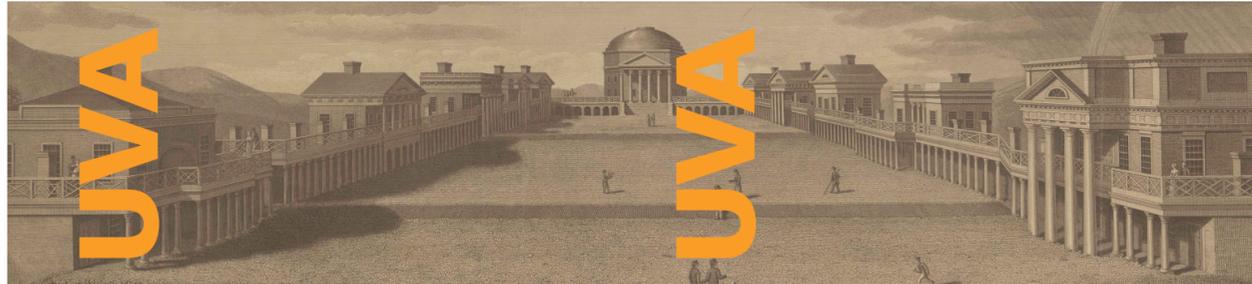


ENSLAVED AFRICAN AMERICANS at the University of Virginia

ENSLAVED AFRICAN AMERICANS at the University of Virginia



William & Isabella Gibbons

The President's Commission on Slavery and the University is leading research efforts to illuminate the story of enslaved individuals at the University. To learn more about other opportunities and sites around Grounds to explore the history of enslaved workers, visit

slavery.virginia.edu



President's Commission
on Slavery and the University

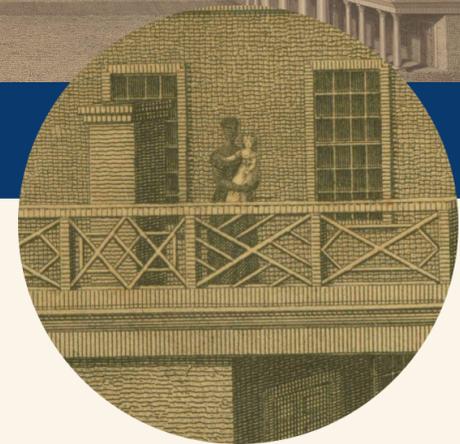
William & Isabella Gibbons



UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA

Resilience and Resistance

Below and detail
Engraving of the University of Virginia by B. Tanner, 1859
This detail includes a depiction of an African American woman standing on the balcony of Pavilion IX. Likely an enslaved caregiver, she is holding an infant. Numerous accounts of enslaved workers exist in University records, but no other images have been located. Courtesy of Special Collections, U.Va. Library



The enslaved population at the University fluctuated between approximately 100 and 150 for the years 1830 through 1860. Isabella and William Gibbons were among the several hundred enslaved individuals who toiled at the University over the course of its first half-century.

In addition to long hours of backbreaking labor, enslaved workers faced a constant threat of violence. Slave-owning faculty families and hotelkeepers enforced rules with physical punishment. Students attacked enslaved people with some regularity. In 1828, a student, after receiving supposedly rancid butter while dining, clubbed the enslaved server over the head. A group of students in 1837 attacked the University's bell ringer, an enslaved man named Lewis Commodore, in protest against the strict schedule. The following year, two students beat Fielding, an enslaved man owned by Professor Charles Bonnycastle, after Fielding tried to stop their attack on a group of free African Americans.

Bonnycastle was beaten when he intervened "for the purpose of preventing his servant from being murdered." He described the assault as "severe and inhuman."

In 1856, a student beat a ten-year-old enslaved girl "so severely" that for a time she was "rendered insensible" and required medical attention. Her alleged crime was "impertinent language." As another student explained, "correction of a [slave] for impertinence [was] not only tolerated by society but [also a] necessity of maintaining due subordination of this class." It was in this climate that Isabella and William Gibbons struggled to lead lives that reclaimed what enslavement sought to deny them.

Struggling for Family and Freedom

Born into slavery, Isabella and William Gibbons refused to be restricted by the laws and customs of that institution. They managed to build a family and educate themselves. In freedom, they built on the education they struggled to obtain and worked to lift up those in their community. Their lives are a testament to their steadfast resistance to enslavement.

William Gibbons was born on an Albemarle County plantation in 1825 or 1826. Isabella was born circa 1836, possibly in Charlottesville. The couple married in the early

1850s despite Virginia laws that did not recognize the marriages of enslaved individuals. They struggled to raise a family while laboring in different households. Isabella, owned by Physics professor Francis Smith, cooked in the kitchens of Pavilions V and VI from 1853 to 1863. In the 1850s, William worked as a butler for Moral Philosophy professor William McGuffey, who resided in Pavilion IX.

