

Thomas Gibbons

Summary

Thomas Gibbons was a Savannah lawyer turned New York steamboat tycoon. With his son, [William Gibbons](#), and his captain, Cornelius Vanderbilt, he took on New York ferry monopolies and won a Supreme Court decision regulating interstate commerce. Gibbons died in 1826.

Biography

It was two years after George Washington's inauguration as the first president of the United States. His ceremonial tour of the South was a smashing success. Everywhere his presence symbolized the personal popularity of the president and the hope and unity of the thirteen states under its new constitution. On May 12, 1791, when he came to Savannah, he was rowed from Pureysburg by nine American captains dressed in light blue silk jackets, black satin breeches, while silk stockings and round hats with black ribbons having the words in gold letters - "Long Live the President."

On the landing steps he was met by some of his recent Revolutionary Army officers - General McIntosh, Colonel James Jackson, and Mad Anthony Wayne. But the head of the Savannah delegation who formally addressed the president and assumed responsibility for the military display, concert, ball, and alderman's dinner in Washington's honor was the new mayor of Savannah.

Thomas Gibbons had been elected alderman on April 14th, and the next chosen mayor. In this year 1791 he was one of the most prominent of Savannah's citizens, prominent in several senses, since one source indicates that he weighed something like three hundred pounds. Lawyer, plantation owner, pillar of the local Presbyterian church, Gibbons was still only 33 when he ended his formal address to the president:

"May it please the Great Ruler of Events to grant you long residence on earth...that the advantage of the present government may be permanently established."

If Gibbons' words on this occasion brought cheers and a presidential handclasp, there are ironies in the situation. His career had its paradoxes and mysteries, then and later. And it is strange that there is still no biography of this larger-than-life, anti-Jeffersonian Federalist who became one of the wealthiest men in American, whose stubborn insistence on his rights had a permanent effect on life in these United States, and without whose fortune and influence we would not be celebrating as historically significant, Mead Hall, the building erected by the only one of his children who did not deeply disappoint him, his son William.

Thomas Gibbons was born and raised at Mulberry Hill, the principle plantation owned by his father, Joseph Gibbons, who himself had grown up in the rice plantation culture of South Carolina. Before he took up residence in Georgia, Joseph Gibbons and his brother William had married sisters, the daughters of the South Carolina planter James Martin. By crown grant and purchase, Joseph Gibbons acquired, between 1752 and 1762, several thousand tideland acres between the Ogeechee and Savannah Rivers. He grew rice, operated a sawmill, and experimented in silk culture and indigo. By 1757, when Thomas was born, he had four children and fifty slaves; in 1765, the total was six children and 108 slaves. When Thomas was only twelve, his enterprising father died. Yet, even with eight living brothers and sisters, Thomas' education in Charleston could be provided from his father's estate. Schooling was followed by legal training under a Mr. Parsons, "an Irish gentleman of high grade in the law." Gibbons was eighteen when the Revolution broke out. He sided with the Tories.

Thomas Gibbons' Tory sympathies during the British occupation of Savannah are difficult to understand. His older brother and his uncle, both named William, were influential leaders of the Colonial cause from the time that one of them led in the seizure of the town's powder magazine in the first uprising of 1775. And most of the Gibbons clan were on the side of the Colonists. But neither Thomas, who took the oath of allegiance to the King in 1779, the year before his marriage to Ann Heyward, nor Nathaniel Hall, who had married Thomas' sister Ann in 1774. One suspects, although it would be difficult to prove, that the Gibbonses were covering their bets, protecting their property against either outcome of the Revolutionary struggle.

Thomas went from convicted Tory to Mayor of Savannah in less than ten years. When the Americans retook Savannah after Yorktown in 1782, Anthony Wayne sent the young Col. Jackson to take possession after the British evacuated. Gibbons and other remaining Tories were convicted of treason and deprived of their estate. One executive order gave Thomas Gibbons permission to remain at his mother's and to pass to and from Savannah but required him to hold himself a prisoner to the Sheriff of Chatham County. On January 11, 1783, he petitioned the House of Assembly, asking to be admitted to citizenship. Six months later his petition was granted by removal of his name from the list to whom the Act of Confiscation applied, yet it was specified that he could not vote or hold office for fourteen years, nor could he practice law. Four years later he was admitted officially to all the rights and privileges of citizenship, and in another four years he was mayor.

But the harmony that seemed to prevail in 1791 at the time of Washington's visit was deceptive. In the recent congressional election Gibbons seems to have served as campaign manager for Anthony Wayne, who was now resident on the confiscated plantation Mulberry Grove, which was granted to him in gratitude for his services by the state of Georgia. Wayne's opponent was Col. James Jackson, now a Savannah lawyer seeking reelection. Wayne did not campaign, but apparently Gibbons did, and Wayne won. After the General sailed for the capital in Philadelphia at the end of July, Jackson challenged the validity of the election by petition to the House of Representatives. Jackson's case was based on a number of voting irregularities, including one district which certified 89 votes when there were only seventy eligible voters in the district. Jackson blamed Gibbons. In his speech he described him, "this person, Gibbons, whose soul is faction, whose life has been a scene of political corruption, who never could be easy under Government."

The House of Representatives finally resolved that Wayne was not a duly elected member. Another resolution which would have seated Jackson in his stead, however, was defeated by the tie-breaking decision of the Speaker. Ironically, the Speaker on this occasion was Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut, whose relative John M. Trumbull later married Thomas Gibbons' daughter Ann and was involved in counter suits with his father-in-law in which Trumbull charged Gibbons with slander and alienation of his wife's affections. But that is another long and sordid story.

