

The Education of William Gibbons¹

By Scott Nesbit

On the afternoon of Friday, July 2, 1886, the “First Colored” church of Charlottesville was “packed to suffocation.”² Torrential rains had turned the unpaved West Main Street into a mud field, and the church sanctuary abutting the street was thick with steam from the drenched congregation inside, which consisted of much of the town’s African American community and more than a few local whites, as well.³ Rev. William Gibbons’ body had arrived just earlier on the train from Washington, D.C., accompanied by two full cars of mourners, who had been granted a reduced fare by the rail company.⁴ The service industry of Charlottesville, dependent upon African American labor, slowed to a stop, as did traffic along University Avenue, which was lined with empty carriages sitting in the red clay. At the depot behind the Church, a reporter spotted a

dudish white youth who entered the depot breathless and muddy. He loudly lamented the loss of one of his overshoes, his wet foot, his spattered raiment, the run he had had to make, in the same breath denouncing a colored hack man who had promised to bring him to the train, but had perfidiously left him to his fate, and gone to the preacher’s funeral.⁵

Walter Brooks, the young, elite minister of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington pronounced a “glowing eulogy upon the life and character of the deceased.”⁶ This was Rev. Gibbons’ second funeral; his first was held in Washington, DC, twenty-four hours earlier, and was attended by ten thousand mourners, according to one of the

¹ I would like to thank Prof. Scot French and the Center for the Study of Local Knowledge at the Carter Woodson Institute for African and African American Studies for office space and invaluable expertise, and the William R Kenan Endowment Fund for the Academical Village at the University of Virginia for their generous financial support, without which this article would not have been possible.

² Charlottesville *Chronicle*, “Funeral,” July 9, 1886.

³ Orra Langhorne, “Southern Sketches” in *Southern Workman*, 15:9, (September 1886) p.94.

⁴ Washington *Post*, “Rev. Wm. Gibbons’ Funeral,” July 2, 1886.

⁵ Orra Langhorne, “Southern Sketches” in *Southern Workman*, 15:9, (September 1886) p.94.

⁶ Charlottesville *Chronicle*, “Funeral,” July 9, 1886.

newspapers covering the event.⁷ Both ceremonies were lavish, and the editor of the Charlottesville paper commented that the African American mourners, “who are least able to bear the expense,” had squandered “hundreds of dollars” on “symbols of grief” that were “rare and costly and, but for the momentary purpose, utterly useless.”⁸ The communities in Charlottesville and Washington that came to a standstill to pay respects to Rev. William Gibbons surely saw their actions in a different light.

William Gibbons’ life exemplified the tensions that American society, black and white, placed upon black leaders under slavery and after emancipation. This essay will examine Gibbons’ life and education, broadly defined, during three periods: as a slave in Albemarle County and at the University of Virginia; as a minister to Charlottesville’s African American Baptist community during the transition from slavery to freedom; and as the leader of one of Washington D.C.’s largest Baptist churches from 1868 to his death in 1886.

This biographical essay will add to recent studies of African American community life in post-emancipation-era Albemarle County that have focused on the development of an educated leadership class, steeped in the gendered politics of respectability and the ideology of racial uplift, within an emerging black public sphere of church, school, and fraternal order.⁹ One of these studies, Gayle M. Schulman’s 1997

⁷ *Washington Bee*, “South Washington News,” July 10, 1886.

⁸ *Charlottesville Chronicle*, Editorial, July 9, 1886.

⁹ For analysis of African American public life, leadership, and ideology, see Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom.” *Public Culture* 7 (February 1994):107-46; Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, 1993); Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill, 1996). Among the studies that have enriched our understanding of social relations within and between the local African American and white communities are Corey D. B. Walker, “*The Freemasonry of the Race*”: *The Cultural Politics of Ritual, Race, and Place in Postemancipation Virginia*, (unpublished dissertation, 2001), Laurantette L. Lee, *Crucible in the Classroom: The Freedpeople and their Teachers*

Magazine of Albemarle County History article, “The Gibbons Family: Freedmen,” introduced readers to Rev. William Gibbons, a remarkable figure whose life-long education, as a slave and a freedman, is more fully documented and analyzed here.¹⁰

Under slavery, Gibbons grasped a social education that enabled him to negotiate the disparate expectations of white and black communities. Elite whites permitted him to obtain basic literacy, believing it important that he improve himself that he might serve them, and God, better. Within the black community, William Gibbons’ ability to read and write combined with his charisma to establish the lay preacher’s leadership among his fellow slaves.

After freedom came to Albemarle, the radical transformation of the social, political, and religious landscape that accompanied emancipation forced William Gibbons to renegotiate the terms of social success fluidly. To a great extent, Gibbons’ focus on his call to ministry and the persuasiveness with which he urged his congregants toward faith in God earned the preacher continued support from freed African American Baptists. He was unable, however, to win the satisfaction of some progressive voices, black and white, that emphasized formal schooling in their struggle for respectability and uplift. In the eyes of progressive elites, Gibbons distracted freedmen and women from their duties as citizens, and promoted superstitious and “noisy” religious practices that corresponded too closely to conservative, white notions of African American ignorance. Moreover, a generational conflict, between those who, like Gibbons, lived most of their

Charlottesville, Virginia, 1861-1876, (unpublished dissertation, 2002), Ann W. Carter, “Our Legacy: A History of Mount Zion First African Baptist Church, 1867-2003,” unpublished paper (2003), and Richard I. McKinney, *Keeping the Faith: A History of the First Baptist Church, 1863-1980, in light of its times, West Main and Seventh Streets, Charlottesville, Virginia*, (Charlottesville, 1981).

¹⁰ Gayle M. Shulman, “The Gibbons Family: Freedmen,” *Magazine of Albemarle County History*, 55 (1997), 60-93.

lives under slavery and elites of a younger generation, who generally had greater opportunities and expectations, became increasingly apparent after the Reconstruction era. Nonetheless, at the close of Gibbons' life and ministry, two inter-generational, African American communities, in Washington and Charlottesville, paid homage to one whom they each proudly claimed as their own.

CHILDHOOD SLAVERY

Much of the information that exists about Gibbons, particularly during the years before emancipation, is fragmentary and anecdotal. The modern historian is always constrained by the reliability of his sources, and this limit on knowledge is particularly keen when the anecdotal histories that have been preserved are seemingly contradictory, and were written down not as contemporary descriptions but as memories of the past.

It is difficult, then, to describe William Gibbons' childhood. We know that William Gibbons was born in 1825 or 1826, as a slave, in Virginia. According to Orra Langhorne, a late 19th century correspondent to the Hampton Institute's monthly *Southern Workman* magazine, Gibbons was born on an Albemarle County plantation owned by a prominent family. As a child, Langhorne notes, Gibbons became "fast friends" with his master's son, a boy of about the same age.¹¹ As the childhood playmate of an elite southerner, Gibbons may have had opportunities to obtain parts of an education denied to him by Virginia law. The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* demonstrates one of the strategies available to precocious, enslaved youths:

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time

¹¹ Orra Langhorne, "Southern Sketches," *Southern Workman*, 18:10 (October 1889), and *ibid*, 15:9 (September 1886).

to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.¹²

Douglass used relationships with whites in order to transgress formal limitations on his educational possibilities. This strategy was common throughout the antebellum South. Historian Eugene Genovese pointed out that “white children frequently defied their parents to teach the black children to read and write.”¹³ Thus enslaved children could obtain literacy in Virginia by using the social capital from their relationships with whites.¹⁴

Once educated, slaves often became teachers themselves. For example, Peter Fosset a slave of Thomas Jefferson, was taught to read by Lewis Randolph, Jefferson’s grandson. After Jefferson’s death, Fosset was sold to Col. John R. Jones, who forbade his slaves from exhibiting any trace of literacy. Jones also threatened to whip his sons—William and James Lawrence, who attended the University of Virginia—if they taught Fosset to read. “But,” Fosset recalled, “they helped me all they could, as did his daughter Ariadne.”¹⁵ Fosset is credited with teaching Burkley Bullock, another of Jones’ slaves, to read and write.¹⁶

The education of African Americans, though tolerated in Jefferson-era Albemarle, was officially discouraged after 1829, when white authorities discovered copies of David

¹² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, ch.7, p.38. Accessed online at: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/douglass/douglass.html>.

