



Search

Home > News > Obituaries

Joseph W. Alton Jr., first Arundel County executive

Anne Arundel County executive was ensnared in the political corruption scandals in the 1970s that swept Maryland

Comments 0 28 0 Tweet 1 Recommend 1

By Frederick N. Rasmussen, The Baltimore Sun
2:56 p.m. EDT, April 3, 2013

Joseph W. Alton Jr., who served as the first Anne Arundel County executive and whose political career ended at the jailhouse door, died Friday of complications from dementia at Genesis Eldercare Spa Creek Center. He was 94.

"Joe was probably the most influential political figure in modern Anne Arundel County history, and that was largely due to his leadership in transforming the county from commission to charter government," said Robert R. Neall, who was elected county executive in 1990 and was a longtime friend.

"He believed in civil rights and public accommodation at a time in Maryland when that wasn't too popular. He had another dimension," said Mr. Neall. "He was a very shy person and had a wonderful empathy for his fellow man. He knew how to connect with the common man, and he raised that to an art form. In other words, he had the common touch."

Related



Maryland obituaries



Maryland obituaries archive

Ads by Google

ANCO Wiper Blades

The Clear Choice in Wiper Blades. Enter Our Sweepstakes Now!

www.ancosweeps.com

The son of the county sheriff and a homemaker, Joseph Walter Alton Jr. was born and raised in Annapolis, where he graduated from Annapolis High School.

After leaving high school, Mr. Alton went to work for his father as a deputy at the jail in Annapolis.

When his father died in 1950, Mr. Alton ran for the job and won. He served as sheriff for 12 years.

"For the longest time when I was running for sheriff," Mr. Alton told The Baltimore Sun in a 1975 profile, "I'd win bigger than everyone else, but it just didn't occur to me to run for something big."

In 1953, Mr. Alton was considering a bid for the state Senate seat held by Louis N. Phipps Sr., the Anne Arundel County Democratic boss "whose word was law," reported the newspaper.

Mr. Alton was viewed as "a maverick Republican in a county in which the GOP meant something like 'Godforsaken Outcast Party,'" observed The Sun. "Mr. Alton won elections which, by all rules of thumb, he should have lost, just as his father, a Republican sheriff before him, had won."

He challenged Mr. Phipps in 1960 and lost. Two years later, Mr. Phipps stepped aside after winning the primary when he ran instead for clerk of the Circuit Court.

Mr. Alton ran — and won by his narrowest margin ever.

"It was my whole life — winning," Mr. Alton told The Sun. "From the time I went into the Senate, I just wanted to do that."

"In order to write the law that created charter government, he had to serve in the Senate to do it," recalled Mr. Neall. "He took on a lot of entrenched interests that ran the county when under the commission form of government."

Mr. Alton took on the eight commissioners who essentially carved up Anne Arundel County into eight fiefdoms. He also fought for the abolition of slot machines.

In 1964, county voters approved the charter government plan that Mr. Alton had played an enormous role in shaping. He was sworn

in as the county's first executive on Feb. 1, 1965.

"He transformed the Anne Arundel into a modern county government where the executive prepared budgets and had control over public works, zoning and planning," said Mr. Neall. "Before that, Anne Arundel County was run like a banana republic."

The federal corruption probe in 1973 that claimed Vice President Spiro T. Agnew and Baltimore County Executive Dale Anderson began looking at Mr. Alton, who admitted publicly that he took cash from consultants

Ads by Google

Panera Bread® Coupons

Your Favorite Restaurant Just Got Cheaper With Our Free Coupons!

PaneraBread.shopathome.com

Baltimore Luxury Condos

Located on the Inner Harbor 1 Bedroom Homes from \$199,900!

414WaterStreet.com



Newsroom directory | Social Sun

Search death notices

First Name

Last Name

Search

Powered by Legacy.com

Sign up for e-mail alerts with ObitMessenger

Note to readers: This section contains obituaries. Please click here for death notices or use the search widget above. **Obituaries** are articles written by reporters, and usually found in the Maryland section of The Sun. **Death Notices** are paid classified ads, usually placed by funeral homes, that note the individual's passing and contain details of services and viewing times, among other information. Because there is an additional charge, all death notices from The Sun may not be available online. We regret any inconvenience this causes.

- To place a paid death notice, call 410-539-7700.
- To contact a newsroom obituary writer, call The Sun newsroom at 410-332-6100.

whom he helped win county contracts.

In April 1974, Mr. Alton told The Sun, "I feel I should stand up and say, step by step, what I've done."

