

James Sewell Morsell (1775–1870)

James Sewell Morsell was born in Calvert County, Maryland in 1775. It is not known where he studied law or when he came to Georgetown. However, in 1800, when he was 25 years old, he belonged to a military company in the District of Columbia that was ordered to Philadelphia to escort the federal government on its move to the City of Washington (all of 131 civil servants). He was a Lieutenant in a District of Columbia artillery company during the War of 1812. As early as this time (1814), he was a close personal friend and correspondent of Francis Scott Key.

In 1815 President Madison appointed him Assistant Judge on the Circuit Court of the United States for the District of Columbia. He held this position on the three judge federal panel for the next 48 years, retiring in 1863.

Two years after his appointment to the bench, at the founding of Christ Church in 1817, Judge Morsell subscribed to 10 shares worth \$250, the same amount as Francis Scott Key, whose name on the subscription agreement immediately precedes his. He also was a member of the Committee of Eight and on the list of 26 committed to purchasing pews. He does not appear as a member of the early Vestries, but in the 1820s and 1830s he was a perennial Vestryman, serving until 1842. He was in fact a pillar of the church. In the early years he did not own a pew, perhaps because as a bachelor at the time he did not have the need. In 1824 he purchased pew Number 20 coincidental with his first election to the Vestry. On his resignation from the Vestry in 1842 Judge Morsell was the last of the Old Guard, the sole remaining active founding father of Christ Church.

At one point, Judge Morsell owned the large house at what is now 2812 N street before fellow lawyer and church founder Thomas Plater owned

it. According to early Georgetown appraisal records, it also is probable that he built circa 1808, but later sold, what is now 3038 N Street, the one-time home of Governor Averill Harriman and his wife Ambassador Pamela Harriman. However, Judge Morsell ultimately lived for many years at what is now 3108 P Street in Georgetown. His house still stands and was in the mid 20th century the home of Secretary of State Christian Herter.

His first wife was Mary Anne Marbury Fitzhugh, whom he married at Christ Church on October 21, 1829 and who at 32 was some 23 years his junior (he was 54 at the time of their marriage). Mary Anne's first husband was Richard Henry Fitzhugh, a Georgetown merchant who forged bank notes and fled to Kentucky to avoid prosecution; he apparently was dead by the time she married Judge Morsell. Mary Anne's father was the plaintiff in the landmark Supreme Court case of *Marbury v. Madison* which established the Supreme Court's power to rule on the constitutionality of a law passed by Congress and signed by the President. Judge Morsell and Mary Anne had one daughter, Mary Anne Elizabeth, born April 13, 1831. Five days after Mary Anne Elizabeth's birth her mother died, presumably from complications in childbirth. There is a record of the funeral of Mary Anne Morsell at Christ Church on April 19, 1831. Inexplicably she was buried in the churchyard at Zion Episcopal Church in Charles Town, WV. It is not known why. Her gravestone is inscribed with a poem eulogizing her written by the Morsells' close friend and fellow Christ Church founder Francis Scott Key. The daughter Mary Anne Elizabeth was baptized at Christ Church on June 26, 1831 with the notation in the church records that her mother was deceased. She went on to marry General William P. Craighill of the Army Corps of Engineers but died at age 40 in 1872.



It appears that on June 2, 1831, just six weeks after his wife's death, records show Judge Morsell as marrying again (not at Christ Church), this time to Anna Maria Sewell of Harford County, MD. (The Christ Church marriage records inexplicably show a marriage on June 18, 1833 between James S. Morsell and "Jane Sewall" [sic]). Contemporaries described Anna Maria Sewell as a "lovely and interesting woman" and "one of society['s] brightest ornaments." Given their sharing of the name Sewell, it is not known if they were related. Anna Maria was born in 1808 and thus 33 years his junior. Together they had four daughters in rapid succession:

1. Maria Eloise Sewell, born June 28, 1832.
2. Hannah Catharine, died at 6 years of age.
3. Elizabeth, died young.
4. Olivia Clementina, born and died July, 1835.

Anna Maria died just one day after the death of her youngest daughter Olivia, also apparently from complications arising from childbirth. She was only 26. The Christ Church baptismal and burial records for 1835 are missing (it was a time between Rectors, and the recordkeeping appears to have been faulty). Thus there is no way to confirm the above events from the church records. The church records likewise contain no corroboration of the births and deaths of the other children, nor do they confirm any burial for an Anna Maria or Jane Sewall Morsell. The records for 1838-40 are also missing.

Only Maria Eloise from this apparent union survived to adulthood. She married and had six children, most of whom died in childhood.

Judge Morsell thus led a long, fruitful and pious life but one burdened by recurrent tragedies.

Judge Morsell died at the age of 95 in Prince George's County, MD. It is not known where he is buried. His obituary in the Alexandria Gazette

stated that "he was deeply imbued with the spirit of our Revolutionary Fathers and a notable exemplar of their manly virtues" and that he "was fearless as a Judge" and a "devout and humble Christian."

A more intimate view of Judge Morsell is given by The Reverend Doctor Joseph Packard of the Virginia Theological Seminary in his *Recollections of a Long Life* (1902):

I can never forget Judge Morsell, who...was, I thought, an old man when I first met him in 1836. He was never married until fifty-six years old, but was married twice before he was sixty, each wife leaving him one little girl. I knew him through Rev. Philip Slaughter, then rector of Christ Church, Georgetown, and so cordial was his invitation to me that I looked upon it as a home on my visits to Georgetown and often spent several days together with him. I have never known a more pious, devoted layman. It was a beautiful sight to see his two little daughters kneel down before going to bed and at his knee repeat the Lord's Prayer and Creed, when the youngest could hardly pronounce distinctly the words. He always shaved on Saturday evening instead of Sunday morning, and was a most devout and constant attendant at church. He had a prayer-meeting of laymen of the Church to meet regularly at his house, a sight I never saw elsewhere, and I well remember attending it. He told me that he was converted when a thoughtless, irreligious man, by a dream of the last Judgment. So vivid was it that he rose from his bed and began to pray. For some days he prayed without ceasing, until he found peace in believing. He delighted in talking on religious subjects, and his intelligent interest in Church affairs was very helpful. His brother, William Morsell, was the father of Rev. Joshua Morsell, a friend of mine for years. The Judge himself lived to be ninety-six [sic] years old,



dying in 1870, and at ninety-four walked with a cane anywhere, and, with his long snow-white hair falling on his shoulders, he made a beautiful picture of old age found in the way of righteousness. Judge Morsell's memory has been precious to me, and I hope through Divine grace to meet him again in heaven. He was a firm friend and supporter of the Seminary, of Bishops Meade, Johns and McIlvaine, and of Doctors Sparrow, May and Keith.

