

Jacob Gibson's Prank
by James Dawson

Jacob Gibson (1759-1818), was a wealthy landowner and politician who lived on Marengo farm opposite St. Michaels. Bright, opinionated and outspoken, he was usually at the center of controversy and often fist fights when he met up with his political foes in the street. Certainly the most outrageous episode in Gibson's remarkable life was his curious affair with the British and its strange aftermath.

Gibson was passionate about liberty and an ardent Jeffersonian Democrat whose sworn enemies were the Federalists, the opposing political party. He once got in a fight in Easton with Dr. Ennalls Martin, who beat him up so badly that he then had to call on that same Dr. Martin to tend his injuries.

It should be said that Dr. Martin had authored a newspaper article severely lampooning Gibson and his allies. It wasn't unusual, particularly around election time, for people to assault their rivals in print and proclaim to the world in paid newspaper insertions, that so and so was a coward, a poltroon and a lying rascal. The slandered could then become the slandee (if that is a word) and reply with ridicule of their own. As you might expect, this often escalated into outright assault and should serve as a lesson to those of us who think that dirty politics is a recent innovation.

Things got so bad that historian Dickson Preston quoted Thomas Perrin Smith, editor of the *Easton Republican Star* as writing in 1805 that "Gentlemen... who are engaged in personal quarrels, ought to know that the public are totally uninterested in their disputes, and believe that the columns of a newspaper might be better filled, either by foreign news, or by essays on political, agricultural, or philosophical subjects." He also wrote that if two parties insisted on a "war of ink and paper", he would be "very happy to accommodate them with handbills."

This really didn't calm anyone down, least of all Gibson, who loved to see himself in print, and so the ink war raged on. In particular, Gibson detested Robert Banning and his friends, who had once beaten out Gibson's party in an election, so he had plenty to write about.

For all of his faults, Gibson was a hard worker who helped start an Easton bank and was known to be charitable to the poor. He made a fortune farming and owned about half a dozen farms and rented several more. As the French were conquering much of Europe in the early 1800s, Gibson named them after Napoleon's victories in the belief that Napoleon was advancing the cause of democracy. And also because Napoleon was fighting the British, who he had detested ever since the Revolutionary War.

Married twice, he had several children. Unfortunately, after his death, his house burned in 1847 with all of his family papers, so there is much about the man that we will never know, however the newspapers of the day were filled with his bragging and slander. He thrived on controversy. With the War of 1812, he had a more fearsome enemy than the Federalists: the British had come to the Chesapeake.

On April 12, 1813, while sailing to his farm on Sharp's Island, near the mouth of the Choptank River, in an attempt to rescue some of his property before the enemy got it, Gibson was captured and taken aboard the British flagship, where he was held for several days. He must have worked some considerable charm on Admiral Warren in

that time. The Admiral wined and dined him, paid him for the livestock that had been seized and let him go with this written protection,

“By the Right Honorable Sir John Borlase Warren, Bart. K.B. Admiral of the Blue and Commander in Chief of His Majesty's Ships and Vessels employed and to be employed on the American and West Indian Station, &c. &c. &c.

Whereas his majesty's squadron under my command, having occasion for refreshments; and Sharp's Island, in this bay, producing live stock, I have directed the said stock shall not be removed. Whatever cattle any of the officers of his majesty's ships under my orders may take, as well as any other stock, is to be paid for by regular bills or cash, and no depredation or injury is to be committed on the houses and farms, servants or slaves, upon the above mentioned island. Given under my hand, and on board his majesty's ship St. Domingo, off Sharp's Island in the Chesapeake, April 15th, 1813.

JOHN BORLASE WARREN.”

Curiously enough, although Gibson hated the British, he wrote that he was treated by all the officers, and particularly by the admiral, with “marked politeness and delicacy.”

Meanwhile, Talbot County and especially St. Michaels was in a fever about a possible invasion. And so few days later on the 18th or 19th, when a suspicious looking barge was seen sailing up the Miles River with what appeared to be a British soldier beating a drum on deck and flying what seemed to be a red flag from the mast, the local militias under Captains Robert Banning and Joseph Kemp gathered on shore to meet it, fearing it was the herald of an attack.

