

JAMES GIBBS - TOMPKINS COUNTY TRAILBLAZER

Re-published in 2018

Written by Donna Eschenbrenner for the Ithaca Journal



James L. Gibbs was a trailblazer. He was a man who took community service seriously, and spent his whole life working tirelessly for the betterment of the African American community in Ithaca. And he did it at a time when opportunities for black Americans were severely limited: a time when there were no black teachers in the Ithaca schools, when many businesses wouldn't hire blacks, when realtors wouldn't show houses to blacks outside of certain neighborhoods, when some restaurants wouldn't serve black customers, and when labor unions wouldn't take blacks into apprenticeship programs.

Born in South Carolina and raised in Richmond, Virginia, James Gibbs first came to Ithaca in 1935. He was a social worker who trained at Syracuse University, and he became the first Director of the new Southside Community Center in 1937, while it was still under construction.

The Southside under James Gibbs was a full-service community center, providing job training for adolescents and adults as well as recreational activities for children. Girl and Boy Scout Troops, music programs, amateur photography, and cooking classes were common. There was also a health committee, a nutrition clinic for pre-school children, and a journalism class that published a weekly newspaper.

Job training was a crucial component of the Southside experience under Mr. Gibbs. He, along with his wife Hortense, played a vital role in expanding the limited job opportunities open to blacks in Ithaca in the mid-20th century. High school students who participated in training programs at the Southside were among the first African Americans to break the color barrier in professional Ithaca. A high school student Mr. Gibbs trained became the first black secretary at Cornell University, and later became the Head Secretary in Cornell's History Department. Mr. Gibbs worked closely with companies like the Ithaca Gun Company and Cayuga Tool Company in arranging for the hiring of black employees in the 1930s and 1940s.

Mr. Gibbs left the Southside in 1944 and embarked on another chapter in his full life of community service. He was the first African American to work at the Ithaca Post Office. He later became a district representative for Mohawk Airlines, where he was instrumental in Mohawk's hiring of the first black stewardess in the United States. He was a community relations consultant for Tompkins County Trust Company.

During his “retirement years” Mr. Gibbs performed even greater service to both the African American and broader community in Ithaca. He was chairman of the Ithaca Civil Service Commission, a member of the board of directors for the Tompkins County Office for the Aging, vice president for the Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services, the first black member of the Ithaca Rotary Club, and later its president. He and his wife Hortense were active members of the NAACP.

James Gibbs did all this and much more in dedication to his community, and he did it with a spirit of love and warmth for all people. As his son, Professor James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., of Stanford University said, “The main reason Dad was so successful in community building, is that he did not have a lot of ego. He was not focused on himself or his accomplishments. He thought the best of everybody and always tried to make other people feel good about themselves and bring out the best in them.... He always had as a goal or template empowering people in the community to be able to improve their individual lives and build a sense of community.”

The History Center is very grateful to Professor James Lowell Gibbs, Jr. and Mrs. Huldah Gibbs Jones, children of James L. Gibbs and Hortense Gibbs, for photographs and family information. They generously gave so many hours of time and effort to share their memories of their parents, and their remarkable legacies.

Originally written for Then & Now column of the Ithaca Journal newspaper in coordination with The History Center in Tompkins County

Written by Donna Eschenbrenner - Archivist at The History Center in Tompkins County