



Local College Met a Critical Need at a Critical Time

# GIBBS JUNIOR COLLEGE

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Adapted from the St. Petersburg Times

## Short History of Gibbs Junior College

***Truly, Gibbs Junior College touched millions — locally, nationally and internationally — through its programs and its graduates.”***

Dr. Walter L. Smith  
*The Magnificent Twelve*



Jonathan C. Gibbs

Gibbs Junior College in St. Petersburg was one of a dozen colleges established by the State of Florida, in the days prior to desegregation, to put public higher education within the literal reach of more black students throughout the state. Although the facility lasted but a decade, Gibbs had a successful run and met the needs of thousands of men and women.

In its 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” education was inherently unequal, and in a related ruling the following year called for “desegregation at all deliberate speed.” Nevertheless, the State of Florida continued to maintain segregated educational institutions, much to the consternation of a black community eager for integration.

In 1957 the Florida Legislature established separate community college districts - 28 for whites and 11 for blacks. The first black institution to emerge that year was Gibbs Junior College, which shared space with Gibbs High School in south St. Petersburg. In fact, the high school’s principal, John W. Rembert, was the founding president of Gibbs Junior College.

Gibbs graduate Walter L. Smith, the first student government president

and former president of Florida A&M University chronicles his alma mater’s history in his book, *The Magnificent Twelve*, and cites three aspects of the college’s growth and development as perhaps most significant: “the interdependence of relationships that developed among students, faculty and administration; the college choir; and the strong athletic program that evolved primarily with basketball, fencing and the intramural sports.”

In February 1965, Gibbs was placed under the supervision of St. Petersburg Junior College (SPJC). At the close of the 1965 spring semester, it became the “Gibbs Campus” of SPJC, and in 1967, its “Skyway Campus.” In June of that year the Skyway was phased out of operation.

In February 1993, the SPJC St. Petersburg Campus became the St. Petersburg/Gibbs Campus, to honor the contributions Gibbs Junior College made to the college and to Pinellas County education in general.

As Dr. Walter Smith wrote in the program for the dedication ceremony, Gibbs “is remembered by its products . . . doctors, lawyers, educators at all levels, diplomats, science researchers, business persons, ministers, and professional athletes.

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For more information you may purchase *The Magnificent Twelve* from Dr. Smith.

### The Man Behind the Name

Gibbs Junior College was named for Jonathan C. Gibbs, the first African-American to serve in the Florida Cabinet — as Secretary of State from 1868 to 1873, and as Superintendent of Public Instruction until his untimely death at the age of 48 on Aug. 14, 1874.

Source: *The Florida Handbook, 1977-1978*, compiled by Allen Morris