

## **Alonzo R. Williams Dies:**

### **General Manager of UER**

**TRACTION FIRM HEAD SINCE 1928 WAS 70**

**Began Rise in Company Through His Skill as Lawyer**

**Providence Journal March 15, 1948**



Alonzo R. Williams, 70, general manager of the United Electric Railway and operating head of that system since 1928, died yesterday in his home, 102 Meeting Street.

Death came during his sleep before 4 a.m. His physician, Dr. William L. Legit, said death was the result of a coronary thrombosis.

Mr. Williams, although suffering from a heart ailment for several weeks and under constant surveillance, of a nurse, remained active in directing UER operations

He had been associated with the UER since early in this century, first as a member of the company's legal staff and then as vice-president and general manager, but his broad interests and enthusiasms encompassed many fields remote from railroading.

He was well known as an amateur weather forecaster—in fact, he alone of the weathermen in Rhode Island predicted the devastating hurricane and title wave in 1938. He was also an authority on the early history of this region, particularly the history of the Pequot Trail

In addition, he was an expert on medico-legal subjects and was considered at one time the most competent cross-examiner practicing in Rhode Island courts. He was a public speaker much sought after, had an active part in Rhode Island's military organizations, was a freelance sketcher of some competence and was an enthusiastic short-wave radio listener in the early days of radio.

His direction of the UER was distinguished by his progressive policies. Almost alone among traction men in the country, Mr. Williams sensed 20 years ago the rising desire of the public to "ride on rubber", and he pushed the conversion of the UER to busses and trackless trolleys while other lines clung to steel-wheeled street cars.

In directing the retirement of the street cars, he bucked the opinion of many traction company officials across the country that busses never would supersede trolleys as vehicles for mass transportation. Mr. Williams realized in 1928, when the changeover to busses for outlying sections was begun here, that the bus had not then been developed to the point that it was a threat to the trolley, but he foresaw that its utility would increase with the years and that, sooner than many expected the public would demand that it be carried on rubber wheels,

Mr. Williams was a direct decedent of Roger Williams in the eighth generation. His name --Alonzo Roger Williams — recalled his descent from the founder of Providence.

He was a son of the late Alonzo Williams and Sarah E (Phelps) Williams. His father, son of a Foster farmer, had served as a sergeant in the Civil War and then had worked way through Brown University, an institution where he served for many years as a professor of modern languages.

### **Studied In France, Germany**

The elder Alonzo Williams insisted that his son have a fine education as was available. The boy attended the-University Grammar School and Providence High School. Then he had three years of study in France and Germany during which. He became proficient in the language of both countries.

Mr. Williams returned to this country and entered Brown University, but his college career was interrupted by service in the Spanish-American war. He had taken an interest in military affairs for some time before the war and was adjutant of the Brown University battalion. As a member of the student military organization, he had taken part in a competition with students from Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Massachusetts Agricultural College and had won gold medals in the manual of arms and in firing and a silver medal in bayonet work.

He left the University at the start of the war and was commissioned a first lieutenant in Company A, First Regiment, United States Volunteers. Later he became battalion adjutant.

When he was mustered out of Federal. Service at the end of the war, Mr. Williams was named captain of Company A. First Regiment of In-Infantry, a unit of the Rhode Island Militia. He had been a wrestler in college, so there may be truth in the story, often told that he announced he would relinquish command of the company to any who could put him on his back. No man ever did. Apparently, for he continued as captain until he resigned on April 23, 1906.

### **Light Infantry Colonel**

In January, 1911, Mr. Williams became a major in the First Light Infantry, one the Rhode Island chartered commands. He retired in that rank on May 17, 1916, but, was recalled to duty as captain of Company B. First Light Infantry, in April 1917, soon being promoted to major. About a year later he transferred as a major to the State Guard and served with it until the end of World War I.

He returned to the First Light infantry after the war, serving as a lieutenant colonel until he retired in 1924.

During the years just after the Spanish-American War, Mr. Williams became "Cap" -Williams to his friends and to the city. He remained "'Cap" .Williams until his death preferring to be known by the rank- he held during a period of his military career he enjoyed -remembering.

Mr. Williams resumed his studies at Brown after the war and graduated with an A. B. degree in 1900, with the Class of 1899. He studied at Harvard Law School and was admitted to the Rhode. Island Bar in 1902. After several months of .practicing, he became associated in July of 1903, with the Law department of the Rhode Island Company, then operating the street car lines subsequently taken over by the UER.

Almost immediately Mr. Williams made his ability as a trial lawyer apparent. Through a quarter of a century during which he represented the traction company in hundreds of suits his reputation grew.

### **Skilled Cross Examiner**

He became known as an expert at cross-examination, so skilled in drawing testimony from reluctant witnesses that few could surpass him. Lawyers frequently came to the court room in which if he was practicing to watch him in action.

One of the cases he argued early in his career –“Wilcox vs. the Rhode Island Company — established the rule that the decision of a trial justice on a motion for a new trial will be upheld, by the Supreme Court unless it is clearly wrong. In this decision, cited more widely than almost any other in Rhode Island jurisprudence, the Supreme Court refused to substitute its judgment for that of a justice who had heard a case in Superior Court.

