

## **Victor Laws Jr., 97, remembered for leadership, influence, determination**

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Victor H. Laws Jr., a prominent Salisbury attorney who was among the leaders of both the city and Wicomico County for more than 50 years, died Sunday at Wicomico Nursing Home at age 97.

Salisbury's former solicitor and the County Council's multi-term president, Laws was known for his quick wit, sharp mind, and ability to grasp community problems and offer solutions.

Laws' character and personal confidence also served to inspire two generations of community leaders.

"Victor was clearly a mentor to me," longtime County Administrator Matt Creamer said in a recent interview. "I respected him enormously, I liked him. There were many times when I didn't agree with him. But that didn't matter in the overall scheme of things.

"There was no doubt that he was most interested in what was in the best interest of the people of Wicomico County," Creamer said. "Whether I agree with a person or not, as long as I'm convinced that's their motive, that's all that matters, because that's all that matters to me.

"You certainly can't spend a lot of time around someone like Vic Laws and not learn something, Creamer said.

Longtime County Councilman Phil Tilghman was known his polite encounters with Laws, even though they were known to disagree.

"He was the smartest guy I ever worked with. For two terms, he sat on my left when I was (council) president," Tilghman said.

"He had a terrific sense of humor. At the opening of the meeting, he would stand behind me, and rather than repeat the Pledge of Allegiance I could hear him saying: 'I pledge allegiance to Phil Tilghman's back, because it's the only thing I can see ... .'"

Added Tilghman: "He was pretty hard-headed. He had a very strong sense of how things should be. I didn't think we would get along, but we became great friends."

Tilghman said his favorite Laws story is often repeated by Salisbury lawyer John Long of Long & Badger. Laws, who was well known for his exceptionally neat appearance and excellent professional suites, was finally “called out” one day.

“Victor had about 15 suites of clothes, Tilghman said. “If it was the the sixth of the month, Mr. Laws would be wearing his No. 6 suit. He entered the Long & Badger office one day and Jeff Badger exclaimed: ‘My goodness, Vic — you look like Xavier Cugat!’ Vic was highly complimented and everyone laughed (about it) for weeks.”

Born on May 8, 1919, in Wango, he was the son of the late Victor H. Laws and Maud Truitt Laws of Wango. In Laws’ youth Wango was still a small farming community in southeastern Wicomico. He later published book, “Maud and Other Family Legends,” about his parents’ generation and life in rural Wicomico County in days gone by.

Long active in local law practice, business and politics, he began his education at the one-room Wango elementary school, then graduated from Wicomico High School in 1935, attended Salisbury State Teachers College (now Salisbury University) for two years and transferred to University of Maryland at College Park, and its School of Law, receiving two degrees.

After admission to the Maryland Bar in October 1941, he first practiced in Salisbury with the firm of Miles, Bailey & Clark, and then in Baltimore in 1942 with the firm of Miles & O’Brien.

After three years of service in World War II, 1942-45, with the Army Signal Corps, including service in England and France, he returned to Miles & O’Brien (now Miles & Stockbridge) from 1945-57 as an associate and later partner in Baltimore, then in 1957 moved back to Salisbury.

Back in Wicomico County, he practiced with men still regarded as giants in local legal circles, including E. Dale Adkins Jr., Charles J. Potts, John William Long, John B. Long II, Hobart Hughes, George Bahen and Russell C. Dashiell Jr.

In 1984, he established Laws & Laws, with his son, Victor Laws III, and daughter-in-law, Jean Laws, as his partners.

He retired in 2011 after more than 65 years of practice.

Laws was a vice president of the Maryland State Bar Association and president of the Wicomico County Bar Association, and was a member of those professional associations and the American Bar Association at the time of his death.

Laws was a guiding force in local politics, known for speaking his mind and determined to do what he believed was right.

Appointed City Solicitor of Salisbury by Mayor Boyd E. McLernon in 1960 and re-appointed in 1962 by Mayor Frank Morris, he served in that role until 1966. During his time as the city's legal counsel, he was instrumental in the city's growth and development, and its expansion of city water and sewer services into county neighborhoods.

