



John William Bell Jr.

February 27, 1935 - March 8, 2024

John William Bell Jr. (Bill), 89, of Asheville passed away peacefully surrounded by his loving family on March 8th, 2024 following a brief illness. He was born on February 27, 1935, in Lattimore, NC, and the son of the late John William and Mary Williamson Bell.

Bill grew up in the small town of Lattimore. He was extremely proud of his Cleveland County roots, loving family, and cherished friendships from his youth. Bill's father was a successful entrepreneur who mentored him in the art of effectively managing different lines of business. Bill was a skilled athlete in both basketball and baseball playing second base and center field for the two-time state championship Shelby American Legion team.

Following graduation as class salutatorian, Bill enrolled at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill receiving both an academic and athletic scholarship for baseball. He played for legendary Carolina baseball coach Walter Rabb in the infield and much enjoyed his time in Chapel Hill. While at Chapel Hill Bill married the love of his life, Janis Elam from Shelby. He later attended Gardner Webb College and studied Business Management.

Bill's professional career began in Lattimore when he founded a small men's store called Bell's College Corner focusing on what was then referred to as the Ivy League Look; button-down dress shirts, khaki pants, and Bass Weejuns. While a little off the beaten path, Bill's attention to detail and competitive pricing generated customers. He also routinely held special trunk shows in fraternity houses at select colleges and universities.

In the early 1960s, Bill was blessed with a growing family, and it became apparent that he needed to operate in a larger retail market. In 1963, Bell's Traditionals opened in Asheville's Biltmore Village. Bill experienced ongoing success and eventually expanded his men's operation to include ladies, gifts, and outdoor.

Locating his business in Biltmore Village at a low point in its history, with some of the historic buildings being lost to redevelopment and others deteriorating and risking being demolished, Bill became passionate about preserving the history of Biltmore Village and bringing it back to the grandeur of the Vanderbilt era. In the 1980s Bill started working with architect Robert Griffin and other merchants to have Biltmore Village designated as a historic district. With tremendous effort this was accomplished in 1988, thus preserving the historic buildings and paving the way for what has become the renowned Historic Biltmore Village it is today. In 2018 Bill received the Sondley Award by the Preservation Society of Asheville and Buncombe County for his preservation accomplishments in Biltmore Village.

Bill's company evolved into Biltmore Property Group (BPG). BPG and its affiliates eventually became Jos. A. Bank's largest franchisee, Lilly Pultitzer's largest licensee, and a Ruth's Chris Steak House franchisee. In real estate, BPG owns and operates commercial properties in five states. Bill had a special affection and relationship with his employees, many of whom have been with the company for decades. Bill considered them part of his family. As a tribute to Bill's career, the company opened J.W. Bell men's clothing in Biltmore Village in the spring of 2023. Bill enjoyed spending his afternoons at the store visiting with employees and customers.

Bill was a loving husband, father, doting grandfather, and great grandfather, who was very proud of everyone in his large family. He and his wife Jan were faithful members of First Presbyterian Church and Bill served as an elder for many years. In addition, he served on the Gardner Webb University Board of Trustees, a member of Rhododendron Royal Brigade of Guards, a member of the Biltmore Forest Country Club, and a founding member of the Lattimore

Museum.

Bill treasured his travels to England and Scotland with Jan and collecting antiques. He loved beach trips with grandchildren and great-grandchildren and boating at Lake Lure. He also took pride in his vegetable garden and enjoyed sharing his bounty with friends.

He is predeceased by his wife, Janis Elam Bell, his sister Marca Bell Colbert, and brothers Robert Brian and Steven Carl Bell. Bill is survived by his four children and their spouses: Julie and Douglas Wilkins of Hickory, NC; John and Heidi Bell, Jenny and Byrd Rawlings, and Jeff and Stephanie Bell, all of Asheville, NC. Also surviving him are thirteen grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

A celebration of life will be held at 2:00 pm on Wednesday, March 13th, 2024 at First Presbyterian Church, Asheville, NC. The family will receive friends in the sanctuary from 1:00 until 1:45 PM prior to the service. Interment will follow at Calvary Episcopal Church in Fletcher, NC.

Bill's family wants to express their sincere gratitude to Nancy Hensley, Jerry Medrano, Angela Grimmitt, Tracy Roberts, and Teresa Christenberry who all provided wonderful and loving support. Many thanks are also extended to the physicians and staff of Four Seasons Hospice.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that memorials be made to First Presbyterian Church, 40 Church Street, Asheville, NC 28801, or Lattimore Historical Society, PO Box 126, Lattimore, NC 28089 in his honor.

Arrangements are by Morris Funeral & Cremation Care, 304 Merrimon Avenue, Asheville, NC. Please feel free to share condolences online at www.lacey.com or www.morrisfamilycaregroup.com.

Cemetery Details

Calvary Episcopal Churchyard

2840 Hendersonville Road
Fletcher, NC 28732

Previous Events

Family will Receive Friends

MAR 13. 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM (ET)

First Presbyterian Church Asheville
40 Church Street
Asheville, NC 28801

Funeral Service

MAR 13. 2:00 PM (ET)

First Presbyterian Church Asheville
40 Church Street
Asheville, NC 28801

Interment at Calvary Churchyard to follow

Tribute Wall

MB

“ So sorry to hear this news. Always loved visiting at either our home or the Bell's while growing up. Will always remember shopping at Bell's in Biltmore. He was such a great influence in our community and will be greatly missed by many. Prayers for the whole family for peace and comfort during this difficult time.

