



James Monroe Morton



Cannie Elizabeth Blackwell



Hattie Belle Morton William Perry Lunsford



The Morton Homeplace, Leasburg, N. C. Picture taken 1954

The Morton home was located at the intersection of Hwy. 119 and Hwy. 158 in the community of Leasburg, N.C. at the northwest corner of the intersection, diagonally across from Four Points Store, on the Property of William "Perry" Lunsford and his wife, Hattie Belle "Morton" Lunsford. This property was willed to my maternal grandmother, Hattie Belle Morton and her sister, Gladys Elizabeth Morton, after the death of their father, James Monroe Morton. The original house contained about 14 rooms in total according to family members that have relayed this story to me. At some point in the past after my grandparents were married as many as 10 rooms were moved from the back of the house to a location just down the road and added to another home. This was very possibly the home of my grandfather William Perry Lunsford's uncle, James Monroe Lunsford, who had purchased his farm from my grandmother Hattie Belle Morton's uncle, William Elijah Morton and his wife, Fannie Wagstaff. I was told that these very same "Rooms" later burnt in a house fire. The remainder of the Morton Homeplace left standing was later torn down and nothing remains today.

I have fond memories of my youth rummaging through the Old Homeplace seeing remnants of the family still left in the home. It appears that James Monroe Morton was some kind of neighborhood druggist as there were lots of "old" medicine bottles there and my grandmother Hattie Belle Morton that he used to supply medicines to neighbors in the community. I have in my home an old sewing machine, beautifully restored by my brother Gary Phelps, that is one of my prize possessions along with an old "Victrola" that once supplied the sound of music to the Morton family.

Latham Mark Phelps

Photo and commentary of the Morton Homeplace, in the Book, *Historic Architecture of Caswell County, N.C.* by Ruth Little-Stokes



Photo 144. Morton Homeplace. ca. 1835. Almost unaltered but delapidated 1½ story frame cottage of transitional design, with Federal form, Greek Revival details. Exterior end stone and brick chimneys, paneled entrance, pedimented entrance porch with tapering columns, simple railing. Interior has raised panel doors, flat-paneled mantels with flanking pilasters.

The Morton Homeplace with its beginnings being placed around 1835, would mean that it was probably built or owned first by Elijah Morton, Grandfather of James Monroe Morton. Vincent Lea Morton, Father of James Monroe Morton, may have lived here once but would have been around 12 years old in 1835. Vincent Lea Morton and his wife, Isabella Frances Oliver, lived in the Village of Leasburg in the Gabriel Lea House. Gabriel Lea was James Monroe Morton's maternal great-grandfather, as Elijah Morton married Mary "Polly" Lea, daughter of Gabriel Lea and Elizabeth Ashburn. All these people are buried in the Leasburg Community Cemetery in the Village of Leasburg.



The Cabriel Lea home. Tradition says Francis Asbury stayed here while in Leasburg on his circuit rides.

James Monroe Morton and Cannie Elizabeth Blackwell—My Maternal Great-Grandparents

James Monroe “Pug” Morton, oldest of 14 children, was born September 2nd , 1850 in Caswell County, NC. The firstborn child of Vincent Lea Morton and Isabella Frances Oliver. James married Cannie Elizabeth Blackwell, (Gr-Gr-Granddaughter of Captain Robert Blackwell and his wife Zillah Rice) May 18th , 1905 in Caswell County. At the time of the marriage James was 54 years old and Cannie was only 17 years old as stated on their marriage certificate. James and Cannie had two children , Hattie Belle and Gladys Elizabeth.

Cannie was afflicted with what they called in the old days “spells”, which was most probably epilepsy. This was not a very socially acceptable condition to have in those days as it was thought of as being “touched” , “demented” or “possessed” in some way. I have heard family members relate stories of how when Cannie would feel a “spell” coming on she would run into the woods so her children or others wouldn’t see her when she was having a seizure. It was obviously a great source of embarrassment to her and she went to great lengths at these times to conceal her affliction. In those days the medicine of choice for this malady was Laudanum, which was a powerful narcotic and could be very addictive. On one fateful day perhaps after having a “spell” when my grandmother Hattie Belle was perhaps 3 years old and her sister Gladys still a baby, family members found Cannie lying unconscious on the floor with her little girls at her side rubbing her face, trying their best to wake her. Sadly she never awoke having taken too much Laudanum, which overpowered her vital functions and caused her death. More than one family member passed down this story to me and I feel it to be an accurate portrayal of the death of my great-grandmother.

