

# Shadow & Light

An Autobiography · Mifflin Wistar Gibbs

Introduction by Booker T. Washington

Introduction to the Bison Books Edition by Tom W. Dillard

# SHADOW AND LIGHT

## AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

WITH REMINISCENCES OF THE LAST AND PRESENT  
CENTURY

BY  
MIFFLIN WISTAR GIBBS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

Introduction to the Bison Books Edition  
by Tom W. Dillard

A Fatherless Boy, Carpenter and Contractor, Anti-Slavery Lecturer, Merchant, Railroad Builder, Superintendent of Mine, Attorney-at-Law, County Attorney, Municipal Judge Register of United States Lands, Receiver of Public Monies for U.S., United States Consul to Madagascar—Prominent Race Leaders, etc.

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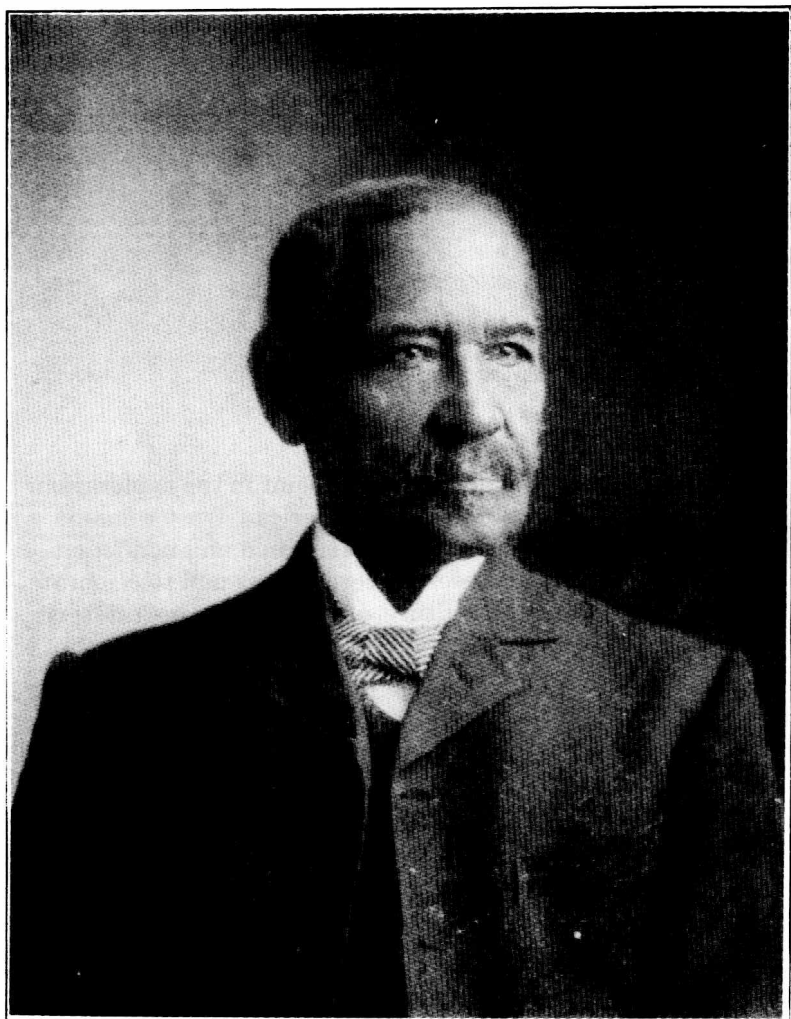
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# BLACKS IN THE AMERICAN WEST

## Editors

Richard Newman  
Marcia Renée Sawyer

The involvement of blacks at every point in the exploration, history, and ongoing life of the American West remains a little-known story. The books—both fiction and nonfiction—in this series aim to preserve these stories and to celebrate the achievement and culture of early African-American westerners.