¹³ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1976) p.515-6. Literacy among slaves, while not unheard of, was not common, either. Some estimates suggest that less than 5 percent of slaves could read and write.

¹⁴ My conception of social capital roughly follows that laid out by Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, 2000).

¹⁵ Fossett’s memoirs were published in the *New York World*, Jan. 30, 1898.

¹⁶ Memoirs of Charles W. Bullock, Sr., undated; Pearl M. Graham papers, Courtesy Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, a radical abolitionist tract, among slaves and freed blacks. The Virginia General Assembly considered outlawing all whites from teaching slaves to read and write, but the legislature settled on prohibiting slaves' formal, paid, schooling.¹⁷ A loophole in the law allowed for informal tutoring of slaves within plantation households such as the one in which Gibbons served.

Opportunities for literacy, often gained against the wishes of white authorities, were accompanied by an education of a different sort: an education in the social hierarchy and racial etiquette of slave society. "For most slaves," Genovese writes, "the moment came when the awareness of class and race, of superordination and subordination, surfaced."¹⁸ This awareness was a vital, if painful, part of Gibbons' education. For example, R.T.W. Duke, Jr., a prominent Albemarle County lawyer after the Civil War, recalled the code of behavior that existed between he and his slave/playmate, Caesar:

Nothing could better show the relations of master & servant as they existed in the South than my relations with this boy. We were friends, without presumption on his part, or any lowering of self esteem on mine. We fought like tigers on very many occasions, and the best man was allowed to win. He was never punished for "striking back" but never allowed to be impudent or to strike the first blow.¹⁹

This account shows the balance that was often struck, in Albemarle County as elsewhere, between the friendship and lordship of one boy over another. Caesar was "allowed" to fight with his master, but was clearly his friend's subordinate. All "presumption" and "impudence" were forbidden the mulatto youth, and it was surely clear to the young slave that to "strike the first blow" was to court punishment at the hands of adults, not just a reprisal in kind from his white playmate. Gibbons' awareness of his subordination to

¹⁷ See Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (Boston, 2004) 21-27.

¹⁸ Genovese, p.516

¹⁹ R. T. W. Duke, Jr., "Recollections of My Life," Accession #9521, University of Virginia Archives, Alderman Library, Charlottesville, 1, 23

whites, in law and custom, was the social education that paralleled any formal literacy that Gibbons gained as a child.

SLAVES & STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY

Gibbons' attendance as a body-servant to his young master at the University of Virginia facilitated the slave's continued education.²⁰ There is no record directly tying Gibbons to any particular student at the University. Hundreds of families from central Virginia sent their sons to be educated at the University, far too many to match to the brief description of Gibbons' owners that comes down to modern historians from anecdotes.²¹ Nevertheless, there is circumstantial evidence, however fragmentary, that suggests the identity of Gibbons' owners.

Assuming that Gibbons derived his name from his owner's family, it is possible that he belonged to Arthur Gibbons, a University student and member of the prominent Cabell family in Albemarle. Arthur was a contemporary of Gibbons, only four years his elder; the age difference is congruent with Langhorne's description of Gibbons relationship with his childhood master. An aspiring medical student, Arthur Gibbons attended the University of Virginia during the 1842-43 session, and continued to live at the University with his brother-in-law, Professor James L. Cabell, even after his graduation, until his premature death in 1851.²²

Even if William Gibbons had accompanied his master to the University of Virginia, he would not have been permitted to live alongside the white youth, for students were not permitted to keep their servants with them in the Academical Village. Still, it is

²⁰ Langhorne, "Southern Sketches," *Southern Workman*, 18:10 (October 1889)

²¹ University of Virginia, *Students of the University of Virginia : a semi-centennial catalogue with brief biographical sketches*. (Baltimore, c.1878)

²² *ibid*

clear that these regulations did not discourage interaction between the students and their servants. William evidently had great access to his master in a setting that was at once both academic and social. As Langhorne writes of William Gibbons,

He lived on the most intimate terms with his master and his friends; all their books were at his disposal. He had been trained to good manners, was naturally quick, obliging and observant, and it was rather amusing to the white boys, often too idle and indifferent to study themselves, to see a Negro so anxious to learn. They threw no obstacle in his way and were indeed disposed to encourage him.²³

There was no formal option of education open to William Gibbons during his time as the attendant to a student of the University of Virginia. Social channels, however, afforded Gibbons an education through relationships he established with the white slave-owning class. These relationships introduced flexibility into the white educational system that was not and could not be codified. Gibbons used whatever social capital arose from daily interaction with his master and his master's friends to his own educational advancement. Such ambition, as Langhorne speculates, was viewed not as a threat to white supremacy but as an "amusing" attempt at elevation by a social inferior.

Slaves at the University of Virginia did not always profit from their proximity to the student body; often students would "teach" African Americans about racial hierarchy through acts of violence that interrupted black community life and reinforced blacks' vulnerability and consequent dependency upon whites. Unruly students indirectly threatened enslaved African Americans at the University when rebelling against professorial authority. At nine o'clock on the evening of January 21st 1846, many of the students rioted, probably in protest of University policy, which required all students to deposit their pocket money with the Proctor. The students set fire to barrels of tar on the Lawn, shot firecrackers and pistols, and made other "discordant noises." The unruly

²³ Langhorne, 18:10 (October 1889)

youths paraded in front of the dorm rooms and professors' Pavilions. Interestingly, the students decided to disguise themselves by appearing "with their faces blacked."²⁴ Such disguises were undoubtedly the product of a mere adolescent prank; nonetheless, a prank which would have been interpreted by all within the context of racial enslavement. In this context the youths ascribed, if only in jest, their chaotic behavior to those in the community who possessed dark skin.

Both conservative southerners and progressive, northern observers pointed to the constant threat that students posed to young African American men and women. R.T.W. Duke, Jr. recalled that his childhood slave and friend, Caesar, bore a striking resemblance to John Yates Beal, who was a student at the University of Virginia when Caesar's mother conceived. No one openly claimed paternity of the child.²⁵ It is difficult to imagine a relationship free of the manipulations of power between an elite white male and a local slave.²⁶

Philena Carkin, a northern schoolteacher of freedmen in Charlottesville after the Civil War, described the relationship between University students and young black men and women in less than favorable terms.

It seems a terrible accusation to make, but nevertheless I believe that at the time I was there, there was nothing else in the locality that had so demoralizing an effect upon the colored youth of both sexes as our vicinity to the University of Virginia. Many of the growing boys were employed by students as servants, where they were pretty sure to receive an education of a most undesirable and vicious nature. And the girls—just released from slavery where their status was about the same as that of the domestic animals—is it any wonder that many of them were morally weak while all were practically defenseless? And it was a common and bitter experience with us to have some girl of whom we had hoped to make a bright particular star for the guidance and

²⁴ Journals of the Chairmen of the Faculty [manuscript] Accession #RG-19/1/2.041, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library. Jan. 24th, 1846.

²⁵ R.T.W. Duke, *Recollections* 1, 21

²⁶ Cf. Josh Rothman's nuanced portrayal of the Jefferson-Hemmings relationship in *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia*, (Chapel Hill, 2003), 14-52

uplifting of the race, disappoint our hopes in the cruelest way through the temptations and influences emanating from the University.²⁷

Carkin cited sexual violence against young black women to be particularly troubling to all the recently freed youths. Of equal concern to Carkin, was the peculiar “education” that many freed youths received from students at the University of Virginia in their role as servants there.

Moreover, in order to engrain the inferiority of the enslaved even within the spatial relations of the Lawn, slaves were normally housed literally underneath their white masters, in the cellars below the Pavilions.²⁸ Slave life at the University of Virginia held particular, educational advantages, but left African Americans such as William Gibbons vulnerable to the violent acts of adolescent, white men and dependent upon the protection of the more stable professorial community.