Martha Hollyday Batts - March 19, 2024 at 11:50 AM

DW

“ My parents were Sarah and Dan Williamson, and my grandparents were John and Lucy Williamson. My grandfather and Mary Bell were siblings. I'd always thought I'd touch base with y'all while we lived in Hendersonville, but I never did. I'm sorry for your loss and that I never got the opportunity to meet him while I was an adult. I'm sure I met him while I was growing up! We were often at his parents' home. Prayers for you during this time.

Danette Williamson Wesson - March 17, 2024 at 06:22 PM

CC

“ I've lost too many friends lately and I learned late Wednesday about my very good friend, Billy Bell. Bill and I were team mates in baseball at Lattimore High School and American Legion teams in 1950 and 1951. When we played games away, we were room mates. My sincere sympathy to all the family. I treasure my memories of my friend. God bless you! Charlie Cabaniss

Charlie Cabaniss - March 15, 2024 at 03:51 PM

SL

“ Bill Bell was a wonderful man and will be missed. My Mother (Sally) and my Brother (Skip who died Aug 2023). Bill was a wonderful person to work for and many memories will life on. Rest in Peace, Bill. We loved You.

Sandy Lyman

Sandy Lyman - March 13, 2024 at 01:34 PM



“ Beautiful in Blue was purchased for the family of John William Bell Jr..



March 13, 2024 at 01:15 PM

AD

“ Angie Grimmitt and Anthony Davis purchased the Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum for the family of John William Bell Jr..



Angie Grimmitt and Anthony Davis - March 12, 2024 at 07:52 AM

AD

“ Angie Grimmitt and Anthony Davis planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of John William Bell Jr..

Angie Grimmitt and Anthony Davis - March 12, 2024 at 07:52 AM

LS

“ We at the Lattimore Museum will really miss seeing Bill. And we are so appreciative for his interest and generosity in helping us in many ways. Peace and love to all of the family❤️ Libby Hunt Sarazen

Libby Hunt Sarazen - March 12, 2024 at 02:45 AM

AR

“ I am so sorry to hear this sad news. He was always so sweet to me when I was at his home. He was so well respected in Asheville. Asheville has lost a true southern gentleman.

Anne Roberson Royster - March 11, 2024 at 10:12 PM

BS

“ We were very saddened to learn of Bill's death. What a fine man. We have known him and the stellar reputation of the Bell family, since the 1960's. Our thoughts and prayers, in Christ, are with the entire Bell family, during this time of sadness. God bless you all. Bee, Martha, and the Strain Family

Bee/Martha Strain - March 11, 2024 at 05:16 PM

KR

“ Billy was a remarkable person, and we went rabbit hunting when growing up!

KENNETH L RICHARDS - March 11, 2024 at 03:22 PM

GR

“ I have enjoyed Bill and Jan since they moved here. Wonderful, fun couple. As you remember all the good times, May you find comfort in your memories. Wishing you peace, healing and hope. Love, Gail Rogers

Gail Rogers - March 11, 2024 at 01:40 PM

JP

“ *A smile on his face and a twinkle in his eyes, that is how I will remember Mr. Bell. My prayers and love to all the family. Heaven is smiling because he is up there.*

JoAnn Perry

JoAnn Perry - March 11, 2024 at 12:52 PM

DP

“ *My sincere condolences to Julie, John, Jenny, Jeff, and family. Very fond memories of your father, family and Bell's Traditionals. Bill always had a friendly greeting and was a true southern gentleman. My thoughts and prayers are with you. May he rest in peace. God Bless!*

David Plaisance - March 11, 2024 at 11:00 AM

GB

“ *Bill Bell was always the epitome of a gentleman's gentleman. I still have and wear several neck ties from Bell's Traditionals. A true Asheville legend who left a wonderful legacy.*

Gene Bowman - March 11, 2024 at 10:31 AM

SB

“ *Bill Bell was one of the finest gentlemen I've ever met. He was a mentor and role model to me as a young man growing up in Asheville. I will always remember working with him briefly when he opened his first store in Biltmore Village. I saw firsthand his strong work ethic and ability to get along with people. I will cherish these memories always. Rest in peach Bill Bell.*

Steve Bowman - March 11, 2024 at 07:57 AM

DP

“ We loved Bill Bell....He was an amazing man and visionary! We were friends for years and even worked with him opening a Christmas retail store in Spartanburg, SC years ago. He was kind and compassionate. He loved helping us to grow in business and taught us so much. We will miss you
Keith and Donna Prinz

Donna Keith Prinz - March 10, 2024 at 10:16 PM

PS

“ So many eons ago, Bell's for men and women. I would buy entire windows of womens clothing ...just the best! As well as mens clothing.....wishes for the good old days. Fondly patsy shepherd

Patsy Shepherd - March 10, 2024 at 07:40 PM