Very truly Yours,  
M. W. Gibbs

## INTRODUCTION TO THE BISON BOOKS EDITION

Tom W. Dillard

Mifflin Wistar Gibbs is little known in African-American history. Even in Arkansas, where he spent most of his life, his name is mostly associated with the Little Rock elementary school named in his honor at the turn of the century. But to nineteenth-century black Americans, he was a man widely known for his substantial accomplishments and diverse interests. He was a leader of his race, and much more than that. He was an adventurous spirit, ready to join Frederick Douglass as a youthful orator on the abolitionist speaking circuit, or seek a fortune in Gold Rush California, or campaign for the first black municipal judgeship in America, or serve as the American consul in Madagascar, or start a bank at the ripe old age of eighty.

Students of American history are fortunate that Gibbs published his autobiography, *Shadow and Light: An Autobiography with Reminiscences of the Last and Present Century*, in 1902. While the writing is tinged with the flowery style typical of the Victorian era, and while much of Gibbs's long life remained to be lived (he did not die until 1915, at age ninety-two), this autobiography chronicles a great swath of African-American history.

Perhaps the main reason M. W. Gibbs is so interesting historically is that he serves as a wonderful window from which to look out upon practically the entire panorama of nineteenth-century African-American history. As a child in 1820s Philadelphia, he experienced race riots that engulfed many American cities with large black populations. As an apprentice carpenter, he helped build a new home for Bethel

African Methodist Episcopal Church, the birthplace of the A.M.E. denomination and known as "Mother Bethel." During the evenings Gibbs visited the developing black literary societies, where he came into contact with libraries and—more importantly—with the emerging black leadership elite.

Among the black leaders that Gibbs met was the great Frederick Douglass, who soon took his charge into the anti-slavery crusade. Gibbs had already become a "shrewd, active agent" in the "underground railroad." Soon he was traveling with Douglass on the antislavery lecture circuit; for Gibbs speaking out formed an "epoch in my life's history" (32). While on this trip with Douglass, Gibbs learned of the discovery of gold in California, and he was off to the West where he hoped to do "some great thing" (37).

Once in California, Gibbs quickly found an economic niche for himself—not as a miner but as a merchant. Going into business with another recent black immigrant, Peter Lester, Gibbs at last found economic security in the Pioneer Boot and Shoe Emporium. What California offered in economic opportunity, it took away in racial antagonism and confrontation. Within a year of his landing in San Francisco, he and other black leaders published a series of resolutions protesting the discriminatory practices common in the state. Next he helped create the Franchise League, and in 1855 Gibbs participated in a general meeting of black leaders from across the state. The following year he helped establish the first black newspaper in California, *The Mirror of the Times*, a weekly that he served as a publisher and occasional contributor. The newspaper grew out of the work of the San Francisco Atheneum Institute, which Gibbs helped establish and which served as the headquarters for the black intelligentsia of San Francisco.

A famous fugitive slave case, involving a slave named Archy Lee, caused Gibbs and other black leaders to organize opposition to slavery in California. The ferocity of the black protest offended many white Californians, and antago-

nism between the races grew much worse. Gibbs was especially active in fighting the California poll tax, a business tax that was particularly galling to blacks because payment of it in no way allowed them to vote. In 1858, when a bill was introduced in the state legislature to limit black immigration, Gibbs struck back, writing that the African-American's "right to the benefit of just government is as good as that of his pale face brother who clamors for his expatriation."<sup>1</sup> The situation reached the boiling point when blacks were ordered to remove their children from the public schools. With their world collapsing about them, Gibbs and several hundred other black Californians fled the United States altogether, settling in the British possession of Victoria, British Columbia.<sup>2</sup>

Victoria impressed Gibbs as a "whirlpool of excitement," and he immediately notified the San Francisco press that British Columbia is "a country good enough for me."<sup>3</sup> Having already learned that he could make more money from miners than mining, Gibbs and Peter Lester resumed their retail business in Victoria. Soon Gibbs diversified his business undertakings by venturing into the real estate business, where he achieved financial success. Of all his business undertakings, none was more breathtaking in its scope than his dealings with the Queen Charlotte Coal Mining Company. In the spring of 1868, Gibbs was awarded a contract by the company to open a coal mine in the Queen Charlotte's Islands north of Victoria. In May 1870, Gibbs sailed back to Victoria, taking with him the first shipment of anthracite coal ever mined on the Pacific coast. He arrived as a local hero. Now recognized as a wealthy man, he had fulfilled his goal of going west and "doing some great thing."