GIBBONS AND THE “PROFESSORIAL COLONY”

William Gibbons’ stay at the University of Virginia extended beyond Arthur Gibbons’ brief enrollment as a medical student, and his prolonged service there provided him with opportunities that would be of great benefit after emancipation. Sometime during the 1840s, William Gibbons was sold to Dr. Henry Howard, Arthur Gibbons’ professor of Anatomy and Surgery.²⁹ Gibbons probably served for a short time in the Howard household, but was soon hired out as a butler to Professor William McGuffey, who had married Dr. Howard’s daughter, Laura and who resided in Pavilion IX.³⁰

Intermarriage between professorial families at the University of Virginia was common,

²⁷ Carkin, *Reminiscences I*, 49-50

²⁸ Minutes, Board of Visitors, July 7, 1840

²⁹ Papers of Philena Carkin, MSS 11123, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library. “Reminiscences of my Life and Work among the Freedmen of Charlottesville, Virginia, from March 1st 1866 to July 1st 1875” Volume II, 50

³⁰ James Moore Goode, “William Holmes McGuffey at the University of Virginia, 1845-1873.” MSS 7906-b. Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library, 5, 20

according to one contemporary observer, and created a situation in which “many of the older ones are related in some way, which fortunately results in making the professorial colony one large family.”³¹ As the slave of faculty members who were long-term residents at the University, Gibbons became a part of the extended University of Virginia community. Gibbons’ years at the University created ties to white patrons, of local and regional prominence, who may have been of assistance in years following emancipation.

Within the McGuffey household, especially, Gibbons benefited from close interaction with white elites. Prof. William McGuffey was originally from Ohio, and evidently was reticent to conform to regional norms of slave discipline. The McGuffey family initially preferred to rely solely on “moral suasion” instead of the more traditional corporal punishment. Their reliance upon the alternate system of discipline proved to be ineffective, and so for much of the 1840s the McGuffeys “were expected to send [the hired slaves] back to their owners for punishment when they misbehaved.”³² The dual systems of discipline under which the McGuffey household operated probably undermined the paternal bonds between masters and slaves. The ambiguous nature of ultimate authority for those in bondage within the University, however, also allowed Gibbons more room to maneuver between his owner and employer, respectively. Gibbons’ childhood education, which surely taught him how to defer to a master, just as surely taught the young slave how to exploit the hiring system to his own benefit.

As a slave, Gibbons learned the extent of his dependence upon members of the McGuffey and Howard families. He also learned, however, the ways in which his

³¹ David M.R. Culbreth, *The University of Virginia: Memoirs of her Student-Life and Professors*. (New York, 1908), 276

³² Alice McGuffey Ruggles, *The Story of the McGuffeys*, (New York, 1950), 106

interaction with them created mutual bonds of obligation.³³ William Gibbons was an integral part of the McGuffey household in his role as the family's butler. His constant presence put pressure on all white residents of Pavilion IX, in one way or another, to recognize both his humanity and their own complicity in an economic and social system that denied Gibbons' humanity.

Mary McGuffey, daughter of Prof. William McGuffey, understood the irony of the Virginia slave code, which forbade Gibbons, the servant of highly educated whites at one of the South's preeminent Universities from attending school. Her childhood was spent in various frontier towns in Ohio. By the time she arrived at the University, she was sixteen years old, and quite popular among the young men at the University. Prof. Gessener Harrison's daughter, Maria, wrote in 1846 that Mary McGuffey "is regularly turned out this winter and always has several beaux around her."³⁴ This young woman, who only recently had arrived in the South, was particularly troubled by the limitations placed upon those who were enslaved in the way that created the greatest difference to her: education.

Mary McGuffey had probably learned to read and write through early editions of her father's classic reading textbooks, the *Eclectic Readers*. Truman and Smith Publishers first printed the *Eclectic Readers* when Mary was six years old, and we may suppose that McGuffey permitted if not required his daughter to read the texts as she grew. The McGuffey household was surely focused, much more than many households, upon pedagogy and upon the practical and moral benefits of education. The morality

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Maria C. Harrison to Peachey Rush Harrison, 11-23-1846. Papers of the Tucker, Harrison & Smith families, 1809-1911, Accession #3847-1, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Quoted in Goode, 6.

highlighted in the *Readers* was an education in honesty, loyalty, kindness, and charity; the topics of slavery and race were avoided altogether.

Still, William Gibbons' slavery within her own household was troubling to the adolescent. Mary McGuffey responded to his bondage by relying upon the kind of moral education, particularly with regard to charity, that her father espoused publicly as appropriate for young women.³⁵ The ideas of charity which are contained within McGuffey's *Primer* are not counter-cultural, and they in no way advocate civil disobedience, yet the fact of slavery and the peculiar laws that buttressed the institution in Virginia created tension within the adolescent girl's mind. In a world in which education was the key both to economic and religious improvement, the presence of uneducated African-Americans within her own household probably unsettled Mary McGuffey.

Alice McGuffey Ruggles, slipping into hagiography, retold a McGuffey family story of Mary's interaction with William Gibbons:

[The McGuffeys'] sixteen-year-old daughter Mary said the Southern system was all wrong. How could people be whipped into a moral sense? She would show what she could do. The McGuffey's butler, a bright young colored man about her own age, named William Given [sic], was eager to learn to read and write, and Mary began to teach him. "You can't do that," her father remonstrated, "it's against the law of Virginia." "Don't care if it is," retorted the chip off the old block, "I am going to do it anyway." And she did.³⁶

Ruggles' account is problematic as an historical document, but behind the dialogue, which Ruggles placed in her ancestors' mouths, is the fact of William Gibbons' education. Gibbons' presence demonstrated to the young woman the absurdity of his status as both human and chattel; this absurdity combined with McGuffey's own

³⁵ E.g. the *First Reader*, 1849 Edition, p.36-7 illustrates two adolescent girls giving alms to a lame beggar. The narrative explains: "See that poor man! He is lame, and has no hat on. Jane, will you give him John's old hat? Yes, that you will. You will be glad to help him. We must feel for the lame, and do all we can to help them. Jane, you are a kind girl, and I love you." The question for further thought makes the moral education explicit to the reader: "What was the matter with the old man? What must we do for those who are in trouble?"

³⁶ Ruggles, 106

educational experiences within the household to create a crisis of sorts for the young girl. The result of these circumstances mitigated the humiliation of slavery, and created some level of charity or empathy between Mary McGuffey and her family's hired slave. Thus Gibbons used his connection to elite, University whites within the professorial community to obtain greater literacy.

Without overtly challenging the head of household, Gibbons likely pricked the conscience of William McGuffey, too. McGuffey expected Gibbons to fulfill the role of a butler; therefore Gibbons was under the direct authority of McGuffey. In this role, obedience was required and tested often, with each request every day. Despite the constant reminder of Gibbons' bondage that McGuffey's orders represented, the power relations within this regime did not prevent the formation of bonds of appreciation between Gibbons and Professor McGuffey.

While serving as a Professor at the University of Virginia, McGuffey developed a relationship with many in the local African-American community. This relationship included but also transcended the forms of patronage that many whites attempted to establish with blacks. William Thornton, who attended the University from 1868-72, recalled that,

[McGuffey] preached often to the coloured people and was greatly beloved by them. When they determined to buy the old Delevan building in Charlottesville for a church Dr. McGuffey helped them with a handsome donation. Their pastor was William Barnett, a negro born in Africa and educated in America. To him and to Dr. McGuffey are largely due the helpful and friendly relations, which have always existed between blacks and whites in Charlottesville.³⁷

While Thornton's account of race relations in Charlottesville was surely quixotic, his emphasis on McGuffey's relationship to members of the African-American community in

³⁷ Thornton, 246

Charlottesville, especially with reference to religious education, is supported by evidence from McGuffey's funeral. The Charlottesville *Jeffersonian Republican* narrated the event at great length, and included a depiction of the African American presence.