As the mysterious vessel approached St. Michaels, Gibson appeared on deck laughing and it was seen that the British redcoat was actually one of Gibson's men, the drum an empty rum barrel and the Union Jack a red bandanna handkerchief. This stunt so enraged most of St. Michaels that Gibson was nearly lynched when he landed and came very close to being shot. It really wasn't a good time to play a joke.

His affair with the British excited the suspicions of his detractors who thought he was illegally trading with the enemy, which was treason. Rumors flew that he had sold Sharp's Island to the British for a “great price” or that he had “bought goods from the British which he brought back to sell in St. Michaels” or that he “tried to escape and two of his people were killed by a shot from the enemy while he lay down [and hid] in the boat”, or that he was going back to England with Admiral Warren to become a “great man”. Gibson called these insults “a list of lies and slander that would make a fiend of Hell blush.”

Gibson was now very much on the defensive, or the offensive depending on your point of view, and wrote Secretary of State James Monroe and Levin Winder, the Governor of Maryland asking them what he should do with the money. Gov. Winder wrote back:

“We have your letter of the 24th inst. considering the decision of your first enquiry [sic], to wit- whether you have a right to retain the money, &c. left in payment of the stock taken from you from the enemy belongs to general

government, we shall transmit to the President of the United States a copy of your letter and its inclosures [sic], and ask his answer thereto.

The demand upon the state government from every part of Maryland, greatly exceed our ability to meet. The Legislature will soon be in session, and will, no doubt, make further provision for the safety of the state.

To other parts of your letter we shall be able more freely to reply when the President shall have communicated to us his sentiments.

I am, sir, with respect,
LEV. WINDER”

Apparently President Madison never answered. He probably had enough troubles of his own what with the war and all.

Gibson then accommodated himself by writing handbills defending his actions. All of the quotes in this article, unless otherwise stated, have been taken from the one titled *Federal Treason and Democratic Gratitude* dated May 10, 1813.

The Harrison/Tilghman history of Talbot County, which was published about one hundred years later in 1915, called it “one of the most extraordinary productions that ever came from Gibson’s pen”, a pen that was known to have produced some “wonderful and fearful products”. It should be noted that in recounting this episode they shied away from the slanderous parts which they thought “must remain in the original edition, fit for the eyes of the curious only”.

As a *Tidewater Times* historical exclusive for curious eyes, some of these are now appearing here in print for the first time since 1813. (And as a further note: if anybody wants to sue me about this, I just left the country).

In this broadside, Gibson detailed the whole episode claiming that the British had “forced” the \$54 deposit on him for the 4 sheep, 12 cattle and 28 hogs that they had taken, which he claimed were worth \$255, and that he had “protested against any agency in the transaction with the enemies of my country that might contribute to their aid”.

He printed the documents from the British, his letters to the government and many paragraphs explaining his actions and also (naturally) slandering his enemies, especially Banning who he said “you would almost swear was the illegitimate offspring of a violated Monkey by a Pug Dog... it would puzzle the devil and forty grannies to say what his right name is.” And not content, he topped this off with the jingle:

*“Dame Nature when she sported, and made this cursed bantling.
Cobbled up a name, and called the thing Bob Banning.”*

Strangely enough, despite of all the slander, it is not at all clear what it was that Gibson accused Banning of doing. Apparently, he blamed him for all the furor following his prank, but Gibson was all innocence about the event, and continued:

“I say this fellow, a coward and a poltroon, was elected by the federalists, in opposition to Samuel Stevens, David Kerr, jun. Wm. G. Tilghman and James Wainwright. Men of unblemished characters, respectable in every department of life, were out-poll'd by this cowardly scoundrel, who had the horrors so bad, at

seeing me sailing up to St. Michael's, with two or three handkerchiefs at my mast-head, when I returned from Sharp's Island, rejoicing at my escape and at the glad tidings I should bring to the women and children, and to the timid men (of whom we have too many God knows)-notwithstanding this base-begotten rascal knew the vessel, knew me, saw the people running up the creek on both sides of me, talking to me and rejoicing at my return; yet, because the two handkerchiefs looked so much like blood, (although a white one was at the head of the bowsprit, as a signal of friends) he was so afraid that a British musket was in the red handkerchief, and that the *meat of his gourd* [i.e. his brains] would be blown out in reality. His fears are at this time so extreme, that the sight of my red neck-cloth sets him at peep bo [i.e. peek-a-boo], when he sees me at Easton."

