



Wilson W. Wyatt, Kentucky's “Number-One Citizen”

Wyatt Family Lot. Michael Higgs.

By Greg King, Special to Cave Hill Heritage Foundation

In 1941, at the age of 36, Wilson W. Wyatt was elected Louisville’s “boy wonder” mayor. A respected lawyer since his early 20s, he was sworn into office on the steps of City Hall just days before the infamous bombing of Pearl Harbor.

This is only one of the many highs and lows that characterized the remarkable life of a man whose epitaph reads, “He left his city better than he found it.” Upon Wyatt’s death, in 1996 at the age of 90, his friend and former Kentucky Governor Edward Breathitt stated, “We have lost our number-one citizen.” Wyatt is buried at Cave Hill Cemetery (Section 33, Lot 13), near such local luminaries as attorney entrepreneurs David A. Jones and Wendell Cherry (both of whom were employed as young associates with Wyatt’s law firm), distillery executive Owsley Frazier Brown, philanthropist Charles Edwin Gheens, and Colonel Harland Sanders.



Wilson Wyatt. Courtesy Find-A-Grave.

Born and raised in Louisville, Wyatt was valedictorian of the Male High School class of 1923. Eschewing the traditional undergraduate route, he worked his way through the former Jefferson School of Law, graduating first in his class. Lacking a true campus, JSL operated from the basement of the old Jefferson County Courthouse. The school did not require a college degree and was taught exclusively by practicing and retired lawyers and judges.

Wyatt quickly built a busy and respected law practice. By age 27, he had been appointed Law Director for the City of Louisville. By his early 30s, he had become principal attorney for the Robert Worth Bingham family and their enterprises, the *Courier-Journal*, the *Louisville Times*, and WHAS Radio.

Elected mayor of Louisville just as the United States entered World War II, Wyatt served during an especially challenging time for all cities. Those were years fraught with food rationing, civil defense drills, and the difficulty of running police and works departments when most younger men were overseas. Wyatt did such an efficient job as mayor that after the war President Harry Truman appointed him to serve as United States Housing Expeditor for the Office of War Mobilization—then a cabinet level position charged with promoting the building of adequate apartments and housing to meet the needs of returning veterans.

Wyatt returned to private law practice in the 1950s, while remaining active on the national political scene. For example, he chaired Senator Adlai Stevenson's 1952 presidential campaign against retired general Dwight Eisenhower and played a significant role in Stevenson's repeat campaign of 1956.

In 1958, Wyatt began an initial campaign for the Democratic nomination for governor of Kentucky. Early in those efforts, however, he chose to endorse one of his two chief opponents, attorney Bert Combs from eastern Kentucky. Wyatt subsequently switched tracks and ran successfully for lieutenant governor, serving as Governor Combs' second in command. At Combs' urging, Wyatt worked to make the office of lieutenant governor a more meaningful and substantive part of state government. In addition to the constitutional responsibility of presiding over the Kentucky State Senate, he served as chair of the newly created Kentucky Economic Development Council.

Most political pundits assumed that Wyatt would run, successfully, for Kentucky governor in 1962. Instead, he chose to run for the United States Senate, losing a close and bitterly fought campaign against his friend Republican Thruston B. Morton.

After that failed election, Wyatt again returned to full-time law practice. In the early 1980s, his law firm, Wyatt, Grafton & Sloss, merged with Bert Combs' considerable practice, Tarrant, Combs & Bullitt, to form Wyatt, Tarrant & Combs. WTC would grow into Louisville's first "mega firm" and remains one of the largest and most prestigious in the state.

Wyatt served his hometown of Louisville in ways beyond law and public office. Between 1941 and 1996, few successful citywide projects lacked his footprint. Wyatt was involved in efforts as diverse as creating the University of Louisville Brown Cancer Center, the Louisville Convention Center, the Kentucky Center for the Arts, and the National Center for Family Literacy. Wyatt chaired the University of Louisville Board of Trustees, and he and his wife, Anne, donated more than \$500,000 to that institution. In 1995, the primary building for the UofL Brandeis School of Law was named “Wilson Wyatt Hall.”

Wyatt served as chair of the Bellarmine College (now University) Board of Trustees, and the Wyatts contributed heavily to the school. Bellarmine’s Wyatt Center for the Arts is named in his honor. The Wyatts donated \$500,000 to Jefferson County Public Schools to create high school debate scholarships. In his later years, Wyatt helped to create Leadership Louisville and Leadership Kentucky, programs designed to better educate community leaders regarding strengths, challenges, and opportunities for the city and state.

For a more detailed account of Wyatt’s life, see his fascinating personal memoir *Whistle Stops: Adventures in Public Life* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1985), dedicated to “Anne, my complete partner.” See also *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2001).