Among those who followed the remains of the deceased to the grave were the pastor of the Delavan colored Baptist church, the members of that church and the Sunday School. Dr. McG. was their friend, had preached for them, and had aided and counseled them. To him they were attached, and they mourned his death, as sincerely as the whites, and upon the clods that covered his body they placed a wreath of beautiful flowers, and after a few words spoken by their pastor, Rev. Mr. Barnett, united their voices in singing an appropriate closing hymn, by Beddome.

“If I must die, oh let me die—
With hope in Jesus' blood—
That blood that saves from sin and guilt,
And reconciles to God.”³⁸

McGuffey became a patron to many within the African American community, and his death evoked great mourning. The mourning of the members of the Delevan Baptist Church, however, came with an affirmation of the deceased professor's religious faith within its assertion of the sufficiency of “Jesus' blood.” In other words, McGuffey's complicity in the slave regime and his appropriation of black labor was mitigated by McGuffey's other, redeeming, dealings with the local church. We may suspect that McGuffey's interest in the freed community in Charlottesville was related to McGuffey's involvement in the slave system, an economic and social structure in which he seems never to have been altogether comfortable. William Gibbons' presence and service to McGuffey was a goad to the conscience of the professor of moral philosophy.

William McGuffey and Gibbons' continued relationship, too, bears witness to the way in which their interactions evolved after emancipation. In the six years preceding McGuffey's death, Alice Ruggles asserts that when in Charlottesville the former butler “never failed to call at the home of Professor McGuffey, bearing gifts of fruit, game, and

³⁸ Charlottesville *Jeffersonian Republican*, May 8, 1873

‘beautiful Potomac shad.’”³⁹ While the historian might doubt some of the specifics of this account, such as beauty of the Potomac shad, there is not reason to doubt that such an event took place. This inversion of the slave economy, wherein McGuffey played host to and received gifts from his former servant, was evident to William McGuffey’s wife, Laura. Laura Howard McGuffey, along with her father, had owned Gibbons before emancipation, not merely employed his labor. When confronted with the social equality of her former slave, which Gibbons’ visit connoted, she “withdrew to an upper room.”⁴⁰ Since Gibbons’ dignity was upheld instead of denied by law after the war, it seemed necessary to Laura to remove herself from the ironic juxtaposition of slavery and freedom, dignity and humiliation that newly constituted her relationship with William Gibbons.

AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY LIFE

The white community of students and professors made up only the dominant part of the social world at the University of Virginia. Gibbons was also part of a vibrant African-American community that existed alongside whites in and around Thomas Jefferson’s Academical Village. The University of Virginia, by requiring a large (African American) support staff, inadvertently facilitated the creation of communities in which the psychological burden of slavery was not omnipresent. Gibbons used the literacy that he gained while a slave of the white community to acquire status and develop his calling as a minister within the black community surrounding Charlottesville and the Rotunda.

³⁹ Ruggles, 106

⁴⁰ Ruggles, 111

During his enslavement by Howard and his service to the McGuffey family, William Gibbons solidified his place within a larger African American community at the University of Virginia. He would have come into contact with Lewis Commodore, the slave owned by the University of Virginia at the time, as well as “Anatomical Lewis,” whose repulsive task was to assist the anatomy class’s research on cadavers. Gibbons served alongside other slaves hired by McGuffey, too. He interacted closely with Susan Robinson, McGuffey’s long-time cook, among others. The intergenerational community at the University of Virginia included Robinson; Mary Jane Snowden, a Methodist owned by Henry Howard; Priscilla, a mulatto also owned by Howard; William Gibbons; and Susan Robinson’s young granddaughter, Susan Jones, who would later marry into the Gibbons family.⁴¹

Like the white faculty members whom they served, slaves within this community sought to solidify class status and personal sentiment through marriage. Although legal marriage was denied to slaves, nearly all, southern whites recognized marriages between persons held in bondage.⁴² In the early 1850s, William Gibbons married Isabella, slave of Francis Smith, a professor of Physics.⁴³ Isabella Gibbons was described as “intelligent” and “a handsome, capable woman,” who would later become one of the teachers at the local school for freedmen.⁴⁴ Her superior in the school, Anna Gardener, remarked that Isabella Gibbons possessed the “one excellent qualification for a

⁴¹ Thornton, Wm. M. “The Life and Services of William Holmes McGuffey: Philosopher, Teacher, Preacher” *University of Virginia Alumni Bulletin*, (Series 3:10 1917), 246; Church register for the Albemarle Circuit of the Virginia Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1860-1881, Accession #10336, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va; Henry Howard Journal, 1856-1873, Accession #12684, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.

⁴² The white community formally acknowledged some of these marriages. E.g. see Records of Christ Episcopal Church, [manuscript] 1836-1970, MSS 9682, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library, p.66.

⁴³ Schulman, 84-92

⁴⁴ Carlin, Reminiscences I, 75

teacher—a very distinct articulation in speaking and reading, almost entirely free from negro dialect.” Historian Laurantette Lee added that, “Gardner was so taken by Gibbons’ ability that she doubted ‘whether a dozen persons could be found in Charlottesville, who can excel her in that respect.’”⁴⁵

Isabella was not only “intelligent” and “handsome,” but also well connected among both whites and blacks. Before coming to live with the Smith family at the University of Virginia, Isabella Gibbons probably was owned by Jane West, a wealthy woman of color in Charlottesville.⁴⁶ Jane West was part of an elite, property-owning, class of “mulattos” who included the Scott, Hemings, Fossett, and West-Isaacs families.⁴⁷ [The census of 1850 uses the categories “white,” “black” and “mulatto” to identify individuals. There were 587 free persons of color, i.e. black and mulatto, in Albemarle County that year.]⁴⁸

The nature of the relationship between Isabella Gibbons and Jane West is difficult to determine. Many slaves, who were owned by people of color, were held for protection from whites because of some familial tie. At the very least, Isabella trusted West implicitly, because at age 15, Isabella allowed West to adopt her son, John.⁴⁹ Jane West’s status within the Charlottesville black and mulatto community would have been conferred, at least in part, to Isabella, and thus to William Gibbons. The union between

⁴⁵ Quoted in Laurantette Lee, *The Crucible in the Classroom*, 35

⁴⁶ A slave of Jane West, named Isabella, was baptized into the Charlottesville Baptist Church on October 5, 1851. Combined with the fact of John West’s adoption and census data that confirm the existence of a slave of the right age and gender, we can be reasonably sure that the Isabella belonging to West was Isabella Gibbons. For more on the West family, see Joshua Rothman, *Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families Across the Color Line in Virginia*, (Chapel Hill, 2003), 53-91, Schulman, “The Gibbons Family: Freedmen,” and Lucia Stanton, “Monticello to Main Street: The Hemings Family and Charlottesville” *Magazine of Albemarle County History*, 55 (1997), 95-126.

⁴⁷ Stanton, 95-126.

⁴⁸ University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. *United States Historical Census Data Browser*. ONLINE. 1998. University of Virginia. Available: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>. August 9, 2004.

⁴⁹ Schulman, 67n

Isabella and William Gibbons, then, was a match of two mulatto slaves who had social access to an elite, property-owning class of free mulattos in Charlottesville. The marriage cemented social status they had gained through a combination of familial ties, literacy, and charisma.

CHARLOTTESVILLE BAPTIST CHURCH, BLACK & WHITE

All contemporaries of William Gibbons agreed that he was not only literate, but good looking, powerfully eloquent and charismatic, and deeply religious.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, there is little information about Gibbons' life within the black community during the slave period. This absence of data points to the invisibility of black cultural institutions, that existed at the periphery of white consciousness. The black public sphere only became visible after emancipation, when African American institutions were granted some legitimacy by whites. The black church was one institution that unveiled itself during and after the Civil War, as it pushed for greater autonomy from local whites. Gibbons' experiences in Charlottesville testify both to the invisibility of the slave church and its self-assertion as a democratic organization during the Civil War.⁵¹ As a democratic institution whose formalization was concurrent with the advent of political rights for African Americans, the black church sought leaders that reflected the needs of both the spiritual and political communities. These needs, and Gibbons career, fluctuated in tandem with the political fortunes of African Americans in Virginia during the years immediately following emancipation.

