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William Walsh: Landmark decade, landmark times, landmark mayor

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By **Sean Kirst / The Post-Standard**



The Post-Standard

William Walsh at Salem-Hyde Elementary School, on the day the Syracuse city schools were officially desegregated in 1965. None of the other people - including the mother and child - are identified.

A year or two ago, Ben Walsh took his grandfather for a driving tour of downtown Syracuse. It was a big moment for Ben, now an economic development official with the city. His grandfather, Bill Walsh, was well into his 90s. He had been the city's mayor throughout most of the 1960s, and Ben hoped the ride would spark some memorable tales.

They drove past the Everson Museum of Art, where Bill Walsh recalled a brilliant young architect, a relative newcomer, who handled the design. "Grandpa!" exclaimed Ben. "You're talking about I.M. Pei?" Yes, replied Walsh, who loved everything about Pei's original design except for the trees he wanted to plant outside. Those trees would never survive a tough winter, he told Pei. Pine trees, he said, might be a better choice.

Ben looked out the window, where a few tall pines still swayed in the wind.

That sense of living history explains the deep community sigh over Saturday's death of Bill Walsh, at 98. He was a Republican mayor from 1961 to 1969, and later served as the region's U.S. representative. His son Jim — Ben's father — held the same congressional seat for 20 years, while Jim's sister, Martha, and brother, Billy, went on to be judges.

Yet Bill Walsh is remembered, beyond all else, for his time as mayor.

Former Police Chief Frank Sardino, hired as an officer during Walsh's tenure, said no mayor could have anticipated the Niagara of events that engulfed Syracuse during those years. Walsh was mayor when many city landmarks were built, such as the Everson and the AXA Towers, and when many others were lost to demolition financed by Urban Renewal.

He was in office for the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and civil rights champion Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Walsh rode a bus with black African-American schoolchildren on the September day in 1965 when the city schools were officially desegregated. He was mayor during the razing of the 15th Ward, the traditional heart of the city's black and Jewish communities.

"The 1960s were a really pivotal decade for all these (Northeastern) cities," said Dennis Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association. "There was the big shift in population to the suburbs, and the surge in (construction of) interstate highways, and (the issues surrounding) the Civil Rights movement.

"During Walsh's terms, he had to really struggle and figure out a lot of these issues," Connors said, "and you can argue that Syracuse came out of that time in better shape than a lot of these cities."

Maybe no crisis was as volatile as the street violence of August 1967, when resentment in suffering city neighborhoods led to window-breaking and firebombs. The anger teetered on the brink of a full-blown riot. That didn't happen. Sardino — a police lieutenant at the time — recalls how the police department had just gone through a tough review by the state Crime Commission. Walsh responded by instituting better pay for officers and bringing in top administrators from outside of Syracuse.

"That guy turned the police department completely around," Sardino said.

With other cities in flames, Sardino said the police were ready for an outburst. Walsh — with the support of new Chief John O'Connor - quickly placed the 15th Ward under a curfew. When residents called it prejudicial and unfair, the mayor extended the curfew to the entire city. He later held a public hearing that allowed angry speakers to accuse the police of excessive force during the crackdown.

Emotions were raw, but the city never burned.

"That's when Bill was so absolutely cool," said retired Judge Stewart Hancock Jr., a corporation counsel for Walsh in his first term.



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William F. Walsh poses for a photo on September 27, 1961 at the start of his daily campaign trips. The van was nicknamed the Walsh Wagon.

[William F. Walsh](#) gallery (16 photos)

Certainly, of 20th century mayors, it can be argued that only Rolland Marvin — who instituted great changes amid during the Great Depression — served in a comparably traumatic time. The long-term impact of Walsh's policies will be studied and debated for as long as there is a Syracuse. Still, Hancock, William P. Burrows and Les Deming — all lawyers who at one point or another worked for Walsh — said he had one irrefutable characteristic:

"He was an absolutely honest person with a great deal of integrity," said Burrows, who said that Walsh had a gift for being natural with voters from all walks of life.

Those qualities were enough, in chaotic times, to become a landmark presence. Sardino likes to tell the story of a freezing night, when many firefighters and police officers were called to a raging fire. Walsh showed up alone. "It's got to be pretty cold out here," he said to Sardino, who offered distracted agreement that it was.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee?" the mayor asked, a question that didn't really matter in itself.

To Sardino, what matters is that he knows Walsh would have done it.

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