

1963

Jonathan C. Gibbs: Florida's Only Negro Cabinet Member

Joe M. Richardson



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Richardson, Joe M. (1963) "Jonathan C. Gibbs: Florida's Only Negro Cabinet Member," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 42 : No. 4 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol42/iss4/7>

JONATHAN C. GIBBS: FLORIDA'S ONLY NEGRO CABINET MEMBER

by JOE M. RICHARDSON

HISTORIANS HAVE CONTENTED that during the period of Reconstruction when the Republican party dominated the political stage in Florida, the state was controlled by incompetent, illiterate, and venal Negroes. A critical examination of primary sources, however, shows that this is not a valid conception. Negro office holders were always in a decided minority and among those who held office on the state and local level there were many capable men. The best example of a Florida Negro who disproves the stereotyped freedman politician is Jonathan C. Gibbs, one of the best educated and most cultured persons holding a political office.¹

Gibbs was born in Philadelphia about 1827, of free parents. After his father, Jonathan C. Gibbs, a Methodist minister, died in 1831, he was apprenticed to learn the carpenter's trade, which he followed until he was an adult. In the meantime, he had joined the Presbyterian Church, and, in 1848, at the age of twenty-one, entered Dartmouth College with the assistance of the Presbyterian Assembly.² At Dartmouth, Gibbs studied Latin, Greek, mathematics, rhetoric, morals, and natural philosophy.³ Graduating in 1852, he studied for two years at the Princeton Theological Seminary, and then became a pastor, first of a church in Troy, New York, and then of one in Philadelphia.⁴

Shortly after the Civil War, Gibbs was sent to North Carolina as a Presbyterian missionary. He opened a school for freedmen, and ministered to their religious needs.⁵ In late 1867, he was

1. William Watson Davis, *The Civil War and Reconstruction in Florida* (New York, 1913), 494.
2. Mifflin Winter Gibbs, *Shadow and Light: An Autobiography* (Washington, 1902), 111.
3. Letters from D. P. Hanna, assistant in the Archives Department, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.
4. *House Report*, 42nd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 22, pt. 13, 223; *New York Tribune*, February 10, 1868.
5. *Ibid.*, W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (Philadelphia, 1935), 643, 655.

transferred to Florida. When the freedmen were enfranchised, Gibbs decided that there was an "obvious necessity for ability in secular" as well as in religious matters.⁶

Gibbs was elected as a delegate to the Florida Constitutional Convention which met in Tallahassee, January, 1868. When the Convention convened, the Republicans who were in control immediately displayed an obvious division between the conservatives, sometimes called the "Johnson Party," and the more radical Republicans, who were in sympathy with the ideas of Thaddeus Stevens. Gibbs was aligned with the latter faction, although his speeches were usually temperate. He was the outstanding Negro member of the Convention, and many thinking Floridians agreed with the *New York Tribune* correspondent who said there is "no fitter man" present, "white or black."

Gibbs was described at this time as being of medium size, with "a good intelligent yellow African face." He was "active in body and intellect, well educated, and an orator by nature, not a roarer but a convincing, argumentative, pleasant speaker: in this respect the most talented man in the Convention."⁷ During the Convention, Gibbs preached one Sunday night in Tallahassee. "I have never heard a better address in my life," a Northern correspondent wrote, "than I did last evening from the Rev. Mr. Gibbs, at the African Church." Another white listener became almost ecstatic, saying, "O that all the old masters in the South could have heard him this day."⁸ Gibbs was "a good example" of what education would make of his race, a Jacksonville paper stated, adding that he was a man of "pleasing and courteous address."⁹ He was probably the best educated man in the Convention, a convention which, according to agriculturist Solon Robinson, compared favorably with any past legislative body of any southern state or with any new state in the country.¹⁰ Despite his adherence to the radical faction of the party, Gibbs was independent, even opposing his cohorts on occasion. His goal was a constitution

6. *Gibbs, op. cit.*, 111.