Although busy building his fortune, Gibbs took time out in 1859 to begin a family. Why he waited until he was thirty-six years of age before marrying is a puzzle. An intelligent, handsome man with a warm sense of humor, he obviously



was not unattractive to women. His wife, Maria Alexander, a native of Kentucky and a student at Oberlin College in Ohio, was a suitable mate for a socially prominent and successful businessman. In quick succession they had five children. But Victoria was no paradise for the young family.

At first the black immigrants were well received, but as large numbers of white American gold miners rushed into the area, race relations deteriorated. An 1861 attempt by local white ruffians to expel Gibbs and his pregnant wife from a Victoria theater resulted in a fisticuff, with Gibbs being hauled into court and fined five pounds. Next came the denial of jury service to blacks, and in 1864 the local black militia company was disbanded. Still, black British Columbians could vote and stand for public office, as they could not in the United States.

Gibbs took his first step toward voting in 1859 when he registered, and two years later he and fifty-two other blacks applied for British citizenship. (Gibbs left Victoria before gaining citizenship.) In August 1862, Gibbs announced his candidacy for the newly incorporated Victoria City Council. He failed to win election by four votes, but four years later he handily won election to the Council. When his term ended, Gibbs won reelection without opposition. In 1868 he was elected a delegate to a convention to consider union between the colony of British Columbia and the Dominion of Canada, a cause Gibbs stoutly supported. His tenure on the Victoria City Council ended when his work kept him away from the city.<sup>4</sup>

Without warning, in 1870 Gibbs left Victoria and settled in Oberlin, Ohio. He probably left for a variety of reasons, one being his dissatisfaction with the "totally unfitted" government of British Columbia. Another reason was the relocation of his wife and children to Oberlin in 1867, so that the children could attend the fine school associated with Oberlin College, Mrs. Gibbs's alma mater. But, M. W. Gibbs never spent much time with his family, so it must not have

surprised Mrs. Gibbs when he remained in Ohio only a brief time before seeking new adventure, and again without his family. On a warm Sunday morning in May 1871, he crossed the Arkansas River into Little Rock, Arkansas, a town that only a few years earlier had been freed of slavery.

Gibbs always seemed to be seeking opportunities in newly opened, frontier regions—first California, then British Columbia, then finally the Reconstruction-era South. His brother, Jonathan Gibbs, was already making a name for himself as the secretary of state in Reconstruction Florida. A man of economic means if not wealth, Gibbs took time to read law upon settling in Arkansas. Without reluctance, he threw himself into the bruising political wars then raging in Reconstruction Arkansas.<sup>5</sup>

Gibbs arrived in Arkansas just as the state Republican organization was splitting into warring factions of regulars and reformers. The new immigrant, with his freshly minted law license, joined the reform faction. Later the two factions united after a regular Republican named Elisha Baxter won the governorship and then proceeded to make a complete *rapprochement* with the Democrats. Gibbs became a close and loyal ally of United States Senator and former Governor Powell Clayton, an alliance that allowed Gibbs to run for police judge of Little Rock. His election victory in 1873 made Gibbs the first elected black municipal judge in American history. With the Democrats back in control by 1875, when he stood for reelection, Gibbs was defeated. But this defeat did not remove him from Republican politics.

