

MARCUS WALTER WILLIAMS

Walter Williams was one of the most influential journalists in American history. An accomplished newspaper editor, he founded the world's first school of journalism at the University of Missouri.



Marcus Walter Williams

Marcus Walter Williams' mother predicted, "Walter will do one of two things. Either he will sit in an editorial sanctum, or he will have a bookstore."

Williams left school at age 13 to work for the local newspaper, the *Boonville Topic*, as a printer's devil or apprentice. He was only paid 75 cents a week but he learned the newspaper business from the bottom up.

A natural reporter, Williams began writing articles for the paper and, at just 20, became editor of the *Boonville Advertiser*. He eventually became one of the paper's owners. His rising reputation within the newspaper industry led to his election as president of the Missouri Press Association at the age of 25, the youngest in its history.

He moved to the *Columbia Herald* as the paper's editor and married Hulda Harned. Williams became an integral part of the local community. His Sunday school class at the First Presbyterian Church was so popular, hundreds of people came to hear his carefully prepared lessons. Williams also helped found the State Historical Society of Missouri in 1898.

Williams guided the *Herald* to prominence. He also published the *Country Editor*, a trade publication for journalists, and served as part-time editor for the *St. Louis Presbyterian* and the *Jefferson City Tribune*.

At the turn of the century, Missouri boosters began planning an elaborate world's fair to celebrate the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase. Williams was appointed publicity director and

embarked on a nine-month promotional tour, traveling 25,000 miles and visiting 27 countries.

Although there had long been a movement to establish a professional school of journalism, the idea failed to gain momentum until the late 1890s. Williams believed in formal classroom instruction, but others believed that journalism had to be learned on the job. In 1906, his dream was realized when the Board of Curators and Missouri legislature gave their approval.

Williams was selected as the first dean of the University of Missouri School of Journalism. The first students arrived on Sept. 14, 1908, as part of a new experiment that would forever change the field of journalism.

Students learned journalism through a combination of classroom instruction and hands-on experience gained by working on a student-produced community newspaper. This way of teaching journalism became known as the "Missouri Method."

Williams worked to increase the school's national and international prominence. He invited well-known journalists to campus, hosted journalism conferences and traveled the world, establishing connections between the journalism school and the international community.

Williams went on to serve as president of the University of Missouri, guiding the University through the turbulent early years of the Great Depression.

Another of Williams's enduring legacies is "The Journalist's Creed," a code of ethics for journalists. The creed advocates truth in reporting, freedom of the press, and the belief that the press should serve the best interests of the public.



The University of Missouri School of Journalism

Williams as a young man with colleagues.

— Biography and photos courtesy of The State Historical Society of Missouri

