

## **Mifflin Wistar Gibbs Biography**

(Courtesy of BC Black History Awareness Society)

Mifflin Wistar Gibbs (pronounced *Wis-ter*) was a Black man of many talents and a community leader within Victoria. A James Bay resident and local merchant, Gibbs served as Victoria City Councillor from 1866 – 1869 representing the James Bay District.

In 2016, the City of Victoria declared November 19 “Mifflin Wistar Gibbs Day” in honour of Gibbs becoming the first Black person elected to public office in British Columbia the same day in 1866.

At age 16, while learning the trade of a carpenter, Gibbs joined the Philadelphia Library Company, a group of Black men who met to discuss the social and legal issues facing Blacks in the United States. He also spent every night in laborious reading, determined to acquire the fundamentals of an education, and learned public speaking from touring with renowned Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

Working as a carpenter, Gibbs saved enough money to get to California during the Gold Rush of 1849, where he went into business as a merchant. In listening to the reports from Victoria, he decided he would join the ‘emigration of 1858.’

Gibbs did not like the boisterous, brawling, unwashed gold mining camps of the Fraser River. He chose instead to advance his fortunes by seeking financial gain in an area with which he was familiar - merchandising. He sold all the goods he had brought to Victoria immediately for a handsome profit, and sent to San Francisco for more. Gibbs purchased a one-storey building near today’s corner of Government and Yates Streets.

In November 1866, he was elected to Victoria City Council, representing the James Bay District, where he had purchased land and built a house. He supported Confederation and represented Salt Spring Island at the Yale Convention in 1868, a gathering called to debate the question of B.C. joining the Federation of Canada or going for annexation to the United States. Gibbs was firmly on the side of staying with Canada and helped to frame the terms by which British Columbia entered Canadian Confederation.

Gibbs was both a director and a major shareholder in the Queen Charlotte Coal Company. In 1870, Gibbs liquidated all his assets except Victoria House and returned to the United States. In his autobiography, he has praise for British Columbia and reflects with fondness on the years he spent there.

Upon returning to the United States, he took a refresher course in law and became a municipally-elected judge in Little Rock, Arkansas. He was made State Registrar of Lands by President Harrison, and finally was appointed United States Consul to Madagascar, where he served for three years.

In 1907, he visited Victoria and was received as a distinguished former resident. Mifflin Wistar Gibbs died July 11, 1915 at the age of 92.