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Profile Series

Profile of:

MIFFLIN WISTAR GIBBS

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Mifflin Wistar Gibbs (1823 – 1915) was Canadian-American businessman, judge, lawyer, politician, and black rights activist. He was born and raised in Philadelphia, worked in San Francisco, then moved to Victoria. In 1866, he won a seat on City Council and became the first Black person to be elected in British Columbia and the second in Canada. Gibbs helped guide B.C. to join Confederation. Later, he moved back to the U.S. and earned a law degree. In 1873, Gibbs was elected police judge of Little Rock, Arkansas making him the first elected black municipal judge in the U.S.



Gibbs was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on 17 April 1823 to Jonathan C. Gibbs, a Wesleyan Methodist minister, and Maria Gibbs. His father died in 1831, leaving his widow with four small children and little money. Mifflin Gibbs began working at the age of eight to support his family, driving a doctor's horse, and later became a carpenter's apprentice.¹

In 1839 he joined the Philadelphia Library Company, an African American literary society which included prominent abolitionists. Soon Gibbs was involved with the Underground Railroad. In 1849, he attended a national anti-slavery convention and accepted the invitation of Frederick Douglass to join him on an abolitionist speaking tour in western New York State.²

During the tour, Gibbs heard about the California Gold Rush.³ He sailed to San

Francisco in 1850 and there he worked as a carpenter and bootblack, joined a clothing business, and partnered with Peter Lester to import fine shoes and boots.⁴ California was technically a free state, but the government was hostile to Blacks and tolerant of southerners who brought their slaves into the state.⁵

Gibbs protested the rising discrimination and helped found the *Mirror of the Times* which advocated equal rights. In 1857 he and Peter Lester refused to pay the poll tax because they were not allowed to vote. Some of their goods were seized for auction to sell the debt, but a sympathetic white person persuaded the crowd not to bid.⁶

According to the 1857 Dred Scott decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, African Americans did not have the rights of citizenship. The San Francisco Black community decided to seek a new home in 1858. At the invitation of Vancouver Island Governor James Douglas, they chose Victoria.⁷ Part of the lure was the B.C. gold rush, even though the prospecting was done on the mainland.

In his autobiography, Gibbs wrote, "We had no complaint as to business patronage in the State of California, but there was ever present that spectre of oath denial and disenfranchisement; the disheartening consciousness that while our existence was tolerated, we were powerless to appeal to law for the protection of life or property when assailed. British Columbia offered and gave protection to both, and equality of political privileges.... Three or four hundred colored men from California and other States, with their families, settled in Victoria, drawn thither by the two-fold inducement — gold discovery and the assurance of enjoying the benefits of constitutional liberty."⁸

Gibbs arrived with large supplies of flour, bacon, blankets, picks, and shovels, and sold them upon arrival in Victoria. The next day he bought a one story house for

\$3,000 and used it for another mercantile business in partnership with Lester. It was the first one in the city not run by the Hudson's Bay Company.⁹

Reflecting on this time, he wrote in his autobiography, "The trade my mother insisted I should learn enabled me to do this. Get a trade, boys, if you have to live on bread and apples while attaining it. It is a good foundation to build higher. Don't crowd the waiters. If they are content, give them a chance. We received a warm welcome from the Governor and other officials of the colony, which was cheering."¹⁰

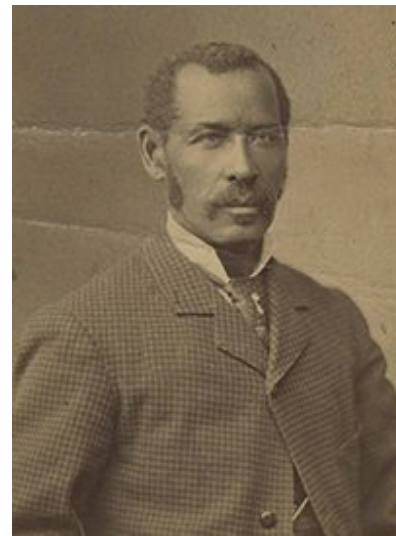
In 1859, Gibbs left Victoria to court and marry Maria Ann Alexander, who had been a student at Oberlin College in Ohio.¹¹ The couple moved to Victoria in 1860 and all five of their children were born there. A dispute with the U.S. over San Juan Island (Washington State) prompted the blacks to form the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps, of which Gibbs was a member. A "Committee of Coloured Ladies" raised money for the corps and for ex-slaves in the U.S. In contrast to California, blacks in Victoria joined existing churches. The Gibbs and Lester families joined the Anglican Christ Church Cathedral. Gibbs was baptized there 24 October 1860.¹²

Vancouver Island was its own colony in those days. In the 1860 elections for the House of Assembly, Gibbs and 17 other black male property owners voted as a block to support George Hunter Cary and Selim Franklin, who received 137 and 106 votes respectively.¹³ These were part of the faction led by Governor James Douglas. By contrast, future premier Amor De Cosmos,¹⁴ editor of the *British Colonist*, received just 91.¹⁵