In November 1974, he was charged in federal court with conspiracy to commit extortion for attempting to get \$36,000 in kickbacks from engineering firms, architects, surveyors and others seeking county contracts.

A month later, he pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court and was sentenced to 18 months and served seven months at the Allenwood federal prison camp in Allenwood, Pa., until being paroled in September 1975.

"All of the money I ever received went into either my campaigns or for the dozens of other candidates I helped finance," he said at the time. "The fact that I was careful not to allow my political activities to adversely affect the operation of government cannot alter the fact that some of these activities were excessive and in violation of the law."

When Mr. Alton was sentenced, he told Judge Herbert F. Murray, "I have no one to blame for these difficulties but myself."

Mr. Neall said that more than 1,500 people showed up to wish Mr. Alton well the night before he departed for prison.

"That doesn't happen to too many politicians," said Mr. Neall.

"It was an expression from people for the many things he had done. The number of people he helped along the way is unaccountable," he said. "Joe was unique, but he was not without his faults, and he did take responsibility and the medicine for what he had done."

At Allenwood, Mr. Alton busied himself exercising, jogging, planting flowers and building rock gardens.

"It was not an unhappy experience for me, partly because of my attitude when I went in, but most people there are extremely miserable," he told The Sun in a 1980 interview.

After leaving prison, Mr. Alton, who did not return to politics but remained a sort of an elder statesman in county politics, retained his personal popularity.

In the intervening years, he built houses and managed properties.

Mr. Alton enjoyed "building things," family members said, as well as running and old cars.

He was a member of Calvary United Methodist Church in Annapolis.

At his request, there will be no funeral services.

Mr. Alton died two days after his son, Joseph W. Alton III, 64, an Anne Arundel County personnel analyst, died of a heart attack.

He is survived by his daughter, Marsha J. Alton of Eastport; a sister, Mary Smith of Ajo, Ariz.; four grandchildren; and nine great-grandchildren. His three marriages ended in divorce.

Baltimore Sun librarian Samuel Savin contributed research to this article.

fred.rasmussen@baltsun.com

Copyright © 2013, The Baltimore Sun

Join now for Baltimore Sun All Digital Access >>

Ads by Google

Dr. Nikita Levy Lawsuit

Patients of Dr. Nikita Levy OB/GYN Eligible for Compensation. Get Info

www.YouHaveALawyer.com/DrLevy

Udi's Gluten Free Bread

Try the #1 Best Selling Gluten-Free Bread. Print a \$1 off Coupon Now.

UdisGlutenFree.com/Coupon

Comments 0 28 0 Tweet 1 Recommend 1

Popular Stories



'Dancing With the Stars' recap, Jacoby Jones crown...



Police ID man killed Monday in shooting that injur...



Bernard Pollard still feels 'a little offended' by...



Towson community frustrated with negative attentio...

Tavon Austin, Corey Fuller to participat...

NFL mock draft roundup: Who will the Rav...

Maryland becomes a liberal paradise

Jimmy Fallon to succeed Jay Leno as 'Ton...

Orioles' Matt Wieters not concerned abou...

Offseason moves show Ravens are poised t...

Photos: Notable deaths



Notable deaths from 2012



2012 Notable sports deaths



Comments (0)

[Add comments](#) | [Discussion FAQ](#)

Currently there are no comments. Be the first to **comment!**

COMMENTING POLICY: Readers are encouraged to post comments that are germane to the article. We reserve the right to remove any user, and to delete comments that contain abusive language or personal threats, as well as those that are racist or demeaning. Readers may report comments by clicking "Report Abuse." Once a comment has been flagged, a Baltimore Sun staffer will investigate. [Click here](#) for more information on commenting.



[Events/Venues](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Mobile/Apps](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Site Map](#)



[Print Edition](#) | [e-Edition](#) | [Explore Baltimore County](#) | [Explore Carroll](#) | [Explore Harford](#) | [Explore Howard](#) | [Sun Store](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Public/Legal Notices](#) | [Sun Insider](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [About Our Ads](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Search/Archive](#) | [Preakness](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [About Us](#)

[Baltimore Sun](#) | [Chicago Tribune](#) | [Daily Press](#) | [Hartford Courant](#) | [Los Angeles Times](#) | [Orlando Sentinel](#) | [Sun Sentinel](#) | [The Morning Call](#)

The Baltimore Sun, 501 N. Calvert Street, P.O. Box 1377, Baltimore, MD 21278

A Tribune Newspaper website