

J. Warren Upson

1903 - 1992

"Be it known that J. Warren Upson has been a leader of long-standing in the fight for open government in Connecticut. He has been an articulate spokesman for the public's right to know"

- Freedom of Information Committee

J. (Julius) Warren Upson was born December 11, 1903 in East Haven, Connecticut. His parents were Chauncey Julius Upson, a farmer, and Lillian Emily Terrell. Upson's ancestors were among the first settlers in Waterbury and can be traced back to 1679. Upson's early education began in New Haven public schools and evolved through Mount Hermon School and Yale College in 1927. He graduated from Yale Law School in 1929 and, that same year, arrived in Waterbury to practice law. He married Grace Shreve Fisher in 1934 and the couple had three sons: Warren, Thomas and Dickinson.

During his fifty-year legal career, J. Warren Upson was involved in two landmark decisions which have impacted millions of lives. In the 1930s while a junior partner in the Waterbury law firm of Bronson, Lewis and Bronson, Upson defended the right of a clinic, Waterbury Hospital's Chase Dispensary, to distribute contraceptive materials. Although he eventually lost the case, Connecticut v. Roger B. Nelson et al., his argument is credited as being the origin of Roe v. Wade, the 1973 Supreme Court decision which gave constitutional guarantee of a woman's right to choose abortion. Upson cited an obscure 1888 case of the Wisconsin Supreme Court in his argument and said, "any citizen of Connecticut may deal with his own body in any way he wants to and it is his natural right to do so if he does not impair any similar right on the part of another citizen."

After the Torrington board of Education refused to relinquish the minutes of a closed meeting, Upson began a lengthy fight to change the way local administrations conduct their business. He spent years lobbying and testifying at legislative committees in an effort that resulted in the "Right-to-Know" law, which limits secret meetings in government and assures access to public records.

During his career Upson made an unusually large contribution to Waterbury civic life. His law firm represented The Waterbury Republican and The American newspapers and he was a key participant in the planning and executing of the successful campaign that exposed the City Hall conspiracy of Mayor T. Frank Hayes and Comptroller Dan Leary. Upson ran unsuccessfully for Congress, served as chairman of Waterbury's Republican party, was a member of the GOP State Central Committee and twice refused state court judgeships. He served as president of the Greater Waterbury Chamber of Commerce and was the chairman of Waterbury's War Salvage Committee, the Waterbury Draft Board, the



United Way and of a special Waterbury Committee on Conflict of Interest.

Upson received a life membership award from the Mattatuck Historical Society and a charter membership from Flanders Nature Center. He was presented with the John Lewis Award for dedication to the Visiting Nurses Association and was inducted into the select American College of Trial Lawyers.

He was described as a big burly man with a cherub's face who ambled the streets of Waterbury wearing many hats, including lawyer, politician, municipal watchdog, amateur historian and defender of the public's right to know what its government is doing. Waterbury reporters thought of him as "frank, honest, brilliant of mind and bedrock in character." Although J. Warren Upson died March 14, 1992 at the Lutheran Home in Southbury at the age of 88, the legacy of his work continues to hold municipal government accountable for its actions.