In Banning's defense, it should be noted that while he was the adopted relative of Jeremiah Banning, it was unkind of Gibson to call him illegitimate. And also, it should be said that he showed admirable restraint in never coming to fisticuffs with Gibson about this in the streets which, frankly, Gibson probably deserved. It should also be said that in Banning's defense, he was a well liked and respected member of the community, but a Federalist and so at ideological odds with Gibson.

In his prankish way, perhaps Gibson had ulterior motives with his own "invasion" of St. Michaels in trying to make Banning look silly, although he denied knowing that Banning would be there.

Gibson's account of his dance with the enemy seemed reasonable enough. Gosh, it was practically his patriotic duty to take the Admiral's money:

"And now let me ask you, what you, or any one of you would have done had you been in my situation, four miles from any land but the island I was on; surrounded by water and by a large British fleet; out of the protection of your government and your neighbors-I could not remain on the island during the war, or I might not have asked for its defence [sic]. Neither my overseer nor my people [slaves] would remain on the island until I would satisfy them of their safety-I should have lost my crops during the war, and probably my houses and other things left there. This island brings me three thousand dollars per annum-Its safety injured no person-it violated no law; I knew not who might come there in my absence to do mischief. Everything was burnt on Poplar Island last war, by the British government or its officers-I had no right to expect that I was to be favored, but on the contrary, to be the first victim of British vengeance. Fortunately God has made me of strong nerves to encounter difficulties, of a control of manners that I can shine when I please in a church, a drawing room, a grog shop or a brothel: And if by my address and urbanity of manners, I softened the roaring lion to a kind lamb, and obtained papers that helped my country and rendered no aid to its enemy, was I not justifiable? Yes, says everyone-but we did not see the subject as we now do; why did you not tell us all these things at first?"

Gibson bought the village two cannons by way of making amends. At least that was what some said, but he didn't see it quite that way thinking that he had done

nothing to apologize for and even managed to insult the town yet again with his explanation. He said that the story that he had “sent some cannon to St. Michael’s to appease my enemies there” was wrong, since “it is well known that I have more property on the river (above the contemplated fort) than the whole town and every thing in it would sell for... I will honestly acknowledge that I had one eye towards the people of St. Michael’s and my neighbours, the other to myself property and family.” A backhanded apology at best, but when Gibson’s blood was boiling, as it often was, look out.

“From the Federalists I had nothing to expect”, he continued, “they forced me to ride them rough-shod-I have never spared them, nor never will, when I see them err. I have given them whip and spur; I rolled them, in this county, from a high political standing to the bottom of the valley. I took democracy from its slumbering ashes. Yes- I, Jacob Gibson, did it; with my zeal, perseverance, justness of the cause, and my purse...” Gibson predicted that he would rise above it all “ into new life and grandeur, like the Golden Phoenix that fluttered from her ashes.”

The affair seems to have settled down as other events overtook it. And Gibson’s six pounders came in handy later that August when the British did attack St. Michaels, which probably helped to smooth things over. People came to realize that Gibson had acted honorably and, given his background, would have been the last one in town to consort with the enemy and it was said that he did pass the money on to the government.

For a final note, after the war, Gibson came to believe that his Federalist foes cared just as much about this country as he did, and that perhaps they weren’t so bad after all, even if he didn’t always agree with them. He and Dr. Martin even became good friends, and although it was said that Banning was not one to hold a grudge, it is a safe bet I think, that he and Banning never reconciled.

Another safe bet would be that things were never dull when Jacob Gibson was around.

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The *Tidewater Times* is practically a local institution and has published many great articles on Delmarva in it’s 54 year history. Thanks, *TT* for letting me use this one.

