



Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture / NYPL



Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, ca. 1870

Mifflin Wistar Gibbs

SHADOW AND LIGHT

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

WITH REMINISCENCES OF THE LAST AND PRESENT CENTURY

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.

1902 EXCERPTS (1850-1860)

Mifflin Wistar Gibbs was born in 1823 in Philadelphia into a free black family. By age 16 he was a carpenter's apprentice as well as a budding orator for abolition. In 1858 Frederick Douglass invited him to join an abolitionist lecture tour in New York State, where he heard enticing tales of the California Gold Rush. He headed to California and soon established a retail boot store. Frustrated by the growing discrimination and lack of civil rights in California, he headed to British Columbia, Canada, as did several hundred other African Americans at the time. There he continued his business ventures for ten years until returning to the United States in 1869.

The war with Mexico, discovery of gold in California in 1848, the acquisition of new territory, and the developments of our hitherto undeveloped Western possessions, stimulated the financial pulse, and permeated every avenue of industry and speculative life. While in New York State I met several going and returning gold seekers, many giving dazzling accounts of immense deposits of gold in the new Eldorado; and others, as ever the case with adventurers, gave gloomy statements of peril and disaster. A judicious temperament, untiring energy, a lexicon of endeavor, in which there is no such word as "fail," is the only open sesame to hidden opportunities in a new country. . . .

I returned to Philadelphia, and with some friendly assistance, sailed, in 1850, from New York, as a steerage passenger for San Francisco. . . .

We had a stormy passage, making San Diego with the top of smoke stack encrusted with the salt of the waves, paddle wheel broken and otherside disabled, finally arriving at San Francisco in September. . . .

After dinner I immediately went out, and after many attempts to seek employment of any kind, I approached a house in course of construction and applied to the contractor for work. He replied he did not need help. I asked the price of wages. Ten dollars a day. I said you would much oblige me by giving me, if only a few days' work, as I have just arrived. After a few moments thought, during which maybe charity and gain held conference, which succumbed, it is needless to premise, for we sometimes ascribe selfish motives to kindly acts, he said that if I choose to come for nine dollars a day I might. It is unnecessary for me to add that I chose to come. . . .

I was not allowed to long pursue carpentering. White employees finding me at work on

Gibbs sailed to the Caribbean side of the Isthmus of Panama and traveled by river to the Pacific Side, where he took passage on another steamship for San Francisco. After finding a room in a "colored" hotel, Gibbs went in search of work.

the same building would “strike.” On one occasion the contractor came to me and said, “I expect you will have to stop, for this house must be finished in the time specified; but, if you can get six or eight equally good workmen, I will let these [white] fellows go. Not that I have any special liking for your people. I am giving these men all the wages they demand, and I am not willing to submit to the tyranny of their dictation if I can help it. . . I could not find the men he wanted or subsequent employment of that kind. . . .

Saving my earnings, I joined a firm already established in the clothing business. After a year or more so engaged, I became a partner in the firm of Lester & Gibbs, importers of fine boots and shoes. Just here a thought occurs which may be of advantage to ambitious but impecunious young men. Do not hesitate when you are without choice to accept the most humble and menial employment. It will be a source of pleasure, if by self-denial, saving your earnings, you keep a fixed intent to make it the stepping stone to some-thing higher. . . .



Our establishment on Clay street, known as the “Emporium for fine boots and shoes, imported from Philadelphia, London and Paris,” having a reputation for keeping the best and finest in the State was well patronized, our patrons [customers] extending to Oregon and lower California. The business, wholesale and retail, was profitable and maintained for a number of years. Mr. Lester, my partner, being a practical boot-maker, his step to a merchant in that line was easy and lucrative.

Thanks to the evolution of events and march of liberal ideas the colored men in California have now [1902] a recognized citizen-

ship, and equality before the law. It was not so at the period of which I write. With thrift and a wise circumspection financially, their opportunities were good; from every other point of view they were ostracised, assaulted without redress, disfranchised and denied their oath in a court of justice. . . .

In 1851, Jonas P. Townsend, W. H. Newby, and other colored men with myself, drew up and published in the “Alto California,” the leading paper of the State, a preamble and resolutions protesting against being disfranchised and denied the right of oath, and our determination to use all moral means to secure legal claim to all the rights and privileges of American citizens. . . .

The committee above named, with G. W. Dennis and James Brown, the same year formed a company, established and published the “Mirror of the Times,” the first periodical issued in the State for the advocacy of equal rights for all Americans. It has been followed by a score of kindred that have assiduously maintained and ably contended for the rights and privileges claimed by their zealous leader.

The weekly *Mirror of the Times* was published from 1857 to 1862.

State conventions were held in 1854, '55 and '57, resolutions and petitions passed and presented to the Legislature of Sacramento. We had friends to offer them and foes to move they be thrown out the window. It is ever thus “that men go to fierce extremes rather than rest upon the quiet flow of truths that soften hatred and temper strife.” . . .

