Judge John R. Gibson

John R. Gibson was born to Harry B. and Edna Gibson on December 20, 1925, in Springfield, Missouri.

A young John Gibson served in the United States Army as Staff Sergeant with the Medical Detachment of the 693rd Quartermaster Battalion from 1944-1946. His unit served in Europe and the Philippines during World War II and in Japan after the war for occupation services. Gibson was decorated with ribbons for his participation in two theaters of operations.

After his army service, Judge Gibson attended the University of Missouri-Columbia, where he received his bachelor’s degree in 1949. He then earned his law degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law in 1952.


After law school, Judge Gibson moved to Kansas City and entered into private practice at the firm of Morrison, Hecker, Curtis, Kuder & Parrish in 1952. He made partner in 1957 and worked there for 29 years until 1981, engaged primarily in trial and appellate work.

Judge Gibson became a powerful influence in his community in the 1970s. In 1970, he served on the Jackson County Charter Commission as Chairman of the Drafting Committee. With the charter approved, he then served as Vice Chairman of the Jackson County Charter Transition Commission from 1971-1972. In 1973, he was appointed by the governor of Missouri to Kansas City’s Board of Police Commissioners, where he served as Vice President from 1973-1977.

One of Judge Gibson’s most prominent early roles was as a special prosecutor in 1979 to enforce court orders directing Kansas City firefighters to return to work. When work slowdowns and other job actions occurred in early 1980, Gibson prosecuted individual firefighters for contempt of court. Gibson said it was not pleasant sending firefighters to jail but that he believed in what he was doing. “Voluntary obedience to court orders is a very central part of our civilization,” he told the Kansas City Times (9/17/1981).
THE FEDERAL JUDGE

The mark Judge Gibson made on his local community widened as he was nominated in 1981 by President Ronald Reagan as U.S. District Judge for the Western District of Missouri to a seat vacated by Elmo B. Hunter. Six months after his appointment, he was elevated to the U. S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit in 1982. He filled the seat vacated by Floyd R. Gibson.*

“Sterling character, eminent stature, blameless reputation, adherence to principle, and a distinguished intellect” were terms Judge Floyd Gibson used to describe Judge Gibson during his Court of Appeals investiture.

Judge Gibson contributed greatly to the welfare and jurisprudence of the Eighth Circuit. In Jenkins v. Missouri, he helped desegregate Kansas City’s school system. In a landmark abortion rights case, Hodgson v. Minnesota, he authored the en banc opinion ruling that a Minnesota statute requiring underaged women to notify parents 48 hours before having an abortion was constitutional because it provided a procedure for the minor to seek a court waiver of the requirement. He dissented against lifting limits on campaign contributions in Missouri, writing that free speech rights of political parties are not more important than those of individuals. He also ruled to restrict the political conduct of candidates for state judicial office in Minnesota, in the interest of preserving judicial independence and integrity.

As a jurist, Judge Gibson is known for his fairness. He told a Kansas City Times reporter in 1982, “Each case has to be viewed on the basis of its own set of facts. Using labels (like liberal or conservative) might make great stories, but they don’t make very good law.” In Judge Gibson’s senior status resolution, Judge Morris Arnold echoed those words, noting that Judge Gibson’s “personal predilections ... do not influence his decisions. That is not only true, it is among the highest compliments that a judge could receive.”

*Judge Floyd Gibson and Judge John Gibson are not related.
Family, friends, colleagues, and past and present law clerks gathered to honor Judge Gibson at his portrait ceremony in 1998. Their comments during the ceremony paint their own portrait of Judge John R. Gibson.

**Judge Heaney:** “He is a man of great independent spirit, and he is a great scholar with deep understanding of the human spirit.... During [the many] sessions that we have had on that case [Kansas City desegregation], I have grown to have the greatest respect for Judge Gibson’s integrity, his compassion, and his deep devotion to the Constitution.”

**Judge Wollman:** “Judge Gibson is blessed with a powerful, analytical mind.... In addition to his intellect, compassion, and fairness, Judge Gibson’s unfailing good humor, his enormous capacity for work, and his role as a delightful dinner companion make him an ideal colleague and a boon companion.”

**Judge Richard Arnold:** “[Judge John R. Gibson] is a genuinely fair person scrupulously careful to look at the rights of each side of every case and to decide that case only when he is as sure as he can be that a fair result is being reached, a fair result consistent with the law and the facts and the equities of the situation. And there is no finer epitaph...that a judge could receive than to say that the judge was fair.”

**Judge Hansen:** “[H]aving Judge John R. for a colleague means that you work harder because you know that if he is on your panel, his position on the case will be extremely well-reasoned and very strongly supported by the case law.... No trial judge likes to be told that he or she has made a mistake. But when Judge John R. tells you that you did, he also takes the time and makes the effort to tell you why, and he does so in a reasoned, nonjudgmental way that puts your error, however grave and egregious it may have been, in its best possible light. On this court, his dissents always give me great pause to reconsider my own position.”

**Judge Magill:** He is “a judge’s judge” who writes “clear and lucid opinions.” “He is at home with everyone.... He is at home if he’s at Tony’s or at the finest restaurants in Paris.... He is at home with his Alfa Romeo as he is barreling north on Main to get to the office. He is a youngish man of all seasons....”

**Judge Morris Arnold** (from Judge Gibson’s senior status resolution): “Judge Gibson has over the years been our convener for many a pleasant evening, an indefatigable catalyst for social gatherings and conviviality. It is in this context that he best exhibits his persona as ‘John R.’”

Above: Judge Gibson in his Alfa Romeo with his daughter, Jeanne.
ASSOCIATIONS & AWARDS


He was a fellow of the American Bar Foundation and a member of the American Bar Association; American Judicature Society; Federal Judges Association Board of Directors, 1991-1997; Missouri Bar Association, Board of Governors, 1972-1979, President, 1977-1978; Kansas City Bar Association, President 1970-1971; Lawyers Association of Kansas City.

Judge Gibson was a member of the Phi Beta Kappa and Omicron Delta Kappa honor societies. He received several prestigious awards, including the Missouri Bar Association, President’s Award, 1974; Lawyers Association of Kansas City, Charles Evans Whittaker Award, 1980; Missouri Bar Association, Spurgeon Smithson Award, 1984; University of Missouri-Columbia Law School Citation of Merit, 1994.

Photos courtesy of the Gibson family.