7. *New York Tribune*, February 5, 10, 1868; *Tallahassee Sentinel*, February 20, 1868.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Jacksonville *Florida Union*, November 14, 1868.

10. *New York Tribune*, February 5, 1868.

which would protect both the rights of Negroes and of property in the state.¹¹

Gibbs apparently made an excellent impression at the Convention upon the Republican party leadership. In 1868, Harrison Reed, Florida's first Republican governor, presented his name to the Senate for appointment as secretary of state. The name was incorrectly presented as John, and Reed withdrew it. For some reason it was not resubmitted.¹² Later that same year Gibbs was appointed secretary of state after the incumbent, George J. Alden, a native white Unionist, joined the governor's enemies in an attempt to impeach him. The elevation of Gibbs to the cabinet was an obvious attempt by Reed to strengthen his position with the freedmen, who believed the governor was neglecting their interests.¹³ As secretary of state, Gibbs was a trusted public servant, and worked closely with Reed and the other state officials, some of whom were former Confederate army officers. He sometimes served as acting governor during Reed's absences.¹⁴ He was Reed's right-hand man, and apparently was respected by other cabinet officers.

Even bitter Democratic opponents commended Gibbs for his fairness and honesty. In 1873, the Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, the most important Democratic paper in the state, complained that the legislature has passed "a legal advertisement law" for the purpose of subsidizing Republican newspapers. But under Gibbs, the editor pointed out, "The harsh operations of the law were 'considerably mollified' by the designation of a number of Democratic journals as 'official papers'."¹⁵

None of his white associates were able to shield Gibbs from the hatred of the Ku Klux Klan, however, which opposed all Negro politicians regardless of their ability and standing. Furthermore, as secretary of state, Gibbs was active in trying to ferret out and punish members of these lawless organizations. His brother, Mifflin W. Gibbs, an attorney in Little Rock, Arkansas, visited

11. John Wallace, *Carpetbag Rule in Florida: The Inside Workings of the Reconstruction of Civil Government in Florida after the Close of the Civil War* (Jacksonville, 1888), 55.

12. *Florida Senate Journal*, 1868, 84.

13. Wallace, *op. cit.*, 90-91; *New York Tribune*, February 8, 1868.

14. See Minutes of the Board of Commissioners of Public Institutions, October 26, 1868-February 13, 1892, February 27, March 2, 23, May 1, 1871, in Florida State Library, Tallahassee, Florida.

15. *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, March 4, 1873.

him while he was secretary of state, and found him in a "well-appointed residence," but sleeping in the attic where he kept "considerable of an arsenal." Gibbs said he had slept in the attic for several months for protection since the Ku Klux Klan had threatened his life.¹⁶

When Governor Reed was succeeded in January, 1873, by Ossian B. Hart, Gibbs was appointed state superintendent of public instruction. According to a Negro contemporary, Negro Republicans threatened to desert the party unless a member of their race received a cabinet appointment.¹⁷ Since Gibbs was the ablest Negro in the state, he was invited to join the new governor's administration. As superintendent, Gibbs was also president of the board of trustees of the agricultural college that Florida planned to establish with the proceeds realized from the sale of lands secured under the Morrill Land Act.

Extant records show that Gibbs was deeply interested in developing public education on every level, for both whites and Negroes in Florida. Insisting on full and accurate reports from his county superintendents, he inspected these documents carefully. He had moderate success in securing adoption of uniform texts in elementary and secondary schools. Previously each student had used any book he could secure. In 1873 the state published a series of textbooks under Gibbs' direction. This was the first time a course of study of any kind had been developed by Florida.¹⁸ The public school system in Florida experienced rapid growth under Gibbs' leadership, although he was often discouraged that he was not able to move forward even more rapidly. A visitor to Florida, who described Gibbs as "a gentleman of considerable culture and capacity," quoted him as saying that his efforts were often thwarted by other politicians, many of whom opposed integrated schools.¹⁹ There was considerable opposition by

16. Gibbs, *op. cit.*, 112.

17. Wallace, *op. cit.*, 268.

18. "School Report of Florida, 1869-1894," Office of State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tallahassee, Florida; Boyce F. Ezell, *The Development of Secondary Education in Florida With Special Reference to the Public White High School* (DeLand, 1932), 36-37.