⁵⁰ E.g. Philena Carkin describes him as "a fine looking man, with a rich, sonorous voice and a wonderfully magnetic manner." *Reminiscences II*, 50

⁵¹ See Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978)

Late in life, William Gibbons recalled that he became a preacher in 1844 to the African American, Baptist community of Charlottesville. Little is known of the particular events during his ministry as an enslaved preacher. Probably, he assisted a local white minister in preaching to black congregants. The educational prerequisites for preachers under the slave regime varied, but even his basic level of literacy placed Gibbons in a position of respect. Eugene Genovese summarizes the relationship between community leadership and the black preacher:

Precisely those slaves and free Negroes who had the strength to lead their fellows took up the Word. The experience of slavery, and of Reconstruction too, suggests that rather than preachers somehow usurping community leadership, the natural leaders of the community, as defined by the slaves themselves, felt the call to preach and knew that preaching was their road to prestige, power, and deepest service within the black community.⁵²

Preaching was the obvious calling for someone of Gibbons' eloquence, charisma, and literacy. Gibbons did not, however, see his role of a preacher in utilitarian terms, as simply a means to pursue status or personal influence. Rather, Gibbons conceived his whole life to have been ordained by God for the purpose of ministering the Gospel. Years later, after a service during which Gibbons had baptized one hundred and twenty new converts in the Potomac River, a *Washington Post* reporter asked after his health. His response reflects a man who was confident that his religious calling was the purpose for which he was created. "I am no worse for my two hours in the water," Gibbons said. "You see the Maker cut me out for the work and the past forty years have made me better able to endure it."⁵³

Rev. Gibbons' education and charisma allowed him, in 1866, to become a minister to the newly formed African Baptist Church. He had already ministered to black residents of Albemarle County for over 20 years. It seems likely that Gibbons served as

⁵² Genovese, 258

⁵³ *Washington Post*, May 12, 1884

an exhorter or lay preacher in some capacity for the colored congregation at first, then advanced into the role of formal minister. The causes of Gibbons' premature dismissal less than two years later can be traced to the founding of the independent African American congregation and the concurrent development of a black political community.

In the spring of 1863, one year before Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan would advance toward Charlottesville, 812 "colored members" of the biracial Charlottesville Baptist Church submitted a petition to the white members of the congregation that the former group be permitted to constitute its own "independent African Church."⁵⁴ This request was not out of the ordinary. Similar requests were made throughout the South in the years leading up to and after emancipation.

The internal dynamics of the large, black and mulatto community that proposed the church split are difficult to examine, but there seem to have been two identifiable factions once the African American congregation obtained a measure of independence. In 1864, many free members of the congregation, led by Fairfax Taylor, Nicholas Rickmond, and others, thought that the congregation's white minister held too much authority and manipulated the freed congregants to overrule the "minority"—i.e. free—faction. This group of free African Americans seceded from the African church, although the factions were eventually reconciled. William Gibbons' participation in the controversy or leadership in either faction was not recorded, but his later fortunes ran parallel to those of Fairfax Taylor and Nicholas Rickmond, who represented the free blacks in discussions with the white minister of the African congregation and the white Charlottesville Baptist Church.

⁵⁴ Records of the First Baptist Church [manuscript], MSS 4620, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library. March 16, 1863

By the war's end, James Fife, a white member of the Charlottesville Baptist Church and minister of the African Baptist Church, was not the only preacher that the black Baptist community heard. At the request of Nicholas Rickmond, a shoemaker and lay preacher, other preachers, "without regard to color," were permitted to supplement Rev. Fife's ministry, so long as the white minister gave his consent.⁵⁵ Although he was not named, William Gibbons was probably one of the preachers who helped to lead services during this period of transition from slavery to freedom. After the civil war, Gibbons found a niche as one of the African American leaders of the church. He had become the church's acting preacher by the spring of 1866.⁵⁶ Gibbons gradually took on a more prominent role until late in 1866, when he was ordained a minister despite having few educational qualifications.⁵⁷

TRANSITION: 1865-1867

The controversy between the freed and free members hinged upon the meaning of black leadership and, alternately, dependency upon whites. William Gibbons' literacy and social indoctrination under slavery loosely circumscribed his place within this debate: Gibbons' was educated, but not formally, and throughout his life he had been closely associated with whites who held powerful positions. In order to examine Gibbons' place within this dynamic society, we must turn to the political sphere and ascertain the meaning of black leadership within it. The contemporary commentators on Charlottesville's racial politics of 1865-67 observed from wildly divergent positions: Northern observers such as Philena Carkin, and Capt. William Tidball, the local Freedmen's Bureau commander, who were sympathetic to African American political

⁵⁵ Records of the First Baptist Church, Dec. 22nd 1865

⁵⁶ Carkin, *Reminiscences II*, 50

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

struggles; Charlottesville Chronicle editor James Southall, a local conservative leader; and the actions of the African American community as reported by others. From these sources we can determine the shifting demands of Charlottesville's black religious and ecclesial communities, and how black leaders such as William Gibbons did or did not satisfy those demands.

Immediately after the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, the political rights of African Americans were not assured. The Republican Governor, Francis Pierpont, was surprisingly lenient toward ex-Confederates, and resisted the African American franchise in 1865. By October of that year, despite the military presence of the Freedmen's Bureau, former confederates dominated all branches of the state government and black codes were enacted, limiting the freedom that emancipation promised. The spring and summer of 1866, which brought Congress' passage of the civil rights act and the Fourteenth Amendment, also brought increased racial and political violence to Virginia. The Fourteenth Amendment was unanimously rejected by Virginia's state Senate, emphasizing that conservatives in the state were unwilling to recognize freedmen as citizens.⁵⁸

In such a political situation, William Gibbons' leadership made perfect sense to the African American community in Charlottesville. Gibbons had gained the approbation of whites in Charlottesville through his apolitical style of preaching.⁵⁹ Gibbons' literacy, white approval, and social standing under the slave regime were incredibly valuable to a community that was sure of its newly established rights but equally sure that hostility toward white conservatives was not a prudent use of those rights at the time. Between

⁵⁸ See Richard G. Lowe, *Republicans and Reconstruction in Virginia, 1856-70* (Charlottesville, 1991), 25-71

⁵⁹ Charlottesville Chronicle, 11-12-67

1865 and 1867, Gibbons rose to prominence within the religious African American community in Charlottesville just as Fairfax Taylor and Nicholas Rickmond were establishing themselves as political and religious leaders who recognized the benefits of peace with white moderates, if not conservatives.

In the spring of 1867, Congress instituted martial law for the Southern states through the Reconstruction Act until those states adopted new constitutions supporting equal rights for African Americans. The bills also excluded from political participation those who had served as leaders in the Confederate government. Most local office-holders were therefore excluded from the formal political process. Beginning in the spring of 1867, meetings were held throughout Virginia to discuss the ramifications of black enfranchisement, ex-Confederate disfranchisement, the new legality of black office holding, and the nature of the new Constitution. In Charlottesville, local whites called a meeting in order to convince the black electorate to support their “friends,” the whites. The local editorial pages were complimentary to blacks on the good relations that existed between the races after emancipation:

We do not believe the white people, under the same circumstances, would have behaved so well by twenty percent. They have shown the greatest moderation. They have passed from plantation hands to freedom and the ballot without outward excitement. They still touch the hat, and call us “master” when they pass us.⁶⁰

The editor of the *Chronicle* was careful only to address the outward signs of approval, without inferring anything about the extent to which blacks were pleased with the way that Charlottesville society after the war had developed. Whatever self-deception existed, however, on the part of white commentators, the *Chronicle* knew that there was great opportunity for disturbance, and that blacks might not continue to “call us ‘master’ when they pass us.” The editorial gave advice to those whom it complimented above: “Live

⁶⁰ Charlottesville *Chronicle*, 3-19-1867

peaceably with whites. Make them your friends. They can do you infinite harm, if you make them enemies. They can persecute you to death in a thousand ways which no laws can reach.”⁶¹ Charlottesville blacks would certainly not have interpreted the threat of persecution “to death” as mere idle words.

