Gibbs, George Washington, Jr. (7 Nov. 1916-7 Nov. 2000), sailor, Antarctic explorer, and civil rights leader, was born in Jacksonville, Florida, the son of George Washington Gibbs, Sr., a railroad fireman, and Florence Call.

After service in the Civilian Conservation Corps, on 8 May 1935 Gibbs enlisted in the U.S. Navy as a mess attendant third class in Macon, Georgia. During this time the messman branch was the only option for African Americans who joined the navy, preparing them for duties as officers' stewards and cooks. Gibbs took his training at the Naval Training Station in Norfolk, Virginia.

In 1939 Congress established the United States Antarctic Service, and an expedition under the veteran polar explorer Admiral Richard E. Byrd went south to solidify previous American exploration and to examine more closely Antarctic lands bordering the Pacific Ocean. The expedition was to carry out a wide range of scientific tasks, including seismic, cosmic ray, auroral, biological, tidal, magnetic, and physiological studies. Chosen from hundreds of applicants to join the expedition, which consisted of two ships, USS *Bear* (lead ship) and USMS *North Star*, Gibbs served as a mess attendant first class aboard the *Bear*.

On the morning of 14 January 1940 the *Bear* steamed into the Bay of Whales, an indentation in the massive Ross Ice Shelf that stretches out into the Ross Sea. Gibbs recorded the events in his journal: "When the *Bear* came up to the ice close enough for me to get ashore, I was the first man aboard the ship to set foot in Little America [Byrd's old exploration base] and help tie her lines deep into the snow. I met Admiral Byrd; he shook my hand and welcomed me to Little America and for being the first Negro to set foot in Little America."

Not only was he the first black man to set foot in Little America, Gibbs was the first recorded person of African descent known to have actually landed on the continent of Antarctica. Gibbs helped establish West Base (Little America III), near the Bay of Whales, and East Base on Stonington Island, Marguerite Bay, Antarctic Peninsula. He also made two round trips between the United States and Antarctica on the *Bear*, twice receiving official commendations by the ship's captain. However, because of rising international tensions, both bases were evacuated by March 1941.

After U.S. entry into World War II Gibbs saw much combat in the South Pacific. On the light cruiser USS *Atlanta*, as an officers' cook second class, he was present at the Battle of Midway, Battle of the Eastern Solomons, and the Naval Battle of Guadalcanal. The *Atlanta* was wrecked during enemy action, forcing the ship to be scuttled off Guadalcanal on 13 November 1942; her officers and men received the Presidential Unit Citation. Afterward Gibbs was assigned to a motor torpedo boat (MTB) squadron on Guadalcanal, with which he participated in attacks on Tulagi, Bougainville, and New Georgia Island. In

between these operations he fought with the marines on Guadalcanal. He received a second Presidential Unit Citation for service with the First Marine Division.

Continuing to serve with motor torpedo boats based in the Solomon Islands until November 1943, Gibbs was then transferred to the MTB Squadrons Training Center in Melville, Rhode Island, for duty with a new squadron. However, he suffered from malaria and spent the early months of 1944 recovering at naval hospitals in New York and afterward was stationed at the U.S. Naval Receiving Station, Pier 92, New York City. It was apparently during this period that Gibbs attended night classes at the Brooklyn Technical School and graduated from that institution.

Gibbs was honorably discharged as a chief petty officer in October 1945. He reenlisted in the navy the following month and served on a variety of ships and shore stations. He applied to return to Antarctica with Operation Deep Freeze, but because of a reduction in force, he retired from the navy in 1959.

Gibbs married Joyce Powell in Portsmouth, Virginia, on 26 September 1953. The marriage produced two children. After Gibbs's retirement from the navy the family moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where he graduated from the University of Minnesota with a B.S. in education in 1963. That same year he moved his family to Rochester, Minnesota, to work at IBM in the personnel department. While at IBM he received various promotions, including as a housing administrator and international assignment representative, before retiring in 1982. After his retirement from IBM Gibbs started his own business, Technical Career Placement, Inc., and continued to operate the employment service until 1999.

Gibbs received many honors over the years for his extensive civic and business leadership and for his prominent role in the civil rights movement, cofounding the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). As the first African American to apply for membership to the Rochester Elks Club, Gibbs received national attention in 1974 when he was refused membership—evidently due to his race. Gibbs then worked to break the color barrier at other Rochester service clubs, and in May 2000 he was presented with the first George Gibbs Humanitarianism Award by the Rochester branch of the NAACP, which is now awarded annually by that organization.

On 16 July 2001 Gibbs's ashes were scattered in the sea off Pearl Harbor from the destroyer USS *Fletcher*. On 2 September 2009 the U.S. Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names approved the geographical name Gibbs Point, Horseshoe Island, Marguerite Bay, on the Antarctic Peninsula.

Bibliography

Gibbs's official U.S. Navy records, as well as his private journal during the U.S. Antarctic Service Expedition, are in the possession of his daughter, Leilani Rashida Henry, who provided much information on his early life through World War II. *The Messman*

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Online Resources

- For details on Gibbs's later life, see Glenn M. Stein, "Double Honors for African-American Antarctic Explorer George W. Gibbs Jr.," International Polar Year, 22 Sept. 2009, http://www.ipy.org/feature/item/2271-double-honors-for-african-american-antarctic-explorer-george-w-gibbs-jr

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