

## The Lives of Serfs and City Folk

ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY INTO THE REALM OF FAMILY HISTORY



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### The Tale of Three John Gibbs

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Early on in my research days, I realized that sometimes, even in the tiniest of colonial settlements, you could run across more than one person with the same name. Take John Barnett for example. In Virginia during the mid-1700s I think I found 4-5 John Barnetts. When all I knew at the time that John Barnett was the father of one of my ancestors, but nothing else, I knew that I was not going to be able to pick one of these John Barnetts without more information. And, as we all know, sometimes even primary sources can be wrong, or at the very least confusing.

A couple of weeks ago I ran into this issue once again when I decided to resume research on my Gibbs family line. I recently came across citations that placed my ancestor, John Gibbs, at Jamestown, VA, in the 1620s. Like always, I began by Googling "John Gibbs" and "Jamestown" to see what I could find.

As I read both primary documents from Jamestown through my local library's connection to the Gale Genealogy database, and looked at family trees, at first it seemed like an open and shut case! John Gibbs came to Jamestown

aboard the ship Supply in 1619, was an indentured servant to Sergeant William Berry, survived an attack by Powhatan's people in 1622, became a business partner with Christopher Safford sometime around 1624, and at some point in between was commissioned as a Lieutenant. Simple, right?

Wrong.

I can't say what it was, but something about this narrative seemed a bit...off.

It seemed like a lot of things for a person to go through in 5 short years, especially if he started out as an indentured servant! The average length of service for an indentured servant around 4-7 years, so this didn't seem possible.

(See <http://www.ushistory.org/us/5b.asp> and <http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/indentured-servants-in-the-us/>)

Being a romantic, my mind thought, "Maybe after the attack in 1622 William Berry felt bad for John and let him out of his contract early." Oh please...stop right there. If anything, after the attack if William Berry lost servants in the attack, he'd be more likely to want to retain John's services to work his rather large plantation. It didn't make logical sense. There didn't seem like any realistic way an indentured servant would be able to become a business partner nor lieutenant in 5 short years.

So, I began to look at more sources, and ran across Martha McCartney's "Virginia Immigrants & Adventurers, 1607 - 1635: A Biographical Dictionary" (Genealogical Publishing, 2007, Baltimore MD). In the index, McCartney lists three different John Gibbs who were present in the Jamestown area the same time as my possible ancestor! John Gibbs, The Lieutenant; John Gibbs, The Partner; and John Gibbs, The Servant! Dang it, my Spidey-Sense is still working!

So let's look at the evidence from McCartney:

### **The Lieutenant**

First, we'll start with Lieutenant John Gibbs. According to McCartney the Lieutenant was first noted as being in Jamestown in July of 1619 when he served as a burgess for Captain John Ward's plantation, and represented the Ward Plantation in the (Jamestown Colony?) legislature meetings of July and August 1619. So we know that the Lieutenant had arrived prior to July of 1619 and was not an indentured servant. After all, the definition of a Burgess (n.) is 1. A freeman or citizen of any English borough, 2. A member of the English Parliament who once represented a town, borough or university, 3. A member of the lower house of the legislature of colonial Virginia or Maryland.

Soon after, the Lieutenant moves to his own plantation at Westover, most likely in fall or winter of 1619 but definitely before 1622. He in fact now has been granted his own land and so would again definitely not be an indentured servant. But, most importantly, in both McCartney's book, and other primary source documents I've scrounged up, there is 1. no mention of a wife or children, and 2. unfortunately for the Lieutenant McCartney says he is killed in the attack by Powhatan's people on March 22nd, 1622. Because I have no indication of his age at death, and lack of evidence of children, I am ruling the Lieutenant out as my ancestor. As we all know, genealogy can turn on a dime, so he's not quite out of the running. But let's set him aside...for now anyway

### **The Partner**

The Partner John Gibbes is where things start to get muddled. According to McCartney, The Partner left England in September 1620 aboard the ship, *Supply*. He is recorded as having a master, Arnold Oldsworth, and was set to receive his own land after a term of service. Note it does not say here if The Partner is actually an indentured servant at this point or not. All we know is he is supposed to receive land but not when he will receive it. It's entirely possible he was already done with his service at this point and received his land immediately upon arrival.

On January 29th, 1621 McCarthy says The Partner arrives at Berkeley Hundred, a plantation near Jamestown. It is not clear if he has his own land at this point or if he is there to work the plantation. The Partner survives the March 22, 1622 attack and moves to Jordan's Journey soon after. He is still there in 1625 when he is listed as a member of a household which contains his partner, Christopher Safford, and a male servant. Finally, in 1632, The Partner writes a letter to the Society of Berkeley Hundred to revive the plantation, which was apparently abandoned at some point after the attack in 1622.

Now, this is where it starts to get tricky. If you will note, The Partner was also an Indentured Servant, as he came to America with the promise of land once his service was completed. It's not clear when he received his land, or really clear if he ever received it. By 1632 though, it is clear that he had climbed the ranks enough to feel as if he had standing to write to the Berkeley Hundred plantation owners to restart the plantation.

Some of the forums I've read since actually merge The Partner and The Lieutenant. But it seems to me if McCartney's sources are right, then they were two very separate people. Which brings us to our third candidate:

### **The Servant**

And last, and least a far as societal norms dictate, comes The Servant John Gibbs. The Servant arrived in 1621 aboard the *Abigail*, and was an employee of the Virginia Company. This was noted in a primary source of August 1, 1622. By 1625 The Servant was living on Virginia Company land on the south side of the Elizabeth River and was a servant in William Berry's household.

After the Virginia company failed, The Servant is transferred to Governor George Yeardley's household in 1627.