The way to escape such a fate, the newspaper suggested, was to cooperate with whites for the common good, and to avoid politics.

Politics brought all the present troubles on the country. Do you [sic] attend to your business and let politics alone. What you want is bread and meat and decent clothing and a neat little house or room to live in. Try and lay by something, and have your children taught to read and write, and make them go to Church and to Sunday School, and keep them clean. When you learn to read, read the Bible, and learn from the fountain head what Religion is.⁶²

Instead of participating in the political process, the newspaper advocated for its black readership an ethic of hard work, which, in combination with cleanliness and religious education, would enable newly emancipated citizens to provide for themselves and their families.

This description has much in common with the paper’s description of William Gibbons and his apolitical preaching. The newspaper, representing white conservatives, praised Gibbons for his focus on the Word of God: “He says that he is a preacher of the gospel, he thinks it his duty to have nothing to do with politics.”⁶³ William Gibbons’ focus on the spiritual realm was invaluable to his listeners under slavery, and his congregation demanded such leadership in the uncertain times before Congressional Reconstruction in 1867. With the greater political guarantees of March 1867, however, a shift toward more radically assertive leadership began to gain momentum.

⁶¹ *ibid*

⁶² *ibid*

⁶³ *ibid* 11-12-1867

Established black leaders did not immediately respond to the community's nascent radicalism. Despite the threats of violence against those who neglected the advice that the Chronicle offered to black Charlottesville residents, the bi-racial meeting to discuss the political future of the state, held in the Delevan building later that spring, was full. The speakers included Fairfax Taylor and Nicholas Rickmond. At this meeting, the speakers, black and white, suggested to the black voters the ways in which they should vote. At the meeting, Taylor angered many in the white audience by referring to Southern conservatives as "Rebels" and by asserting the right for blacks to attend the University of Virginia.⁶⁴

Still, the messages from black and white speakers were similar in their political suggestions for local African-Americans. Fairfax Taylor and Nicholas Rickmond came to believe that it would not be wise to send African American delegates to the upcoming constitutional convention. They argued that black residents would embarrass themselves and the race as a whole by speaking at the convention. Widely regarded the most educated black male in Albemarle County, Taylor argued that the limited educational attainments of black community members precluded them from holding political office at that time, and that doing so would cause more harm than good.

The established black leaders in Charlottesville thus rejected African American radicalism in the spring of 1867. Fairfax Taylor reinforced his opposition to black delegates by refusing to endorse his own son, J.T.S. Taylor, as a candidate. Nicholas Rickmond, too, refused to endorse the more radical candidates, J.T.S. Taylor and C.L. Thompson, to the constitutional convention, and instead agreed with white conservatives that African American voters should support the moderate Republican Judge Alexander

⁶⁴ *Chronicle*, 4-25-1867

Rives. Despite fully supporting equal civil and political rights for African Americans, Taylor and Rickmond aligned themselves with more conservative, white, political groups. The practical ramifications of William Gibbons' apolitical preaching, as interpreted by the *Charlottesville Chronicle*, were nearly the same.⁶⁵

The leaders' moderate message did not fall upon a receptive audience. When the elections for delegates to the constitutional convention arrived, Alexander Rives received only two votes from African-Americans, whereas C.L. Thompson and J.T.S. Taylor each received more than three hundred. The next month, when Rickmond stood to lead the hymn at the African Baptist Church, "by a simultaneous impulse the whole congregation, with the exception of some thirty or forty, rose to their feet, and marched out of the Church." The *Chronicle* interpreted the event as an expression of the congregation's dissatisfaction with Rickmond's political beliefs: "the explanation is that the colored clergyman in question is not a radical."⁶⁶

For the *Charlottesville Chronicle*, dissatisfaction with Revs. Rickmond and Gibbons were two examples of the same destructive, radical impulse in the African American community. Just as Rickmond was criticized, according to the *Chronicle*, for not being "a radical," Gibbons was dismissed for an analogous reason. William Gibbons strenuously avoided taking a political position during the tumult of the 1867 constitutional debates. Because of his refusal to lead his congregation politically, he maintained the approval of the white press. The *Chronicle* remarked,

that we regret to learn that the colored people here have dispensed with the services of Rev. Wm. Given [sic], colored, who has been preaching to them for a year past. The reason assigned is that he is not sufficiently "learned"; but as he is a man of excellent

⁶⁵ *Chronicle*, 10-15-1867

⁶⁶ *ibid*, 11-12-1867

sense, and some education, we suspect the true reason is that he has steadily refused to have anything to do, one way or the other, with politics.⁶⁷

By the fall of 1867, the black religious and political community in Charlottesville had marginalized Fairfax Taylor, Nicholas Rickmond, and William Gibbons. Community members, acting within democratic political and ecclesial systems, made their dissatisfaction with their leaders known.

Captain William Tidball of the Freedmen's Bureau perceived, to some extent, the roots of these developments. In March of 1867, Tidball described those whom he perceived to be the most able and influential leaders of the African American community to Brevet Brig. Gen. Orlando Brown. In this memorandum, he described Fairfax Taylor's place within the community as "respected" but of "limited" influence.⁶⁸ He described Nickolas Rickmond as "a Baptist preacher, and highly respected in the community." Tidball noted that Rickmond could read and write, and that "he is intelligent, and exercises a considerable influence among the colored people." Such a position in March of 1867 gave Rickmond a hearing in the political debates; his "considerable influence" ended, however, when he opposed radical delegates to the constitutional convention. Tidball also described William Gibbons, emphasizing Gibbons' focus on Christian ministry: "He too is a Baptist preacher—a man of less thought perhaps than Rickmond, but of greater fluency. As a preacher he is very popular, and has a large influence." Of note is the fact that Tidball implicitly limited Gibbons'

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Letter from Capt. W.L. Tidball to Brig. Gen. O. Brown, 12 March 1867. Reports on Prominent Whites and Freedmen March-May 1867, in the Records of the Assistant Commissioner for the State of Virginia, Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, 1865-1869, National Archives Microfilm Publications (University of Virginia Library Documents Microfilm M1246, roll 67)

influence to his role as a preacher.⁶⁹ Judging from his treatment in the conservative press, Gibbons likely would have been satisfied with such a description.

Philena Carkin, a white teacher from Massachusetts affiliated with the Freedmen's Aid Society, shared a belief in African American equality with Tidball, her fellow Northern transplant. She had great expectations for the recently liberated slave population in Charlottesville; she hoped to help the "uplift of the race," and she had little reason to encourage freedmen in any cause that would distract them from the goal of educational achievement.

Philena Carkin viewed Rev. Gibbons' preoccupation with religion as tragic. For Carkin, Gibbons represented great potential for the "negro race," one of those members of his community who was able to rise above the general population and then aid in lifting his brothers and sisters up to the place that he, through natural talent and hard work, had achieved. Such thought was fundamental to many strains of racial uplift thought in the latter half of the nineteenth century, but such views were quite different from Gibbons' own self-conception as a man "cut for the work" by the Maker.⁷⁰ In summarizing her opinion of the man, Carkin noted that

At first glance it seems unfortunate that so much native talent, should have been invested in so narrow a field of labor, but upon reflections we must admit that he was exactly the kind of man needed at that time. He could meet the people of his race understandingly, and upon their own level, and yet they recognized his superiority to the extent that they were gradually led to a higher level of thought and action by his example.⁷¹

She was fully aware that her expectations differed from those held by Gibbons himself, and she displayed this understanding when she lamented "that a larger proportion of those who professed to feel a call to preach the gospel to their people had not done so

⁶⁹ W.L. Tidball to O. Brown, 3-12-67

⁷⁰ Cf. Kevin Gaines' insightful treatment of racial uplift from the late 19th century onward: *Uplifting the Race*, Chapel Hill (1996), especially pp21-37.

