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Alexandria
COMMUNITY MEDIA

The Gibson family in slavery and freedom

BY GREG BEAMAN, PH.D.

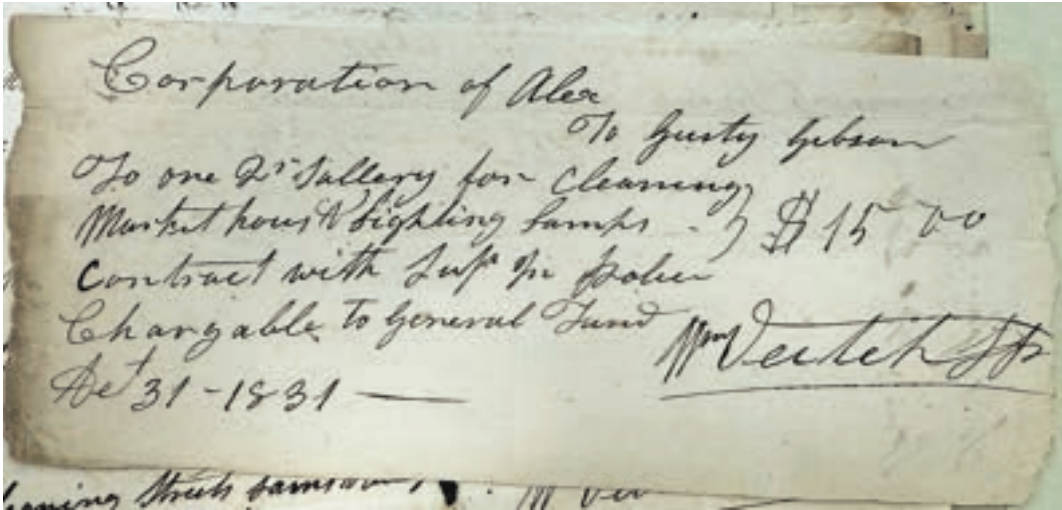
Nestled neatly in an archival folder in the Alexandria Library Special Collection, a slip of paper dated Oct. 31, 1831, reads, “To Gusty Gibson, To one Qtr. Sallery [Salary] for cleaning Market House & Lighting Lamps \$15.50 / Contract with Supt. Of Police / Chargeable to General Fund.”

When Gibson died on December 14, 1831, the Alexandria Gazette wrote, “The deceased was a free man of color, and has long been favorably known to the people of Alexandria as an honest and respectable citizen.”

In the slavery-based racial and social order of early 19th-century Alexandria, labor on Alexandria’s Market Square enabled Gustavus Gibson to free his entire family and leave a legacy of antislavery to later generations.

Gibson was born enslaved around 1770. On Oct. 23, 1824, he bought his freedom from George Graham of Washington, D.C., a career military officer and acting secretary of war under President James Monroe. Before his manumission, Gibson lived away from the Grahams and even appeared in the 1820 U.S. Census as the head of a household with his wife, Basheba, and six children.

Once legally free, Gibson entered into a contract with



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Once legally free, Gustavus Gibson entered into a contract with the Superintendent of Police.

the Superintendent of Police to keep Market Square clean and light the oil lamps each night. As early as July 1830, he began appearing regularly at City Council meetings to request payment of his salary for maintaining the Market Square. After Gibson died, his sons, the still-enslaved James and Henry, continued to collect the \$15 per month until 1851.

The monthly salary increased to \$17.50 around 1844. In October 1851, the City Council gave the Market Square contract to William Arnold, a white man.

Gustavus and Basheba Gibson raised a family dedicated to buying freedom for each member. Gustavus purchased the freedom of his sons, John and Joseph, and daughter, Sarah.

Three other sons, George, James and Richard Henry, were free by 1838.

The family’s commitment to freedom persisted until they bought the liberty of the youngest child, Emily Gibson, in 1843. With Gustavus and Basheba gone, their sons George, John, Daniel and Richard Henry freed Emily and her children Wm. Wilberforce, Sarah Frances and Daniel Gibson.

Emily Gibson, who married to become Emily Hampton, named one of her sons after the preeminent abolitionist in the English-speaking world.

William Wilberforce, a member of the British House of Commons, campaigned for the abolition of the slave trade and helped achieve that end for Britain-flagged vessels in

1807. Wilberforce’s public opposition to slavery made him a well-known trans-Atlantic figure. Emily Hampton naming one of her enslaved children after one of the heroes of the antislavery movement goes down in history as the act of a fearless woman.

Such a legacy befits the family of Gustavus and Basheba Gibson and their children, who served the Alexandria for two decades in slavery and freedom.

The writer authored the historical documentary report on City Hall/Market Square. Read the report at alexandriava.gov/historic-sites/city-hall-and-market-square-block-documentary-study. Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.