

Town of Somerset Historic Archives Collection

**Collection Name: Gibson family papers**

Location: 4723 Cumberland Avenue

Compiled by Lesley Anne Simmons, Chair History Committee, Town of Somerset

**History**

The Town of Somerset is a municipality of some 400 homes, first settled from the mid-1890s and incorporated in 1906. Today it has an elected Mayor and 5-person Town Council to run its affairs along with a Town Clerk and several maintenance personnel. Developed by five scientists who all worked for the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Somerset was one of the early trolley suburbs of the District of Columbia.

The five USDA scientists who purchased Somerset Heights in 1890 – Dr. Harvey W. Wiley, Dr. Charles A. Crampton, Dr. Daniel E. Salmon, Miles Fuller and Horace Horton (Horton's interests were soon taken over by Dr. E. A. deSweinitz) -- each built a home, subdivided the remaining lots and built on them for speculation. By 1905 thirty-five families lived in the community and a Citizens Association petitioned the State of Maryland legislature for municipal powers to enable them to levy taxes to develop much-needed services. The Charter was issued in 1906, and on April 5, the community of Somerset Heights, along with some surrounding farms and land became the *Town of Somerset*.

Women played an important role in Somerset throughout its history . They first organized themselves informally into *the Wednesday Club* in 1902. By 1916 the club was formalized and became part of the Federation of Women's Clubs. The members took on many civic and social causes and had significant impact on the way the Town was to develop, not least of which was to spearhead the effort to get the Somerset Elementary School built in 1928. The Woman's Club disbanded in 1980. The Somerset Elementary School building was added to in 1949, 1951 and 1958, and was demolished and rebuilt in 2004. It has become one of the most respected and successful elementary schools in the County.

From 1950 to 1960 the Town's population quadrupled to 1,444 residents as fields and woodland were developed with new California-style bungalows and split level homes. One of the Town's most controversial periods ran from the 1960s through the 1980s

when a parcel of land, known as the Bergdoll Tract after its Philadelphia based beer-maker owners, was to be developed to house a number of different commercial and residential purposes. The fight to stop that development ultimately failed with the building of the Somerset House high-rise condominiums in the late 1980s. But the fight won the Town some 12 acres of parkland from the developers, which now buffer the Town from the condominiums and the Friendship Heights development, and provided the space for the Town swimming pool to be built. It also achieved a reduction in the height and density of the planned buildings. In 1988 the Town de-annexed the 18 acres on which the first of three high rise condominium towers was being erected when residents, all of whom lived in single family residences, feared that the condominium residents, who would eventually be in the majority, would have different priorities which they could implement by taking over the Town government.

Town residents have celebrated their history throughout the years with festivities, including for its Diamond Jubilee, 80<sup>th</sup>, 90<sup>th</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of incorporation as well as during the Nation's bicentennial celebrations.

### **Provenance**

Most of the materials in the Gibson collection were donated to the Town by John Gibson who grew up at 415 (now 4815) Cumberland Avenue during the war years. He was a student at Somerset Elementary School and a member of the "Rinky Dink Fire Department" a group of boys who put out fires caused by sparks lighting grass around the train tracks that then ran through the Town of Somerset. His father Ralph was a member of the Town Council and a prominent physicist. His mother, Elizabeth was a member of the Somerset Woman's Club.

Mr. Gibson (Jack) contacted the Town historian in February 2007 after reading the history book, *Somerset: One Hundred Years a Town* that was published as part of the Town's centennial celebrations. A lengthy correspondence ensued, resulting in the publication of Jack's memories in "A Somerset Historical Vignette: The Rinky Dink Fire Department", which was published in the *Town Journal* in June, 2007 and "Growing Up In the Town of Somerset, Montgomery County, during World War II", which was published by the Montgomery County Historical Society in the *Montgomery County Story* series (Vol. 50. No. 3) dated August 2007. A short oral history was conducted on September 26, 2007, when Jack and his wife, Donna, visited Somerset. Jack also provided a tape of a conversation made during a walking tour of the Town on the same

day.

### **Scope and Content**

The collection consists of copies of photographs, an original copy of the "Somerset News" dated April 27, 1938 press clippings, e-mail correspondence, draft notes and audio tapes.

### **Processing Information**

Processed by Lesley Anne Simmons. Newspaper clippings and obituaries were copied on to acid free paper. Some photographs were scanned and digital copies are available in the Town's digital photograph collection.

### **File No. 1**

The Montgomery County Story Vol. 50. No. 3 "Growing Up in the Town of Somerset, Montgomery County, during World War II", by John Gibson, August 2007, 11 pages.

415 Cumberland Ave, Gibson Family 1929-1961: History Summary, 1 page

Memories of the Town of Somerset by Dr. Ralph Gibson (unpublished notes) 4 pages

Obituary, Elizabeth D. Gibson, Washington Post, November 1992

Obituary, Elizabeth D. Gibson, The Middletown Press, December 8, 1992

Obituary, Colonel Ronald M. E. Gibson, n.d.

Obituary, Ralph Edward Gibson, Nature, July 1983

Obituary, Ralph Edward Gibson, Washington Post, February 18, 1983

Newspaper clipping, Junior Star circa 1940, "Junior Firefighters Hold Carnival to Earn Money for Their Equipment"

Newspaper clipping, Syracuse Herald Journal, July 28, 1944, "Boy Next Door" Dies in War; Leaves Lesson in Brotherhood, by Marquis Childs

Somerset News, April 27, 1983 (RDFD Pub. Co.) original (poor quality) and copy marked up by Jack Gibson

Gibson house and family photographs circa 1940 -- 8 black and white snap shots copied on to 8 x 11 inch paper

E-mail correspondence between Town Historian, Lesley Simmons and John Gibson, early 2007

Draft of "Growing Up in Somerset during World War II dated 3/22/2007, 17 pages plus one page of photographs

"A Somerset Vignette: The Rinky Dink Fire Department" by Jack Gibson, an insert to the Somerset Town Journal, June 2007

Audio tape of John Gibson's reminiscences during a walk around Somerset on September 26, 2007

Photograph of Jack Gibson taken to accompany his oral history interview on September 26, 2007

Note: See also Town oral history collection for an oral history interview with John Gibson conducted by Lesley Simmons on September 26, 2007.

**Using the collection**

Contact Town historian, Lesley Simmons at 240-497-1876