For most of the remaining four decades of his life, Gibbs played an active role in the Arkansas GOP. He was a delegate to every Republican national convention but one from 1876 to 1904; from 1887 to 1897 he was secretary of the state's Republican central committee. During most of this time Gibbs was a member of the political organization of Powell Clayton. Clayton controlled the state GOP through a network of lieutenants who quashed dissent before it could

get organized. Gibbs, then, played the game of “clientage politics,” a process involving a small group of blacks who fashioned close associations with powerful whites, becoming clients of the white leaders in exchange for various rewards. Gibbs was rewarded for his loyalty to the GOP leadership with a variety of federal appointments. In 1877 President Rutherford B. Hayes named Gibbs registrar of the Little Rock land office, and he was reappointed by President Chester A. Arthur. President Benjamin Harrison named Gibbs receiver of public monies in Little Rock in 1889. Gibbs capped off his long career of presidential appointments in October 1897, when President William McKinley named him United States Consul to Tamatave, Madagascar.

The Madagascar appointment was not a choice diplomatic patronage plum, a fact that Gibbs recalled in his memoirs. Tamatave was a small, mosquito-plagued town, and the consular salary was a mere \$2,000. Still, he was one of a handful of blacks to receive presidential appointments during the generally regressive 1890s, and he sailed for Madagascar with his usual optimism still intact. He arrived on the scene just as the French were consolidating their control over the island. He soon discovered that his duties were mostly to show the American flag, as the United States had almost no economic or governmental relations with Madagascar. His major accomplishment as consul was to reestablish good will between the consulate and the local French authorities, a relationship that had been strained during the tenure of Gibbs’s two predecessors. Concluding that “Madagascar was a good place to *come from*” (321), Gibbs resigned as consul in 1901 and returned to Little Rock. Though an old man, Gibbs still had plans for his life.

In the years following his service in Madagascar, Gibbs turned his attention away from politics. Actually, blacks were practically disfranchised in Arkansas and most of the South during the 1890s, so politics offered little hope to African-Arkansans. More and more Gibbs gave his energies to ad-

vancing the economic standing of his race. He seemed to be the perfect man to promote black entrepreneurship, given his many economic successes. In 1903 Gibbs started a bank in Little Rock, his last great venture. It turned out to be a dismal failure and a stain on his reputation.

The Capital City Savings Bank, formed 1 January 1903 with Gibbs as president, was the second black-owned bank in Arkansas history. It must have seemed a propitious time to start a new bank in Little Rock. On the very day Gibbs started his bank, the local newspapers reported that 1902 bank clearings increased \$13 million over the previous year. Until the very day the bank folded, it appeared that Capital City Savings Bank was in good fiscal condition. By 1905 deposits amounted to \$100,000. The bank's officers and board were made up of the black elite of Little Rock. No one suspected that the bank was ill-managed, but on 18 June 1908, with scores of angry depositors nervously waiting to withdraw their deposits, the bank closed. As soon as the receiver audited the bank's books, word got out that the bank had been mismanaged and probably fraudulently so. The general economic panic at the time did not help matters. A leading black lawyer, Scipio A. Jones, filed numerous suits in circuit court seeking a total of \$28,000 in claims against Gibbs. Still worse news came on 21 January 1909, when grand jury indictments were returned against Gibbs and other bank officials. Gibbs was arrested and released on bond, and his personal estate, valued at \$100,000, was sequestered. He escaped prosecution by reaching an out-of-court settlement, and in so doing he also saved the bulk of his personal fortune. M. W. Gibbs could never again be viewed as the Horatio Alger of the black race.<sup>6</sup>

At age eighty-six Gibbs finally seemed ready to retire. He still had a large home to manage, investments to look after, and charities to assist. Since his wife and children never moved to Little Rock, he spent his years in Arkansas without close family support. His children did occasionally visit him, and on

one occasion his daughter gave a recital in Arkansas. His most prominent child, Harriet Gibbs Marshall was a well-known musician who, with financial assistance from him, established the Washington Conservatory of Music in the District of Columbia. It appears that Gibbs did not have grandchildren.<sup>7</sup>

At the age of ninety-two, Mifflin Wistar Gibbs died at his home in Little Rock on 11 July 1915 after several months of declining health. Accompanied by mourners in fourteen black carriages, his remains were buried in the all-black Fraternal Cemetery on Confederate Boulevard in Little Rock.