⁷¹ Carkin, *Reminiscences II*, 53

from motives as conscientious as I sincerely believe impelled William Gibbons in his choice of a profession.”⁷² Carkin ascribed to Gibbons pure motives, but these motives brought counter-productive results because of unjust circumstances that prevented Gibbons from learning. “When I think of what an influence this man exerted in the narrow sphere in which his destiny had placed him, I try to figure what his power would have been, if Fortune had bestowed upon him the advantages she so lavishes upon many who discredit their opportunities. According to all standards he was an ignorant man.”⁷³ Gibbons received respect mingled with pity from Carkin, who saw in the adult Gibbons a childlike purity and potential.

Carkin held antipathy for Gibbons’ “narrow field of labor” because his energetic preaching was, in her view, below Gibbons’ natural abilities and was counter-productive for freedmen generally. Carkin was dubious of Southern, evangelical forms of religion, particularly the religious behaviors that predominated among white and black Baptists and Methodists.

His preaching while in Charlottesville was of the type in vogue at that time, not only among the negroes, but to a great extent among the white people as well—the vociferous and excitable kind, with its terrible denunciations of sinners (meaning those outside the church fold) its arraignment of all wickedness (such as dancing, card playing and similar evils) its word painting of the joys of heaven, and its vivid description of the torments of hell.⁷⁴

Her doubts about religion sprang from direct experience with the “occasional spell of madness which would attack the chief part of the community of colored people, called a religious revival.”⁷⁵ Religious revivals competed directly with education for the affections of Charlottesville freedmen. In her memoirs, Carkin recalled with frustration the many students whose productivity had been checked by the late-night revivals that

⁷² *ibid*, 53

⁷³ *ibid*, 51

⁷⁴ *ibid*, 52

⁷⁵ Carkin, *Reminiscences I*, 101

swept through Charlottesville after the Civil War. Happily for Carkin, however, “Before many weeks had passed, this bountiful harvest of converts, would be much reduced by many backslides.”⁷⁶ The possibilities for misunderstanding between a man and woman of such different worldviews as Gibbons and Carkin were great.

Through the post-war perspectives of the Charlottesville *Chronicle*, Capt. Tidball and Philena Carkin, we see William Gibbons as a devout minister who believed that his life had a specific, religious purpose. Many in the transitional, post-war society increasingly demanded African American leaders obtain formal education and contribute politically to the cause of the African American community. Immediately after emancipation, William Gibbons obtained a position of authority because he was literate and because he could develop understanding with conservative whites in a turbulent post-emancipation environment. He could not maintain this authority for long, however, because the political fortunes of African Americans during congressional Reconstruction demanded a different kind of political, religious, and educational leadership.

WASHINGTON YEARS

When the support for Rev. Gibbons’ leadership in Charlottesville eroded, he responded the way that many southern freedmen did after emancipation: by moving. In November of 1868, William Gibbons was called to minister to the Zion Baptist Church in Washington, DC. Freed men and women from Fredericksburg, including Rev. William J. Walker, had founded the congregation five years earlier.⁷⁷ This congregation was able to identify with the struggles of Rev. Gibbons, as were many in Washington, D.C. at the

⁷⁶ *ibid*, p.102

⁷⁷ Cf. Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham, *From strength to strength: a history of the Shiloh Baptist Church, 1863-1988*. (Washington 1989) Many thanks go to the members of Zion Baptist Church of Washington DC for their hospitality and assistance to me while I was researching this section of the paper.

time. The African-American population of Washington, D.C. nearly tripled in ten years, from 14,316 in 1860 to 43,404 in 1870. Nearly 17,000 of the District's black residents in 1870 had been born in Virginia.⁷⁸

Within such a context, Gibbons' educational background and style of preaching were consistent with the needs of his congregation. There is no evidence of internal strife during Gibbons' early years at the congregation. To the contrary, under Gibbons' leadership, the congregation integrated itself into the larger Baptist church and solidified its place within the African-American community in Washington. In 1870, members of the growing fellowship razed the converted feed store in which the congregation had been meeting, and built a frame edifice in its place. This structure, architecturally, defined the congregation as a legitimate, free congregation of believers. The frame structure, though not ornate, placed the congregation within the accepted forms of material ecclesial expression of that day.⁷⁹

Gibbons integrated his congregation with the larger Baptist fellowship institutionally, as well as architecturally. Shortly after the congregation's new house of worship was completed, the congregation joined the bi-racial Philadelphia Baptist Association, one of the oldest associations of Baptist churches in the United States.⁸⁰ Integration with this body was a decisive course for both Gibbons and Zion church. It was a break, in a sense, with the Virginian heritage of both, or at least an attempt to break from the relations with whites that accompanied life in the South. White, established,

⁷⁸ Census analysis from David Preston McConnell, *Negroes and their Treatment in Virginia, 1865-1867*, (Pulaski, 1910), 3

⁷⁹ Clarke, Nina Honemond, "History of the Nineteenth-Century Black Churches in Maryland and Washington, D.C. Vantage Press. New York. (1983), 114

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 115.

ecclesial bodies hesitated to cede power to blacks, mirroring the postwar political strife, and fearing, in the parlance of the day, “social equality.”

In the summer of 1871, the Virginia State Convention, which the black Baptist congregations had recently joined, unsuccessfully applied to the (white) General Baptist Association of Virginia for an exchange of messengers. The purpose of the proposed exchange seemed to be the eventual union of the two associations.⁸¹ The attitude of General Baptist Association was encapsulated in an editorial printed by the Association’s organ, the *Religious Herald*: “if we invite colored delegates to seats in our religious bodies, we must invite them to share in our hospitality.”⁸² For the *Religious Herald*, the point of contention was not so much the act of admitting blacks to ecclesial fellowship; rather, the paper objected to the attendant social fellowship, which the ecclesial equality implied. By joining with a northern assembly, Gibbons avoided receiving the insults of Southern, white, Baptists, who adamantly refused to admit the social equality of black Baptists.⁸³

Despite his migration northward, Gibbons maintained close connection with his family and former congregation. Isabella Gibbons accompanied her supervisor, Philena Carkin, to Washington in order to visit her husband during Ulysses Grant’s inaugural ceremony in March of 1869. While there, Gibbons served as a tour guide for the two visitors through the Capitol, with which he was familiar. Gibbons reveled in the access that Reconstruction had granted to blacks after the Civil War. Only during

⁸¹ Minutes of the Virginia Baptist State Convention in Danville, May, 1872. (Petersburg, 1872),14.

⁸² *Religious Herald*, Richmond, Va. Dec. 4, 1873

⁸³ See Robert Torbet, *A Social History of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, 1707-1940*. (University of Pennsylvania, 1944). The Philadelphia Association criticized, but did not categorically condemn its southern brethren’s decision. Rather, the editor of the *National Baptist*, organ of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, affirmed the white Virginians’ right to exclude from society any whom they wanted, for personal reasons. Cf. the *Religious Herald*, Jan. 15, 1874.

Reconstruction was Gibbons' familiarity with the home of Congress possible. At that time, black senators, representatives, and pages interacted freely with visitors of a darker hue. Apparently Rev. Gibbons had made connections within the government, for he halted a page, who looked pre-occupied, "hastening toward the Senate Chamber with a message." Carkin recalled with delight the turn of events:

Said he, "That boy has a list of the names of the new President's Cabinet. We'll see who they are," saying which he stopped the page and asked to see the list. So we got ahead of the U.S. Senate that time. We went on to the Senate Chamber, however, and heard the names read to that august body.⁸⁴

Gibbons was surely pleased to show Isabella his access to the federal government.

