THOSE WE’VE LOST

Stephen F. Williams, U.S. Appeals Court Judge, Dies at 83

A Reagan appointee, he served on the District of Columbia bench for three decades. He died of the coronavirus.

By Sam Roberts

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This obituary is part of a series about people who have died in the coronavirus pandemic. Read about others here.

Stephen F. Williams, an erudite lapsed liberal whose opinions reverberated from the bench of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia for three decades, died on Aug. 7 in a Washington hospital. He was 83.

The cause was complications of the coronavirus, his daughter, Susan Ellis said.

Judge Williams was a Democratic environmentalist who voted for George S. McGovern for president in 1972 and had joined in a vigil against the Vietnam War, but who evolved later in the decade into a born-again conservative.

"'When you're young,'" Ms. Ellis quoted her father as saying, "'it's foolish to be conservative, and when you're older, it's foolish to be a liberal.'"

His son Geoffrey Williams described him as "a classic liberal with a free market view of the world."

After volunteering in the 1984 presidential campaign, he was named to the prestigious appeals court by President Ronald Reagan in 1986. He worked full time until 2016, when he turned 80, and was still overseeing cases earlier this year.

Judge Williams was known for a level of gusto for such things as the arcana of oil and gas regulatory cases that daunted some colleagues and law clerks, for his good humor and his tendency to pepper his opinions with references ranging from Greek mythology to quantum mechanics ("a federal receivership is not Schrödinger’s cat," he once wrote).
“There is no one with whom I’d rather disagree,” David S. Tatel, who was named to the court by President Bill Clinton, said in 2006 when Judge Williams’s portrait was unveiled at the courthouse (a ceremony that Judge Williams called “the hanging”).

“Steve defends his positions tenaciously and respectfully and gently, but always with an open mind to the views of others,” Judge Tatel said. “When we disagree, Steve challenges me to think far more deeply about my own positions and to confer weaknesses that might otherwise have gone unexamined. On occasion, his reasoning has even changed my mind.”

Stephen Fain Williams was born on Sept. 23, 1936, in Manhattan to Virginia (Fain) Williams and C. Dickerman Williams, a lawyer who had been a law clerk to Supreme Court Justice William Howard Taft.

After attending Millbrook School in Dutchess County, N.Y., he graduated from Yale College in 1958 and Harvard Law School in 1961 and was assigned to military intelligence in the Army Reserve.

In 1966 he married Faith Morrow, a former school librarian who survives him, along with their daughter Susan; another daughter Sarah; three sons, Geoffrey, Timothy and Nicholas; two sisters, Joan Farr and Honor Ishida; and nine grandchildren.

Before his appointment to the bench, he practiced at the New York firm of Debevoise & Plimpton from 1962 to 1966, served as an assistant United States Attorney in Manhattan and taught at the University of Colorado Law School.

While on the bench, Judge Williams joined in or wrote opinions that rejected the dissolution of the Microsoft Corporation; overturned a cornerstone of the Clinton administration’s air quality standards as arbitrary; and allowed cable television companies to expand and broadcast more of their own programming.

In dissenting opinions, he declared that the government’s sentencing of Jonathan Jay Pollard, a Navy analyst convicted of spying for Israel, was a “miscarriage of justice,” and he foreshadowed a United States Supreme Court ruling by declaring in 2012 that the latest statistics on voter registration, turnout and the election of Black officials suggested that some safeguards imposed by the 1965 Voting Rights Act were no longer imperative.

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