#### GIBBS'S PLACE IN HISTORY

It is easy for students of African-American history, when thinking of black leaders, to concentrate on Frederick Douglass or Booker T. Washington or W. E. B. DuBois. Though never as nationally significant as any of these men, M. W. Gibbs does serve as an illuminating mirror of the times. Chronologically, he was contemporary with both Douglass and Washington as well as the early years of DuBois. Born while the American nation was still in its adolescence, Gibbs came to manhood during those years when Douglass was leading the fight against slavery. In some respects, Gibbs is representative of that group of aggressive black leaders—men such as Martin Delaney and Robert Purvis—who emerged quite early in American black history. These were men who came to view themselves as born leaders of the black race. Eventually, this select cadre evolved into a black leadership elite. Although the Civil War and emancipation brought reforms that this elite group had long sought, the war also resulted in the birth of a new type of black leader: the emancipated slave.

The death of slavery freed thousands of potential black leaders from the bonds of servitude. New leaders, men such as Booker T. Washington, began to emerge. Washington proved to be effective competition to the old black elite. Fol-

lowing the death of Douglass in 1895, Washington and his allies created a near cartel of race leaders. The old black elite, although severely overshadowed by Washington, survived and occasionally, through such men as Monroe Trotter, challenged the "Wizard of Tuskegee." However, the birth of the twentieth century brought a new force to black America in the person of William E. B. DuBois, who was born into an upper-class Massachusetts family. The arrival of DuBois on the scene signaled the reemergence of the old black leadership elite. The ensuing struggle between the confrontational DuBois and the accommodationist Washington symbolized, as historians have noted, an effort by the black elite to regain ideological control of black leadership.

Never one to lose his equilibrium, Gibbs managed to adapt to each of these phases. In some respects he acted as a bridge between the factions. As a former functionary in the Pennsylvania antislavery effort, Gibbs saw himself as an old comrade of Douglass. Yet, their similarity went further. Both men shared a firm faith in the eventual successful integration of African-Americans into national society and government. Like Douglass, Gibbs firmly believed in the essential correctness of American political democracy, if not in the existing political process.

When Booker T. Washington, immaculate in his black coat, marched onto the platform at the Atlanta Exposition on 18 September 1895, a new leader for America's blacks was born. African-Americans were in need of a new national leader since Douglass's death seven months earlier. That Washington would be a leader far different from Douglass was to be expected given the vastly different demeanor of the Tuskegeean. But, more than that, America had changed drastically during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The uneasy racial truce of the post-Civil War years gave way to severe antagonism between black and white. Jim Crow segregation was expanding into more and more areas of national life. Disfranchisement of the black voter

was proceeding apace throughout the South. Observing these changes in race relations, Booker T. Washington concluded that complete integration of the African-American into national society was impossible and that the only alternative to perpetual racial confrontation was to play the game by the rules of the white majority. Washington did not, however, completely capitulate to the racists. He believed that African-Americans, by making themselves indispensable in the Southern labor force, could come to terms with the South.

M. W. Gibbs was a solid link between the hopeful dreams of Frederick Douglass and the cold reality of Booker T. Washington. Like Douglass, Gibbs remained active in politics until his final days. Yet, like Washington, Gibbs came to believe that politics would not answer all the problems of his race. In "industrial education" these two men found a common denominator. Actually, Gibbs was a pioneer in the field of vocational training for blacks. Ten years before Washington urged the blacks at the Atlanta Exposition to "cast down your buckets where you are," Gibbs helped organize a black trade school conference. A man who had been a successful retailer in California, who had opened the first anthracite coal mine on the west coast, and who owned considerable property and investments in Arkansas would naturally endorse black business as a racial panacea.