This left my great-grandfather James Monroe Morton, now approaching 60 years old with two small children and no mother to raise them. My great-great-grandmother Isabella Frances Oliver Morton, wife of Vincent Lea Morton, took in the little girls and after her death their Aunt "Nannie" Morton Stephens, sister of James Monroe Morton, raised the girls. Tragically their father James Monroe Morton, fifteen years after their mother's death, was kicked in the head by a horse and lay upon his bed for a couple of months and finally died from the injury. Now the girls were true orphans, having lost both parents. He was apparently was able to make a will before he died to provide for his girls after his death.

Last Will and Testament of James Monroe Morton—April 1924

North Carolina
Caswell County

I, J.M. Morton of the aforesaid County and State, being of sound mind but considering the uncertainty of my earthly existence, do make and declare this to be my last will and testament.

First: My executor herein after named shall give my body a decent burial suitable to the wishes of my children, and pay all funeral expenses, together with all my just debts, out of the first moneys which come into his hands belonging to my estate.

Second: Whereas my two daughters Hattie Belle and Gladys E. Morton are both minors of the ages of about eighteen and sixteen years respectively, neither being old enough to handle my estate legally, and Whereas, I have encumbered my lands with a deed of trust in the sum of Eight Hundred & Fifty Dollars and am desirous of paying off the debt as early as possible so that my daughters may not be paying interest on the aforesaid note, I do hereby authorize my executor hereinafter named to sell privately or at public auction that portion of land lying on the east side of my land and containing about forty or fifty acres, and if he can not sell the land for enough to satisfy the claims, then in lieu thereof I do authorize and empower him to sell all that portion of my lands lying on the south side of a plantation road leading from the public road known as the Semora and Hightowers road, said plantation road running between the feed barn and another barn nearby, and running in an easterly direction and out of the proceeds of the sale of either of the described lands he will pay the note that is secured by the deed of trust on the place.

Third: After all my just debts are paid, I give devise and bequeath the residues of my estate shall be equally divided between my two daughters, Hattie B. Morton and Gladys E. Morton share and share alike, said decisions to be made when Gladys E. Morton shall arrive at the age of twenty-one years of age, until this division can be made it is my will and desire that R. L. Mitchell be and he is hereby appointed and constituted trustee of my estate which I will to my two daughters to have and to hold the custody of the estate until the said Gladys E. Morton shall arrive at the full age of twenty-one years.

Fourth: I hereby constitute and appoint my trusty friend R. L. Mitchell, my lawful

executor and trustee to all intents and purpose to execute this my last will and testament according to the true intent of meaning of the same, and every part and clause thereof, hereby revoking and declaring utterly void all other wills and testaments heretofore made by me.

In Witness whereof, I the said J. M. Morton do here unto set my hand and seal the ____ day of April, 1924

Signed: J. M. Morton

Signed, sealed, published and declared by the said J. M. Morton to be his last will and testament in the presence of us, who act at his request and in his presence do subscribe our names as witnesses thereto.

Signed: G. R. Lunsford
A.H. Wilkins

Record of Executors and Guardians, Caswell County, in the Superior Court before B. L. Graves, Clerk of Superior Court, August, 1924

In the Matter of the Will of J. M. Morton

R.L. Mitchell being duly sworn, doth say that that J. M. Morton, late of said county is dead, having first made and published his last will and testament, and that R. L. Mitchell is the executor named herein. Further that the property of the said J. M. Morton, consisting of Real and Personal property, is worth about \$3000.00 , so far as can be ascertained at the date of this application, and that Hattie Morton and Gladys Morton are the parties under said will entitled to said property.

Signed: R. L. Mitchell

Sworn to and subscribed before me, this 1st day of August, 1924

Signed: B. L. Graves
Clerk of Superior Court

Transcribed by: Latham Mark Phelps 12-14-2002

Written By Latham Mark Phelps--March 2007