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[Back to previous page](#)

James H. Taylor, first black circuit court judge in Pr. George's County, dies

By Megan McDonough, Published: December 10

James H. Taylor, a pathbreaker in suburban Maryland legal circles who in 1969 became the first black circuit court judge in Prince George's County, died Oct. 31 at his home in Upper Marlboro of congestive heart failure. He was 86.

The death was confirmed by his wife, Jan Taylor.

Judge Taylor completed law school at American University in 1953, becoming the school's earliest known African American graduate. Three years later, he was one of the first blacks admitted to the Prince George's County Bar Association.

The county remained dominated by a conservative white establishment for many years to come, but Judge Taylor continued rising in positions of prominence. In 1963, he was named Maryland's first black assistant state's attorney. In 1969, he was appointed by Gov. Marvin Mandel (D) to the state's 7th Judicial Circuit. He served 18 years on the bench, mainly handling family and juvenile cases, before he retired in 1987.

As a young lawyer, Judge Taylor was widely known as a "gutsy prosecutor," The Washington Post reported in 1987. While serving on the court, he was accused at times of being too compassionate and forgiving in judicial rulings involving minors.

In 1977, then-Prince George's State's Attorney Arthur A. "Bud" Marshall Jr. told The Post that Judge Taylor was "an old softy" who "believes everyone can be rehabilitated." Marshall was known as a particularly stern prosecutor. His comments came in the wake of what he perceived to be Judge Taylor's light sentencing of a woman convicted of drunken driving and manslaughter in an accident that killed a 4-year-old girl and injured five others.

To his critics, Judge Taylor responded, "I thought I did what was right."

After leaving the bench, he returned to private practice and simultaneously worked as an independent consultant specializing in minority-owned business development. Judge Taylor retired about a decade ago.

James Harold Taylor was born July 7, 1926, and raised in Elkridge in Howard County. He was 10 when his father died in a car accident. His mother raised three children while working as a saleswoman at a Baltimore department store.

As a teenager, James Taylor made the commute to Carver Vocational-Technical High School in Baltimore, where he studied bricklaying. To help support the family, he worked as a short-order cook, a railroad oilman

and a mailman.

“We are a product of an environment, and I grew up in a lower middle class or middle class community,” Judge Taylor told an American University law school publication in 1994. “We never knew if we were poor. And I was that and then black. That brought a different complexion to the court and most likely a different background to the circuit court . . . and bringing that flavor to the court was rewarding.”

He served in the Army Air Forces in 1945 and 1946. He was a 1950 Howard University graduate.

Judge Taylor reportedly enjoyed luxury cars and, at one point, owned two Rolls-Royces. At 50, he bought a small airplane and, at 60, he bought a sailboat.

“He had a lifelong love of everything and anything that moved,” his daughter Tanya Taylor Morris said. “He loved a challenge.”

He was a trustee of Prince George’s Community College and, in 1992, the school created a scholarship for paralegal students in his honor. He served on the board of NationsBank (now Bank of America) and several statewide legal commissions.

His first marriage, to the former Lillian Miles, ended in divorce. Survivors include his wife of 44 years, Jan Johnston Taylor of Upper Marlboro; two children from his first marriage, Tanya Taylor Morris of Bowie and Marc Taylor of Washington; a son from his second marriage, David F. Taylor of Martinsburg, W.Va.; a stepdaughter, Tracy Taylor of Upper Marlboro; a brother, Milton Taylor of Odenton, who was reportedly one of the first black Maryland State Police troopers; seven grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

When asked by the AU publication what he enjoyed about being on the bench, Judge Taylor said, “At the risk of sounding corny, I would say it was an opportunity to make a philosophical contribution within the framework of law.”

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