In addition to receiving his wife when she visited Washington, Gibbons also occasionally returned to Charlottesville to visit his wife and children.⁸⁵ These trips also provided Gibbons an opportunity to maintain his connections with the churches in Charlottesville. In May, 1873, for example, the *Jeffersonian-Republican* reported that Gibbons was baptizing new converts in Cochran's pond alongside Revs. Smith and Barnett. This event allows us to see the connection that Gibbons maintained with the black Charlottesville community. It also reveals that Gibbons' role in that community was primarily ecclesial.

It is difficult to attribute motives to the William Gibbons with certainty, but it is clear that his primary goal in life was neither education, nor social or political standing *per se*, but advancing the gospel. Gibbons' success in preaching came to the attention of many within Washington, D.C. in 1884, when Gibbons oversaw a two-month revival. At the culmination of the meetings, on two consecutive Sundays the minister baptized over

⁸⁴ Carkin, *Reminiscences I*, 110

⁸⁵ Cf. Ruggles, 106. Isabella and William also continued to have children, despite living apart for these years.

100 new converts in the Potomac River. Both days, the bi-racial crowd “swarmed on every available spot for hundreds of yards in all directions to the number of 25,000.”⁸⁶

Gibbons’ passion for the unity of the church focused on the physical body of its minister. While officiating at Brooks’ funeral, Gibbons preached that “[Rev. Gibbons] was a plain, blunt man. The Lord had made him with a big mouth and strong lungs, and the reason his mouth was so big, he had been hollerin’ for the Lord for forty years.”⁸⁷ This assertion should be taken together with his words from the baptism, in which he proclaimed, “the Maker cut me out for the work and the forty years I have done for Him seems to make me better able to endure it.”⁸⁸ For Gibbons, the minister was divinely inspired to preach, and had been given the necessary physical attributes of preaching and baptizing by his Creator.

Many of the black clergy of Washington, D.C. were freedmen, like Gibbons. Rev. William Walker was originally enslaved when a member of Shiloh Baptist Church in Fredericksburg, VA.⁸⁹ Walter Brooks, who had graduated from Lincoln University, ministered to Nineteenth Street Baptist Church for fifty years, sat under the preaching of Rev. Robert Ryland in Richmond, when he was an enslaved youth.⁹⁰ Francis Grimke, the learned minister of Fifteenth Presbyterian Church, whose father had been an elite planter in South Carolina, was born to his father’s slave, manumitted, then re-enslaved by his older (white) brother. These ministers preached at each others funerals, ministered to condemned prisoners together, baptized together, and attended denominational

⁸⁶ *Washington Post*, May 12, 1884 This number may be exaggerated, however, since there were, according to the *People’s Advocate*, (April 5, 1884) probably 13,000 black Baptists in Washington at the time.

⁸⁷ *Washington Post*, Sept. 3, 1884

⁸⁸ *ibid*, May 12, 1884

⁸⁹ Cf. Brooks-Higginbotham, *From Strength to Strength*

⁹⁰ Carter G. Woodson’s introduction to Walter H. Brooks, *The Pastor’s Voice* (Washington, 1945), p.vii-xxviii.

conventions together.⁹¹ This is not to say that the black clergy in Washington in the 1880s were in any way a monolithic class. There were divisions between ministers and congregations alike.

By the 1880s, black society in Washington had become more stratified by class. Class distinctions were especially apparent, and often were manifested in the politics of education and respectability. Elite blacks “felt the need to distinguish themselves from the rest of the black community through their manners and behavior. They also felt the need to correct what they considered unsuitable behavior that reflected poorly on the race.”⁹² African-American newspapers in Washington, for example, had a great interest in the content and style of the ministers’ sermons. One correspondent to the *People’s Advocate* complained that “many of the ministers are very ignorant, more ignorant than the congregation, and as a consequence the administration is necessarily heathenish and disgusting.”⁹³ The ignorance and “superstition” of the black ministers seemed, to the writer, to be instrumental in “grinding out hypocrites and propagating infidels and skeptics everyday.”⁹⁴ Older ministers, such as William Gibbons, who had grown to adulthood under slavery and had not had as many educational opportunities, were especially vulnerable to such charges.

Zion Baptist Church had grown from a congregation of 450 when Gibbons first arrived, to a church of nearly 2,000 members. Gibbons’ success, however, in the spring of 1884 brought new skepticism to the preacher’s conduct. Gibbons’ preaching, and the “excitements” of older members of the congregation, had incited “children ranging from

⁹¹ E.g. Gibbons ministered alongside Grimke at James Stone’s grisly execution. *Washington Post*, April 3, 1880.

⁹² Jacqueline Moore, *Leading the Race*. (Charlottesville, 1999), 12

⁹³ *People’s Advocate*, January 26, 1884

⁹⁴ *ibid*, Jan. 19, 1884.

8 to 10 years of age” to ecstatic behavior, so that they had to be “taken home by their thoughtless parents in a state of excitement and fear, which totally unfitted them for study.” Gibbons’ style of preaching did not follow the rules of propriety, and interfered with the education of others. This breach of etiquette impeded the uplift of the race. Propriety demanded that students “go to Sunday school and the public school when they are young, and when they are older they will not forget the church and their books.”⁹⁵

Gibbons surely felt pressure from elites in Washington to adjust his preaching style and the behavior of his congregation, just as he had in Charlottesville. In Washington, however, Gibbons found an opportunity to begin formal theological study. In the fall of 1884, at age 59, William Gibbons enrolled at Howard University as a part-time Divinity student. Enrolment at Howard, for Gibbons, was both a concession to an increasingly demanding, black leadership class and the culmination of a lifetime of educational pursuit, which had constantly been pushed outside formal schools.⁹⁶

The educational standards for urban clergy, even for those not preaching to elite churches, quickly rose after the Civil War. Gibbons realized that in order to maintain his position as a minister, he was required to conform to those standards as well as he could. After two years of classes at Howard Divinity School, however, on the evening of June 28, 1886, William Gibbons died of a “stroke of apoplexy.”⁹⁷

Ten thousand mourners pressed to pay their respects to Rev. Gibbons.⁹⁸ Isabella traveled from Charlottesville, joining several of the couple’s grown children who had already arrived. The funeral service was attended by 79 clergymen from the city, as well

⁹⁵ *ibid*, April 12, 1884

⁹⁶ *Howard University Bulletin*, 1884-1885, Howardiana Collection, Courtesy Archives Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

⁹⁷ *Washington Post*, June 29, 1886

⁹⁸ *ibid*

as representatives of the fraternal and charitable orders of which Gibbons was a part. The local newspapers all lamented the minister's death. After the service, Gibbons' body was transported to Charlottesville, where a second funeral was held.

Gibbons maintained his position as beloved minister to two communities, in Charlottesville and Washington, despite not achieving the educational level that would win the approbation of all within those communities. William Gibbons maintained a close relationship with his wife, Isabella, who bore him children even after he moved to Washington. One of these children, Belle, toured in professional vocal groups connected with the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and achieved some renown internationally.⁹⁹ The reputation of her voice, in Charlottesville, was unparalleled. When home for a brief stint between tours, Belle Gibbons was invited to the Lawn as a dinner guest by one of the professors at the University of Virginia. She remarked upon the irony of being invited to dine at an institution of higher education that normally permitted African Americans only to serve.¹⁰⁰ The irony, of course, was more personal: Belle was honored in the place in which her father had been forced to serve, and a place in which he had gained some education from an institution he was forbidden from attending.

William Gibbons was not accorded the kind of education that free citizens expected, for he was enslaved until his fortieth birthday. Gibbons was immersed in a place of higher education, and carried on his life within two communities there: one white, the other black. Despite being denied any access to formal channels of learning, Gibbons picked up "scraps of knowledge tossed about so abundantly," which he used to educate himself for the ministry of the gospel, his life's work. Moreover, Gibbons

⁹⁹ Cf. Schulman, 81

¹⁰⁰ Langhorne, 18:10

received a social education as a child and young man, which gave him the tools to confront slave society and then obtain leadership roles in the African American religious communities of Charlottesville and Washington, D.C. after emancipation.