If Gibbs and Washington agreed on the question of black business, the situation was quite different in politics. The Tuskegeean used politics as a tool to consolidate his power in the African-American world. On the other hand, Gibbs saw the franchise as a right which every American should exercise. Although both men viewed the Republican Party as the natural home of the black man, Gibbs, especially late in his life, grew to distrust its white leadership, and on at least one occasion abandoned the party of Lincoln.

It was on the question of black political independence that Gibbs most resembled the rising young black intellectual, W. E. B. DuBois. Gibbs and DuBois shared a mutual heri-

tage, both coming from old free Northern families. Although Gibbs had almost no formal education, he shared DuBois's intellectual bent, as *Shadow and Light* makes clear. Both men read widely and both were literary craftsmen; DuBois wrote with a modern biting sharpness while Gibbs employed a more traditional and relaxed, yet effective, style. One can imagine that DuBois, had he known Gibbs, would have been especially impressed with the old man's long record on behalf of his race.

DuBois would have found it difficult to locate M. W. Gibbs within the matrix of African-American history. Unlike other black leaders, such as Washington or DuBois himself, Gibbs made no effort to preserve his personal papers, the means by which one gains historical immortality. It is true that Gibbs wrote his autobiography, but it was self-published and made its way into a mere handful of libraries. Mrs. Gwendolyn McConico Floyd, whose father was an associate of Gibbs, recalls that most of the copies of *Shadow and Light* languished unsold in the Gibbs home. The respected old man, always deferentially referred to by whites and blacks alike as "Judge Gibbs," was forgiven for his tendency to give the autobiography as a gift for every occasion. It was not until 1968 that a reprint of the volume was issued, although the Library of Congress did offer a microform copy.<sup>8</sup>

Gibbs was apparently prompted to write his autobiography by the realization that he had lived a different kind of life, one full of varied activities and peopled with characters as diverse as Chinese immigrant gold miners in California, a newspaper editor in Victoria with the unusual name of Amor de Cosmos, and President Ulysses S. Grant. It was probably during his tiresome service as American consul in Madagascar that Gibbs began his autobiography, for on at least one occasion he asked the French governor of the island colony to critique the manuscript (306-7). A close reading of the book demonstrates that Gibbs did not write completely from memory. On several occasions, he quotes from



old documents, such as his citation of the resolutions he presented to the Colored Men's Convention in Little Rock in 1883 (175).

The book is surprisingly detailed, but occasionally the author omits important activities of his life, such as the important role he played in waging the effort to free the slave Archy Lee in California. The most glaring omission is Gibbs's almost complete refusal to write about his wife. Although married to a well-educated, cultured woman and the father of five children, he remained aloof from his family. His wife, Maria, even after the children completed their education, remained in Oberlin. In his autobiography Gibbs barely makes reference to his wife, and his children are mentioned only slightly more often.

Even with its limitations, *Shadow and Light* is an important historical document. More importantly, it is a heartfelt remembrance by a man of great drive and fortitude, a man of perseverance and determination. Perhaps the black journalist Ralph W. Tyler characterized Gibbs best when he called him "our Moses of the west."<sup>9</sup> Although Gibbs was never able to find a promised land for his people, he never stopped searching.

#### NOTES

1. *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, 5 April 1858.

2. An excellent account of the whole era is found in Rudolph M. Lapp, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

3. *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, 23 June 1858.

4. Robin W. Winks, *Blacks in Canada* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), especially chapter 9.

5. Tom W. Dillard, "'Golden Prospects and Fraternal Amenities': Mifflin W. Gibbs' Arkansas Years." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 35 (winter 1976): 307-33.

6. The bank imbroglio is summarized in Tom W. Dillard, "The Black Moses of the West: A Biography of Mifflin Wistar Gibbs,