The resolutions were tabled in the legislature.

Among the occasions continually occurring demanding protests against injustice was the imposition of the “poll tax.” It was demanded of our firm, and we refused to pay. A sufficient quantity of our goods to pay tax and costs were levied upon, and published for sale, and on what account.



Bainbridge & Casilear, *View of San Francisco: Taken from the Western Hill at the foot of Telegraph Hill, looking toward Ringon Point and Mission Valley*, lithograph (detail), 1851

I wrote with a fervor as cool as the circumstances would permit, and published a card from a disfranchised oath-denied standpoint, closing with the avowal that the great State of California might annually confiscate our goods, but we would never pay the voters tax. The card attracted attention, the injustice seemed glaring, the goods were offered. We learned that we had several friends at the sale, one in particular a Southern man. Now there was this peculiarity about the Southern white man, he would work a Negro for fifty years for his victuals [food] and clothes, and shoot a white man for cheating the same Negro, as he considered the latter the height of meanness. This friend quietly and persistently moved through the crowd, telling them why our goods were there, and advising to give them a “terrible letting alone.” The auctioneer stated on what account they were there, to be sold, asked for bidders, winked his eye and said “no bidders.” Our goods were sent back to our store. This law, in the words of a distinguished Statesman, was then allowed to relapse “into innocuous desuetude [disuse].” No further attempts to enforce it upon colored men were made. . . .

The state of California took Gibbs's business property to auction it for payment of the poll tax.

Early in the year 1858 gold was discovered on Fraser River, in the Hudson Bay Company's territory in the Northwest. This territory a few months later was organized as the Colony of British Columbia and absorbed; is now the western outlook of the Dominion of Canada. The discovery caused an immense rush of gold seekers, traders, and speculators from all parts of the world. In June of that year, with a large invoice of miners' outfits, consisting of flour, bacon, blankets, pick, shovels, etc., I took passage on steamship Republic for Victoria. . . .

Gibbs was one of 400-600 free African Americans who left California and its racial discrimination in 1858 for the gold rush in western Canada.

. . . On my arrival my goods were sold at great advance on cost, an order for more sent by returning steamer. . . Steamers and sailing craft were constantly arriving, discharging their human freight, that needed food, houses, and outfits for the mines, giving an impetus to property of all kinds that was amazing for its rapidity. The next afternoon after the day of my arrival I had signed an agreement and paid one hundred dollars on account for a lot and one-story house for \$3,000—\$1,400 more in fifteen days, and the balance in six months. Upon the arrival of my goods ten days later I paid the second installment and took possession. Well, how came I to take a responsibility so far beyond my first intended investment? Just here I rise to remark: For effective purposes one must not be unduly sensitive or over modest in writing autobiography—for, being the events and memoirs of his life, written by himself, the ever-present pronoun “I” dances in such lively attendance and in such profusion on the pages that whatever pride he may have in the events they chronicle is somewhat abased at its repetition. . . .

Gibbs set up a business selling provisions to the gold prospectors.

Library of Congress



H. O. Tiedemann, *View of Victoria, Vancouver Island* [British Columbia, Canada] (detail), 1860

. . . Previous to purchasing the property I had calculated the costs of alteration and estimated the income. In twenty days, after an expenditure of \$200 for improvements, I found myself receiving a rental of \$500 per month from the property, besides a store for the firm. Anyone without mechanical knowledge with time and opportunity to seek information from others may have done the same, but in this case there was neither time nor opportunity; it required quick perception and prompt action. 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. We had no complaint as to business patronage in the State of California, but there was ever present that spectre of oath denial and disfranchisement; 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. I cannot describe with what joy we hailed the opportunity to

In Canada, black men could vote, hold office, and testify in court, rights denied them in California and many other U.S. states.

enjoy that liberty under the "British lion" denied us beneath the pinions of the American Eagle. 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 impartially the benefits of constitutional liberty. They built or bought homes and other property, and by industry and character vastly improved their condition and were the recipients of respect and esteem from the community.

New York Public Library



Mifflin W. Gibbs (left), P. B. S. Pinchback, and James Lewis, ca. 1900, in Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro in Our History*, 4th. ed., 1927

Mifflin Gibbs remained in Canada through the American Civil War as a businessman in real estate, retail goods, and mining, becoming a wealthy man by 1869 when he returned to the United States. After earning a law degree at Oberlin College in Ohio, he moved to Arkansas with his family, becoming active for decades in the national Negro convention movement as well as the state Republican Party. In 1873 he was elected police judge of the city of Little Rock — the first elected black municipal judge in the United States. In 1897 he was appointed by President McKinley as the U.S. consul to the African island nation of Madagascar, returning to Arkansas in 1901 where he became president of one of the earliest black-owned banks in Arkansas. In 1902 he published his autobiography and in 1915, at age 92, Mifflin Gibbs died in Little Rock.