

Nathaniel Mitchell

1753 - 1814



Nathaniel Mitchell, the first of five native sons of Laurel, Delaware, to rise to the office of Governor of the state and the town's most renowned patriot and hero in the Revolutionary War, was born in 1753, the son of James and Margaret Dagsworthy Mitchell. His mother was the sister of General John Dagsworthy, a famed French and Indian and Revolutionary War hero, now buried in Dagsboro, Delaware, which bears his name.

Nothing of Mitchell's education and early life is recorded, but his subsequent achievements indicate that his early training equipped him well for his future role of outstanding public service in war and peace to his state, Sussex County, community and the parish of Old Christ Church, Broad Creek, where he and his family were communicants. In addition, Mitchell proved to be a man of high courage, combined with humility and a deep sensitivity toward the welfare of his fellow man.

Following the Battle of Lexington in 1775, Mitchell joined General John Dagsworthy's battalion of Delaware Militia and was commissioned as adjutant at the age of 22. In 1776, Mitchell joined General Washington's "Flying Camp" under Col. Samuel Patterson as a captain. In the summer of that year, Mitchell captured a detachment of British and Hessians near Perth Amboy, New Jersey, larger than his own company.

Capt. Mitchell led his company to Philadelphia in 1777 and transferred to Col. William Grayson's Virginia regiment there. He recruited his own company of Delaware troops and spent the winter with General Washington at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. On September 11, 1777, Capt. Mitchell won the respect of his troops during the Battle of Brandywine when he insisted that no wounded men be left behind during the American retreat. He was disabled with "camp fever", and did not take part in the Battle of Germantown on October 12, 1777. From December 1777 through February 1778 he was on furlough.

Capt. Mitchell won a hero's laurels during the Battle of Monmouth in June 1778 when he was in command of Grayson's regiment after Grayson's promotion to brigadier general. Capt. Mitchell led an American attack upon the British when they were progressing well when their advance was halted by command of General Charles Lee. This order so infuriated General Washington that Lee was court-martialed and cashiered out of the army.

Capt. Mitchell was promoted to major in December 1778. In Col. Nathaniel Gist's regiment under General Peter Muhlenberg, Maj. Mitchell was active in defending the Norfolk, Virginia, area against the British. After many successes, he was captured by the British when asleep in his tent after an unannounced retreat by militia guards. He was paroled after the Battle of Yorktown in 1781. In 1797, he was given the rank of Brigadier General in the Delaware Militia.

After his return to Laurel he married Hannah Morris and the couple had six children. Mitchell was a member of the Continental Congress (1786-1788), a Federalist Elector in 1800 and Prothonotary of Sussex County (1788-1805). He was elected Governor for the term (1805-1808), to the State House of Representatives 1808 and the State Senate from 1810 to 1812.

About 1800 he built a grist mill at the dam at Laurel Lake and occupied his home on Delaware Avenue, Laurel, still standing and known as "Rosemont". He was active in the parish of Old Christ Church and occupied pew number 38. Mitchell died February 21, 1814, and was buried in the churchyard next to the church. On July 4, 1976, with appropriate ceremony, the Nathaniel Mitchell Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Laurel Historical Society, and the American Legion, Post #19, dedicated two markers at his gravesite.

by George D. Graves, Jr.

The Reverend William Skelly
Old Christ Church
Broad Creek Hundred
Near Laurel, Delaware



From 1780 - 1786, Old Christ Church, Broad Creek, Delaware was in charge of William Skelly, a lay reader. Being recommended by Reverend John Bowie and the vestry of Broad Creek Church, he was ordained deacon on July 2, 1786 and ordained Priest on July 3, 1786 by the first Episcopal Bishop in the United States, The Reverend Samuel Seabury of Connecticut. William Skelly was the seventeenth priest to be ordained in the Episcopal Church of the United States and the second in Delaware. It should be noted that he must have been a man of great courage and devout convictions to accept this ordination at a time when the Church of England was almost defunct. He continued as rector of Old Christ Church until 1794.

