Historical Background

In March, 1948 the Society received from Mrs. J. J. McGrath of Milwaukee a box containing papers, manuscript volumes, and pencil drawings, which she had obtained from her uncle, George Gibbs V (1861-1940). The papers relate mainly to earlier members of the family, among whom were people prominent in political, scientific, and intellectual fields. Unlike many of the Society's manuscript collections, the Gibbs Family Papers are unrelated to the history of Wisconsin, although at one time in his life, George Gibbs V resided in Milwaukee (1885-1897).

George Gibbs II (1735-1803) was a prosperous shipping merchant in Rhode Island in partnership with his brother-in-law, William Channing. Their fleet of trading vessels sailed to all parts of the world from the West Indies to China, Russia, and the Mediterranean, and at his death Gibbs left a fortune valued at $700,000.

His eldest son, George III was born at Newport in 1776 and was sent to China at the age of twenty in the expectation that he would succeed his father in business. However, he was more attracted by travel and intellectual pursuits especially mineralogy. In Europe he began gathering a large collection of mineral specimens, which he eventually sold to Yale University for $20,000. In 1810 he married Laura Wolcott, the fifteen-year old daughter of Oliver Wolcott, the secretary of the treasury during the administrations of Washington and John Adams. They had four sons, George IV (1825-1873), Oliver Wolcott (1822-1908), Alfred (1823-1868), and Francis Sarason (1831-1882) and three daughters, one who died in infancy, Elizabeth Wolcott (1819-1906), and Laura Wolcott (1827-1908).

Two of the boys followed the scientific bent of their father. George IV was educated at Round Hill School at Northampton, Massachusetts under the direction of George Bancroft, the historian, and Joseph S. Cogswell. Unsuccessful at entering West Point because of his family's Whig political affiliation during a period of Democratic ascendancy, Gibbs studied law at Harvard and began practice in New York City. However, he abandoned the profession to become librarian of the New York Historical Society from 1842 to 1848. Eager to see the West, particularly after the news of the gold rush of 1848, Gibbs accompanied the Mounted Rifle Regiment from St. Louis to Oregon in 1849. During the next few years he unsuccessfully speculated in land and prospected, but his main interests were studying the local Indians and mapping the topography and geology of parts of the Northwest. In December, 1852 he was appointed collector of the Port of Astoria, a post which he held until April, 1853 when a Democratic administration resulted in new federal appointments. George IV was also attached to the Northwest Boundary Commission as a geologist, and he served under Captain George B. McClellan, commander of the Western Division of the Northern Pacific Railroad Expedition which surveyed the Cascade Mountains and the Olympic Peninsula. In 1857 he became a member of the Boundary Commission, remaining in Washington Territory until 1860 when he returned to Washington, D. C. to become secretary of the Hudson Bay Commission. During the Civil War his health prevented active military service, but he spent much of his time in the capital, where he was connected with the Smithsonian Institute, which published a number of his ethnological reports and studies.