For Jackson's words before Congress, Gibbons challenged him. The two men met. Three shots were exchanged. None hit, whatever this says about Jackson's marksmanship or intention when Gibbons' bulk is remembered, and perhaps it is enough conclusion to the episode to set down the testimony of Thomas Spalding, who, years later, recalled his law study under Gibbons in the 1790s:

"After my own father, he was the best friend I ever knew. He was a great lawyer...The result from his professional labors were three thousand pounds sterling a year. This I knew, as I was his collector and Mrs. Gibbons his treasurer.

Gibbons was not a very fluent speaker. He was very quick in discovering the weak point of his opponent, and his memory was always ready to give the law that bore upon it...sometimes he indulged in witticism, which increased as he grew older. Mr. Gibbons in his nature was very open, frank, manly, and very determined. This gave him a few warm friends and many bitter enemies."

And finally Spalding describes a conversation with James Jackson, after Jackson had gone on to become Governor of Georgia. Jackson, he says, called "Mr. Gibbons, as a whole...the greatest lawyer in Georgia."

During the 1790s, Gibbons was three more times elected mayor of Savannah. These were years when his law practice expanded, although it sometimes seems he was as often litigant as counsel. He put together the rice plantation estates on the banks of the Savannah River and on Argyle Island, which have been lumped together under the name Whitehall and which, in our day, have provided most of the land now occupied by the Savannah Municipal Airport.

It was a decade which only three of the many children born to Thomas and his wife Ann survived. They were Thomas Heyward, William, and Ann. Then, for reasons that are not wholly clear, perhaps simply new field to conquer, a new interest in transportation connected with the disposing of rice harvest profitably, or more likely, disappointment at the decision not to award him a judgeship which he felt he had been promised and which had already been announced, Thomas Gibbons moved north in 1801.

He purchased property in New Jersey in and near Elizabeth-town (now Elizabeth) and Perth Amboy. He formed an alliance with Aaron Ogden and with Jonathan Dayton, whose daughter Molly married Gibbons' oldest son in an ill-fated match apparently ruined in a few years by Thomas Heyward's drinking and gambling away the plantation his father had given them as a wedding present. Gibbons invested in steamboats, hotels, stock farms, stage coach lines, and turnpikes, including the Morris Union Turnpike through Bottle Hill (now Madison). From his Elizabeth-town headquarters, he worked out his investments carefully and at the same time kept in close touch with developments in Georgia, traveling back and forth so long as he was physically able and, thereafter, using his son William, who withdrew from Princeton for these purposes, as his agent and right arm.

In the early years in Elizabeth, his establishment of bachelor quarters involved him in a paternity suit. A little later his son-in-law earned his everlasting enmity (including one of the most vindictively exclusive wills in history) by remonstrating with him about the morality of his conduct and bringing Ann's mother into the picture. The terms of Gibbons' will, by which Gibbons ensured that no child of John Trumbull's would ever inherit one scrap of property from their grandfather, testify to that enmity, but also to the success of Thomas' business ventures. The will also explains why, when Aaron Ogden attempted to intervene on behalf of Trumbull and Ann, Thomas Gibbons turned against Ogden and began the comic opera affair that had him nailing a challenge to a duel on Ogden's door. Ogden's response was a suit for trespass which brought a court judgment against Gibbons that cost him a few thousand dollars. But, ultimately, it brought Ogden, war hero and New Jersey Governor though he was, to prison for indebtedness. The will only partially explains, however, the persistence with which Gibbons pursued the Supreme Court case that immortalizes both their names, Gibbons vs. Ogden."

In the name of God, amen. This is the last will and testament of me, Thomas Gibbons, at present of the city of New York, but late of Elizabethtown in the state of New Jersey,

First I recommend my soul to the mercy of my God, through the intercession of my blessed Redeemer.

Second. I submit my body to the grave, to be sealed up in expectation of a happy resurrection.

As to the disposition of my estates, which is the sole object of this instrument, it is as follows: [selected excerpts]

To my son William Gibbons, of Savannah, I give all the rest and residue of my estates...my plantation Rosedew in Chatham County, and Tusculum in Scriben County, with all my negro slaves in the states of Georgia and South Carolina...all my lots of ground in the city of Savannah...And in New Jersey, my Rose-hill farm, my Wheat-patch farm, a house and lot on the turnpike road, my two farms, Rising Sun and Howard's Farm, and the three lots in New Brunswick...at present in the occupation of Cornelius Vanderbilt, and in Elizabethtown, the Union hotel, with all the houses, lots and premises thereto belonging...I also give, devise and bequeath to my said son William Gibbons my swamp plantation in South Carolina, my plantation in Chatham County called Long Payment, and the lot it Morris County called the Mountain Lot...also all my bank stock in New York, New Jersey, and Georgia, and all money in any bank in either of the states, and also all my steamboats and sailboats and all money due to me, and all my plate, household furniture, and stock of liquors, in Georgia or elsewhere."*

*Schooley's Mountain

All this he gave to his son William, provided no bit of it ever reached Trumbull or any of his descendants. D.B. Ogden's assessment is understandable: "I considered Thomas Gibbons a man of very strong mind, of very strong passions, of very strong prejudices, and very strong will." But let us give Gibbons' steamboat captain the last word. Cornelius Vanderbilt put it: "I think he was one of the strongest minded men I ever was acquainted with; I never knew any man that had any control over him...I do not know that William Gibbons ever started a project which his father did not originate. I never saw any failure in his mind. I did business with him (in April, 1826, before he died in May); I thought him as capable of business then as he ever was."

Vanderbilt may not have been fair to William Gibbons. But he was right about Thomas. When Thomas Gibbons died on May 16, 1826, one of the great American originals seems to have been lost to history.

Courtesy of the [Drew University Archives](#)