Because many of the cases he tried involved injuries, Mr. Williams made, himself an expert on anatomy. He acquired this knowledge by studying scores of medical books he collected as reference guides. Many a doctor discovered uncomfortably on the stand that defense attorney knew as much about injuries and anatomy as he did -- if not more. At this period Mr. Williams taught himself shorthand. He was keeping a voluminous diary and practicing free-hand sketching at every opportunity, but his chief hobby was growing flowers -- and following the weather.

It was as an amateur weather prophet that many persons knew him. For years he lunched at the Turks Head Club and he made it a practice to stop at the weather bureau office, then in that building to study the weather trends before returning to the UER-offices each after-noon,

### **First Headed UER In 1928**

His accurate prediction of the course and intensity of the 1938 hurricane was probably his most spectacular prognostication, but the weather advices to the UER were a constant source of invaluable assistance to the company, and indirectly to the public.

Winter after winter, Mr. Williams unfailingly predicted the onset of snowstorms sometimes giving information accurate almost to the minute. As a result, the UER had fore-warning of storms and had its plows and snow crews mobilized when they were needed.

Mr. Williams became general manager of the UER on January 26, 1928 and was named vice-president of operations of July 28 of that year.

His associates in the company, in speaking of him, frequently have used the word “Humanist.” One of the first announcements to the employees after he became general manager informed them that the system of penalties for infractions of the rules was being set aside and that henceforth each would be on his honor.

During the years he headed the company his office always was open to the employees. He was consulted by motormen, bus drivers, officers of the company, stenographers and employees from all levels. Often they were seeking his advice on personal matters or problems from their homes rather than about the company business.

Mr. Williams was well aware of the peculiar problems imposed on a traction company by the street pattern of Providence. He decided that the public vehicles had no place in the middle of the city's narrow thoroughfares and this decision, coupled with his sensing of the public's growing demand for

rubber-tires vehicles influenced the programming of the changeover from trolleys to busses and trackless trolleys.

### **Inaugurated Express Systems**

The first busses were put on the lines to the outlying communities. Mr. Williams worked out a system by which they would run as expresses through the first fare zone, a system now being studied 30 years later – by other street railway companies.

The UER was one of the first lines to employ trackless trolleys and was the first in the country to use them in any numbers.

As the first trolleys were retired in 1928 and the last are currently scheduled for retirement. Mr. Williams' services as general manager almost exactly coincided with the period during which the company was changing over to the more modern types of vehicles.

Mr. Williams introduced other progressive policies. He insisted that the vehicles be painted every six months when other companies let theirs go as long as two years. The one-man safety cars were introduced during his managership.

His associates recalled recently that Mr. Williams was the only company officer ever invited to address the drivers' union. This was in 1932, in the depth of the depression, and his subject was a difficult one to present – a reduction in wages.

Mr. Williams spoke publicly many times under other circumstances. A brilliant raconteur, he possessed unusual oratorical ability and was called on frequently as a public speaker or a toastmaster.

Once he was invited to address the Society of Colonial Wars and chose to speak on the Indians of this region. He plunged into research on the subject with the energy he customarily brought to any undertaking. Before long he had become an authority on Indian lore and probably knew more about the Pequot Trail than any other individual.

In the early 30's he bought a radio set which covered the shortwave bands. Thereafter he spent many hours at the set. Picking up conversations and programs from stations from many parts of the world. He became state manager of Rhode Island Chapter of the international DX'ers Alliance, a worldwide organization of short-wave listeners.

The diversity of his interests was demonstrated in the clubs to which he belonged, These included the Turks Head Club, the Providence Athenaeum, the Rhode Island Historical Society, the Providence Art Club, the Shakespeare Head Association, the Providence Engineering Society, the Automobile Club of Rhode Island and the New England Transit Club.

### **Other Affiliations**

He held membership also in Providence Royal Arch Chapter No. 1, and What Cheer Lodge No. 21, the Rhode Island Commandery of the Military Order of Foreign Wars, the Spanish War Veterans, the Society of Colonial Wars, the Sons of the American Revolution and Providence Post of the American Legion.

He was a member of St. Stephen's Builders Church.

At one time he was a member of St. Johns Commandery, Knights Templers and Palestine Temple Shriners.

For a number of years he had been a member of the Veteran Firemen's Association. His interest in fire-fighting stemmed from his boyhood when he spent many hours in fire stations and sometimes had been honored by being permitted to ride the apparatus or even to hold the reins of the spirited horses. His military background was of value later when he was drillmaster of the Providence police department.

On April 13, 1902, Mr. Williams married the former Mary Butler. They had one son who survives with his mother, Alonzo Butler Williams. Also surviving are three grand-children and a sister, Mrs. Robert Vose of Brookline, Mass.

A Mass will be celebrated in St. Stephen's Church Wednesday at 11:30 a.m. by the Rev. Paul Van K. Thompson. Burial will be in Swan Point Cemetery.