No where does McCartney state that The Servant was ever freed from his bonds of service, so we can rule out that he was ever The Lieutenant. We can also rule out that he is The Partner because it is clear that he was employed by the Virginia Company until at least 1627 and also was not living at Jordan's Journey in 1625. And, since two John Gibbs were recorded as arriving in the same year, and you know that it took months to travel between England and Jamestown, there was no way they could be the same person. So we know now there are at least TWO John Gibbs present in the Jamestown area at the same time. But at this point we still cannot rule out that The Lieutenant and The Partner are not the same person, even though McCartney insists that The Lieutenant was killed in 1622...well, perhaps I will do more research in the near future and post a update here if I find out anything new!

For now though, here is additional information for you from McCartney to help make sense of the confusing Tale of Three John Gibbs.

McCartney's Timeline:

## **1619**

July – The Lieutenant serves as Burgess of Ward Plantation

Fall – The Lieutenant moves to his plantation of Westover

## **1620**

September – The Partner leaves England for Jamestown

## **1621**

January – The Partner arrives at Berkeley Hundred aboard the *Supply*

The Servant arrives aboard the *Abigail*

## **1622**

March 22 – Powhatan attack on the plantations surrounding Jamestown

March 22 – The Lieutenant is killed at Westover

## 1625

The Partner is listed as living at Jordan's Journey

The Servant is in the Berry Household, south side of Elizabeth River

## 1627

The servant is transferred to Governor Yeardley's household

## 1632

The Partner writes to revive Berkeley Hundred plantation

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11 THOUGHTS ON "THE TALE OF THREE JOHN GIBBS"



## Bob Steinert

— JANUARY 19, 2017 AT 10:23 PM

Thank you for this interesting attempt to resolve the multiple John Gibbs mystery. I too find John Gibbs at the end of a long family tree branch and ran across at least the mystery of 2 John Gibbs. I don't know about the 3rd. Mysteries like this may never be resolved, but by publishing our interest in them we not only help search for long buried information but peak the

interest of younger generations in this type of history.

Thank you. I look forward to learning more as you find out more information.

Reply

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*etnasanna*

— JANUARY 20, 2017 AT 3:44 PM

Thanks Bob for the comment. I've been taking a little hiatus from my research for the past couple of years but do hope to get back to working on some of my "unsolvable" mysteries. I did find the John Gibbs problem fascinating, and hope a trip out to the Jamestown area sometime soon will help me resolve the question. If I do, I'll post an update!

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tod gibbs

— APRIL 1, 2017 AT 10:26 PM

my ancestry.com dna results connect me to descendants of john gibbs and mary marron. john is presumably the grandson of the lieutenant. i wait with bated breath for the exciting conclusion of 'the saga of the three johns'.

Reply

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*etnasanna*

— APRIL 1, 2017 AT 10:51 PM

Hi Tod,

So do I! Still don't have any answers to my questions. 😊

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Sarah

— NOVEMBER 23, 2017 AT 6:04 AM

I'm related to Gibbs/marron as well. Wish this could be resolved!

Reply

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*etnasanna*

— FEBRUARY 2, 2018 AT 2:35 PM

As do I! I hope to work with the Colonial Dames to see if we can make any progress. Stay tuned!

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Pingback: [Hanna, wherefore art thou? | The Lives of Serfs and City Folk](#)

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Vicki Nobles

— AUGUST 9, 2020 AT 6:46 PM

I hope to revive this conversation! My family holds dear a family geneology researched by distant cousins and connects us to Lt. John. I feel relatively (pun intended) sure of our line. However after a trip to Jamestown 6 years ago I came away befuddled concerning so many John Gibbs, I am getting ready to teach early American history to my twin granddaughters and would love to have a certain story instead of a puzzle. But alas, that may be all we have!! Thanks,

Vicki Roberts Nobles

maternal family is Gibbs in Nashville TN

Reply

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*etnasanna*

— AUGUST 9, 2020 AT 10:25 PM

Hi Vikki! I'm still here and still confounded by the John Gibbs mystery. I never was able to get anywhere with the Colonial Dames, mostly because I lost my connection to the organization and didn't become a member. But I'm still hoping that elusive clue will come soon. I'm starting to think the only way to know is for Gibbs family members to take a DNA test to see if we're related, although we may never know which John we're descended from! If anything this is a great lesson in history/genealogy for your granddaughters...you can't take family tree

data as the truth without primary sources, and those are more and more elusive as you go back in time. Stay in touch and hopefully we'll find an answer someday.

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## Betty Gibbs

— NOVEMBER 17, 2021 AT 7:07 PM

Thanks for all the work you did to try to sort out the story of multiple John Gibbs at Jamestowne. It has been a tradition in my family that we were descended from Lt. John, but I have been somewhat skeptical. My mentor, Dorothy Gibbs, was convinced that the descent was from Lt. John. I have read some of the early Colonial records, but not all the references in the Wikitree article. I did apply to the Jamestowne Society and was turned down because their belief is that Lt. John died in the massacre and had no children. They sent me an analysis from an earlier application that asserts the same thing. I am starting to think that there is no answer because the records just don't exist to give a definitive answer.

The info I have is that I am descended from Gregory Gibbs (b1635, wife Mary). His grandson is John (b1680, wife Mary Marron). So there may be some cousins who have commented here.

I did do a DNA test, but don't really know much about the whole thing. I am interested in anything else that is known about these relationships.

[Reply](#)

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## *etnasanna*

— NOVEMBER 18, 2021 AT 12:58 PM

Thank you Betty! This work was done quite awhile ago so I'm glad you found it useful!

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