19. Edward King, *The Southern States of North America: A Record of Journeys in Louisiana, Texas, the Indian Territory, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland* (London, 1875), 420.

whites to Negro education throughout the South,²⁰ but this was only one of many problems facing public education. Florida's small population was widely scattered, money was scarce, competent teachers were difficult to secure, especially for Negro schools, and many Floridians could not yet see the efficacy of tax-supported education.

Superintendent Gibbs was not completely pessimistic about the situation, however. In a speech before the National Education Association at Elmira, New York, in August, 1873, he admitted the shortcomings and problems of public education in Florida, but graphically demonstrated its improvement and growth since the Civil War.²¹ In 1872-1873, Florida had 18,000 pupils in school at a cost of \$101,820. The next year, 1873-1874, enrollment and expenditures increased to 21,196 and \$139,870.60 respectively. In 1874-1875 enrollment climbed to 32,371 with total receipts from school taxes amounting to \$188,952.²² There was a relatively large number of Negroes enrolled in the public schools, and visitors commented favorably on their rapid progress. In some counties there were more Negroes than whites attending school.²³ Gibbs' address to the National Education Association received flattering notices from the Elmira newspapers. A New York paper noted that a Negro from the South "had delivered with the dignity of an educated gentleman" a speech that in "breadth of thought and liberality of sentiment" marked the speaker as a "worthy son" of Dartmouth College.²⁴

Gibbs died suddenly on August 14, 1874. He was only forty-seven years old. S. B. McLin who succeeded Gibbs as superintendent of public instruction wrote that Gibbs' death "must be regarded as an event of more than ordinary importance, especially when viewed in connection with the educational interests of the State. . . . Negroes have lost one of their noblest representatives, our State one of its most valued citizens, and our public school system one of its most intelligent advocates and one of its best friends."²⁵ Enjoying good health, he had delivered a "pow-

20. *The Florida Agriculturist*, March 7, 1874, I, 79.

21. Copy of speech in "School Reports of Florida, 1869-1894."

22. *Ibid.*; U. S. Commissioner of Education, *Report for the Year 1874* (Washington, 1875), 61, 532-33; *Report for the Year 1875*, 65.

23. "School Reports of Florida, 1869-1894."

24. *The Florida Agriculturist*, January 17, 1874, I, 20.

25. "School Reports of Florida, 1869-1844."

erful speech" at a Republican meeting in Tallahassee just a few hours before he died. His brother said he died of apoplexy in his office shortly after the meeting.²⁶ Nonetheless, it was rumored and many believed that he had been poisoned.

The death of one of the state's most illustrious Negroes was regretted by both white and Negro Floridians. The conservative Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, which rarely wrote anything favorable about a Republican, editorialized: "He was probably the best informed colored man in the State, and would in this respect have stood in the front ranks of his race anywhere."²⁷ The Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Union* believed it no injustice to the living to say that "in all the elements that go to make up what is termed a good citizen and a capable and honest public servant, he leaves few superiors."²⁸ Gibbs was in many ways "a leading representative of his race," the Jacksonville *New South* attested, "and in the State, owing to his education and gentlemanly bearing, he had no superior."²⁹ The minister-educator-politician was a man of intelligence, integrity, and dedication, and in his time, one of the outstanding men in Florida.

26. Du Bois, *op. cit.*, 521; Gibbs, *op. cit.*, 112.

27. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, August 25, 1874.

28. Jacksonville *Tri-Weekly Union*, August 18, 1874.

29. Jacksonville *New South*, August 19, 1874.