burden. But he gave an easement on the place, preventing its future development, to the Maryland Environmental Trust — and to make sure there was no question about his motives, he took no tax deduction for the gift.

In his modest and understated way, Billy James set an example for public service that won't be soon matched. He showed that it's still possible to have a long and constructive career in politics without being dishonest, dishonorable, or even disliked. That was his great achievement, beyond the programs and buildings that bear his name.