Early records indicate that he also served in Stepney Parish and Worcester Parish in Maryland as well as in Delaware at Prince George's (1706) in Dagsboro, St. Peter's (1708) in Lewes, St. Mary's (1704) in the Seaford area and Cedar Creek. He visited each church once every six weeks compensated by voluntary subscriptions on an annual agreement. Early vestry minutes of St. Peter's in Lewes record that he was not only to conduct services but also to do carpentry work on the church building.

The Episcopal Church of Delaware held its first convention in Dover on December 2, 1791 for the purpose of framing and enacting a constitution and promoting good government among the churches in the state. One of the clergymen in the Diocese who attended this meeting was the Reverend William Skelly of Christ Church, Broad Creek near Laurel. He was one of the committee of six who wrote the constitution for the church in Delaware which was approved at this session. William Skelly took an active part in Delaware Church affairs and also attended meetings and conventions in Maryland.

He married Sarah Harte Wailles on January 29, 1788. "Figg's Chance Enlarged", 212 acres of land near Bethel, Delaware, was purchased by William Skelly on December 7, 1807 for the amount of five hundred and thirty dollars from John and Sarah Gordy. In 1807, his daughter Levenia, married William Bell, son of Captain Nathaniel Bell of Bermuda and Bethel, Delaware. When the Reverend Skelly died in 1808, at the age of 50, he was buried in a Bell Family Cemetery on the banks of Broad Creek about one mile from Bethel. His grave, as well as the graves of other family members, remained undisturbed for over 175 years. In 1984, because of river erosion and the advancement of civilization, this family burial site was excavated by Old Christ Church League and the Sussex Society of Archaeology and History. The remains of The Reverend Skelly, his wife Sarah, his daughter Levenia Bell, two grandsons Levin S. Bell and William S. Bell and Prettyman Cannon with head stones and foot stones were reinterred in the graveyard of Old Christ Church. The Reverend William Skelly served as the first rector of this church after it became a part of the Delaware Diocese.

Researched by Madeline Arnold Dunn

COMPLIMENTS OF: THE SUSSEX SOCIETY OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY

Old Christ Church
Broad Creek Hundred
Sussex County, Delaware



During 1771-1772, Christ Church, an Episcopal Chapel-of-Ease, Stepney Parish, Maryland, was built on land that was once in dispute between Lord Baltimore and William Penn. This colonial structure, on the south banks of Chipman's Pond, about three miles east of Laurel, Delaware, is one of the few existing buildings of this period which has not been altered extensively. Repairs have been made whenever necessary but always in keeping with the original building. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The exterior is covered with sheathing, which replaced an earlier beaded clapboard. The interior is heart pine and remains unpainted. The walls are paneled and some hand hewn beams are forty feet long. There is a barrel vaulted ceiling of wide pine boards. The many paned windows are arched. Over 400 people can be seated inside the box pews arranged along two aisles. A large plain wooden cross hangs over the chancel at the east end. There is a hanging pulpit on the north wall above the lectern. Hand forged hinges in L and H styles are in evidence. Wooden pegs have been used throughout the structure.

Nathaniel Mitchell, who was a Revolutionary War Officer and Governor of Delaware, 1805-1808, is buried in the church yard. His grave has been marked by the Nathaniel Mitchell Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Laurel Historical Society. Other Delaware governors who have been members or communicants are William B. Cooper 1841-1845, William H. Ross 1851-1855, Elbert N. Carvel 1949-1953 and 1961-1965.

An annual service is held on Whitsunday. Visitors or tours are welcome. Arrangements can be made by writing to Old Christ Church League, P. O. Box 293, Laurel, Delaware 19956 or by phoning St. Philip's Episcopal Church Office 302-875-3644 from 9a. m. - 12:00 Noon.