De Cosmos, who was born Billy Smith,¹⁶ launched a bitter campaign against the immigrants, saying they had sold out their country, their friends, and their own selves, and were deserving of the racism they received. De Cosmos declared the vote was illegal because most were not

British subjects. In response, Gibbs wrote to the newspaper to stress that the immigrants were loyal to the British constitution and believed in equality. De Cosmos fought to have the voters' list verified, which got most of the newcomers disqualified in March 1861. However, Gibbs became a naturalized British subject to register as a voter.¹⁷

Gibbs was elected to Victoria city council in 1866 in his first of two terms. As such, he was the second Black to be elected in



Canada and the third in all of North America. He chaired the ways and means committee, paid off the city's debt, and was acting mayor.¹⁸ He resolved his differences with De Cosmos.¹⁹

In 1866, the colony of British Columbia merged with Vancouver Island. In 1868, De Cosmos formed the Confederation League to unite the colony with Canada. Gibbs was the elected delegate of the Confederation League for Salt Spring Island. He and De Cosmos were among 26 delegates at the Yale Convention who met on 14 September 1868 to work out the terms by which B.C. would agree to join Canada. The delegation passed 37 resolutions, including that a wagon road should be built to bridge B.C. to the east, that Canada should pay down the colony's debt, and that the province should have a responsible government. Delegates also wanted the province to have control

over education and settlement policy, land grants, and First Nations affairs.²⁰

Confederation had opponents also. The unelected members of B.C.'s colonial government feared for jobs and pensions if B.C. became a province with a fully elected legislature, instead of a partially appointed one. The legislature voted against the League's proposals. Some settlers preferred annexation by the United States, and a recession in the colony also hindered efforts. Obstacles faded when Governor Frederick Seymour died in 1869 and Canada purchased Rupert's Land and the North-West Territories from the Hudson's Bay Company. This made a coast-to-coast country and railway possible. In 1870, the B.C. Legislature sought entry into Canada without responsible government, but Canada insisted all its representatives be elected. Canada agreed to provide pensions for any unelected local officials who lost jobs in the process, absorb B.C.'s debt, build a railway to the Pacific Coast, and give B.C. the right to send three senators and six members of Parliament to Ottawa. On this basis, B.C. became Canada's sixth province on 20 July 1871.²¹

Meanwhile, Gibbs continued his entrepreneurial efforts. He directed the Queen Charlotte Coal Company, then resigned the directorship to bid on a contract from the company. He won the bid, resigned his seat on Victoria City Council, and left in January of 1869 for the Queen Charlotte Islands (now called Haida Gwaii).²² There, 50 men built wharves and a railway to ship coal. He later reported "the first cargo of anthracite coal ever unearthed on the Pacific seaboard" was sent to San Francisco.²³

Maria Ann Gibbs left for Oberlin, Ohio with the children in 1867. Mifflin Gibbs wrapped up his businesses in Victoria and rejoined his family in 1870. Although their marriage was done, they seemed to maintain good terms. Mifflin Gibbs studied law at a business college in Oberlin a year later. He also travelled across the South where reconstruction took place. Gibbs'

brother Jonathan was Florida's Secretary of State, but he often slept in the attic due to threats from the Ku Klux Klan.²⁴

In 1871, Gibbs moved to Little Rock, Arkansas and was hired by the law office of Benjamin and Barnes. He resigned in 1872 to start his own firm. He was elected as a municipal judge in 1873. He worked as a state official for the Republican Party, and in October 1897 was appointed as the U.S. consul to Madagascar.²⁵ He resigned in 1901 on health grounds, as the working conditions and climate were difficult for a man of 78 years.²⁶

After leaving Africa, Gibbs returned to Little Rock and penned his autobiography *Shadow and Light* in 1902. In 1903 he launched a new bank to serve the Black community. It had initial success but the aged Gibbs might have lost his edge.²⁷ In 1907 he visited Victoria.²⁸ In 1908, the bank went insolvent due to mismanagement. Gibbs paid a large settlement but managed to keep much of his fortune. He died wealthy in Little Rock on 11 July 1915 at the age of 92.²⁹

Gibbs left a positive legacy. His political activism ensured that colonial administrators kept their promise to enfranchise Black settlers in British Columbia. In 2016, the City of Victoria declared 19 November "Mifflin Wistar Gibbs Day" in honour of Gibbs becoming the first Black person elected to public office in what is now British Columbia. In 2017, Parks Canada acknowledged Gibbs' national historic significance with a bronze plaque.³⁰



Endnotes

1. http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/gibbs_mifflin_wistar_14E.html
2. Ibid.
3. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/identity/text4/gibbs.pdf>
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