Rejecting prevailing notions about black inferiority, Isabella and William sought opportunities to educate themselves, and both learned to read and write. William's education included reading books in the McGuffey household and paying attention to student conversations. Isabella secretly taught their children how to read and write.

Following the end of slavery, William and Isabella Gibbons worked hard to enjoy the fullest fruits of freedom. Isabella received a diploma from the New England Freedman's Aid Society's Charlottesville Normal School in May 1867 and became the first African American teacher in that

same school, which became the Charlottesville Freedmen's school (now the Jefferson School). Regarded as "quick and bright" and "an excellent teacher," she was admired by the school's founders and her colleagues. She taught at the school through the late 1880s.

William Gibbons, noted for his "rich, sonorous voice and a wonderfully magnetic manner," became minister to the congregation now known as the First Baptist Church, Charlottesville's oldest black church. He later served as pastor of Zion Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. At the age of 59, William began his formal studies, enrolling at Howard University as a divinity student.

"[B]y their persevering industry," the Gibbonses acquired "considerable property" in Charlottesville in the years after 1865. When William died in 1886, *The Washington Post* ran a front-page obituary. Ten thousand mourners reportedly attended his funeral in Washington, D.C.

Another large funeral was held in Charlottesville before his burial in Oakwood Cemetery. Isabella died three years later and is believed to be buried in an unmarked grave near her husband.

Gibbons House



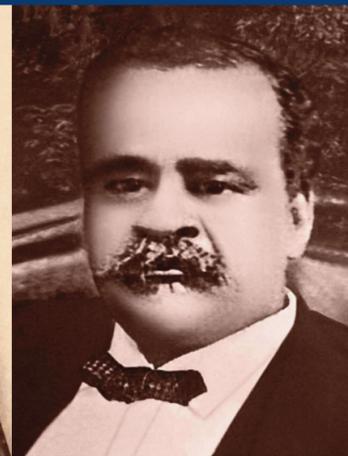
In 2015, a new First Year dorm building was named "Gibbons House" after William and Isabella Gibbons. The President's Commission On Slavery at the University (PCSU) established an educational exhibit in an alcove on the first floor of the Gibbons House dormitory to teach first year students about the namesakes of the building and the larger history of slavery at UVA. The building was formally dedicated in summer 2015 and later that same year, descendants of Isabella Gibbons were honored with a reception at Gibbons House.



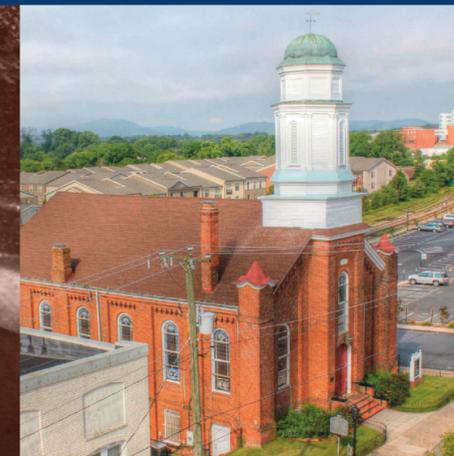
^ **Charlottesville Freedmen's School, 1867**
Isabella Gibbons (top row, second from left) taught at the school through the late 1880s. It became the Jefferson School, which served, in different locations, as Charlottesville's only African American school through 1951. Today the school houses the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center and several community services: www.JeffersonCityCenter.com.
Courtesy of Boston Public Library



^ **Isabella Gibbons, ca. 1833–1889**
Isabella Gibbons received a diploma from the New England Freedman's Aid Society's Charlottesville Normal School in 1867 and became that school's first African American teacher.
Courtesy of Boston Public Library



^ **William Gibbons, ca. 1825–1886**
William Gibbons served as a minister at First Baptist Church, Charlottesville's oldest black church. He later became pastor of Zion Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.
Courtesy of Zion Baptist Church, Washington D.C.



^ **First Baptist Church, 2014**
In 1868 the congregation that became Charlottesville's First Baptist Church purchased the site of their services, the Delevan Hotel. At this location on West Main Street, they constructed the current building, which opened to its members in 1884.
Courtesy of Steve Trumbull, C'ville Images



^ **Grave markers of William and Isabella Gibbons, 2015**
William Gibbons is buried in Charlottesville's Oakwood Cemetery. Isabella is believed to be buried in an unmarked grave near her husband.
Courtesy of Lynn Rainville