“Salisbury Councilman and Mayor) Paul Martin never forgave him for the Urban Services Agreements that were concluded when (Laws) was City Solicitor,” Tilghman said. “The people from Taney Avenue to Tony Tank have sewer and water — without city taxes — thanks to Vic Laws.”

He was first elected to public office in 1962 as a member of the Wicomico County Democratic State Central Committee, serving as its chairman until 1966.

In 1974 he was elected to the Wicomico County Council, was re-elected in 1978 and 1982, retired in 1986 and again was elected to the County Council in 1990, serving a total of 16 years, including terms as its Vice President and its President.

He was the first council member to propose an annual county appropriation to benefit the 14 county volunteer fire companies to help them buy fire-fighting equipment.

Laws was an early and consistent advocate of amending the County Charter to establish a County Executive form of government, which was finally approved by the voters in 2004 and which began to function in December 2006.

To this day, Creamer credits Laws with getting the government changed.

“It had been talked about years and years before. Not widely in the public but there were proponents in county government. One longstanding proponent was Vic Laws, Ken Matthews too — and that was purely from a philosophical point of view.

“It was their view that a single individual should be held responsible for the setting the direction of where the county government was going,” Creamer said. “That was essentially the point.

That thought grew, and as some people would say — took legs.”

During a four-year hiatus from county government, Laws helped to mediate an impasse between the Circuit Court and County Council over how to expand or remodel the old Wicomico County

Courthouse, which dates from 1878. The ad hoc committee's work led to the construction of the new Wicomico County Courts Building in use today.

He was a large contributor to the University of Maryland School of Law. In recent years, he also made major gifts to Wor-Wic Community College, the Salvation Army's West Salisbury Richard Hazel Youth Club, the Community Foundation of the Eastern Shore and Peninsula Regional Medical Center.

He received the Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce Award in 2003 and was also honored by the Salisbury Advisory Council on Youth Activities. In 2011, the Maryland Bar Foundation bestowed on Laws its Legal Excellence Award for the Advancement of Public Service Responsibility.

Laws had a hand in the city and county's development. Real estate and land development were important interests, and he was involved in several local projects that changed the local business landscape.

These included the Giant Food and Montgomery Ward shopping centers, Downtown Salisbury office buildings and the Waverly Plaza Shopping Center, including the former Royal Exchange Pub Restaurant, with his cousin Richard M. Laws as his partner.

With partners and clients such as Oscar Carey and Jim English, Laws also helped create several Ocean City condominium high-rises. With other partners he developed the Riverside Pines subdivision, the Ocean Resorts Golf Course, and started the reclamation of an industrial site which has become the Village Down River residential development.

A longtime member, trustee, treasurer and deacon of the Salisbury Old School Baptist Church on Route 50 in Downtown Salisbury, Laws spent years overseeing several repair and renovation projects there. By 2006, however, the membership of the Church had declined and he oversaw the effort to sell the church property, and merge its membership with Forest Grove Old School Baptist Church near Parsonsburg.

He was a member or former member of several local clubs, including Elks Lodge No. 817, the Rotary Club of Salisbury, Ocean City Golf & Yacht Club, Green Hill Country Club, and the Sea Gull Club at Salisbury University.

He is survived by his second wife, Elaine Taylor Jones Laws, whom he married in 2002. His first wife, and the mother of his two sons, Eunice Hastings Laws, died in 1999; they had been married 51 years.

Laws is survived by two sons and daughters-in-law, Victor H. Laws III and Jean Laws of Salisbury and Gerald A. Laws and Linda Laws of Arlington, Texas, four grandchildren; a sister, Margaret Laws Engle of Salisbury, age 105; and stepchildren Lucinda Outten, Constance and John Rue of Salisbury; and Douglas Jones of Snow Hill.

His funeral is Saturday in Parsonsburg.

Friends may call at Holloway Funeral Home on Friday evening between 6 and 8 p.m. His funeral service is at the Forest Grove Salisbury Old School Baptist Church on Saturday at 3 p.m, with a visitation from 2 to 3 p.m.

Elder Elbert M. Robbins will officiate. Burial will be private for family members at the Laws Family Cemetery in Wango.

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