

KENNETH A. GIBSON

Newark's First African American Mayor



Kenneth Gibson was Newark's first African American mayor. He was born in Alabama in 1932.

While living in Enterprise, Alabama, Gibson's father, Willie, suffered from discrimination at his job. His pay was unfairly cut by his white employer because the Gibson household had a luxury that upset Willie Gibson's boss. "The people that he worked for got jealous because we had an indoor bathroom and they didn't," Gibson said. Due to his pay cut and lack of opportunities for African Americans in the South, Willie Gibson chose to move his family North. The Gibsons were like many other black families who left the South for new homes in the North during the 20th century during the Great Migration.

Between 1916 and 1970, more than 6 million African Americans moved out of the rural Southern United States. African Americans were driven from their homes by poor economic opportunities and harsh segregationist laws. This was called the Great Migration.

In 1940, at the age of 8, Gibson moved to Newark's Central Ward with his parents, and younger brother Harold. His father Willie worked in the Swift packing plant in Kearny and his mother Daisy worked as a seamstress. As a child, Gibson attended the Monmouth Street School and Cleveland Junior High School. He graduated from Central High School in 1950, the same year that he entered the Newark College of Engineering, which is now known as NJIT. Gibson decided to go to college, even though he was encouraged to pursue a trade instead. "I decided that anybody who told me that I couldn't do something, that was the reason I was going to do it," he said.

Gibson's college education was interrupted by work and by his service in the military. From 1956 to 1958, Gibson served in Hawaii with the 65th Engineer Battalion of the United States Army; otherwise he was employed in Newark as a Highway Department engineer from 1950 to 1960. He became Chief Engineer of the Newark Housing Authority in 1960 and remained in that position for six years, all while attending Newark College of Engineering (NJIT) where he graduated with a degree in Civil Engineering in 1962. After obtaining his degree, Gibson served as Newark Chief Structural Engineer from 1966 until 1970.

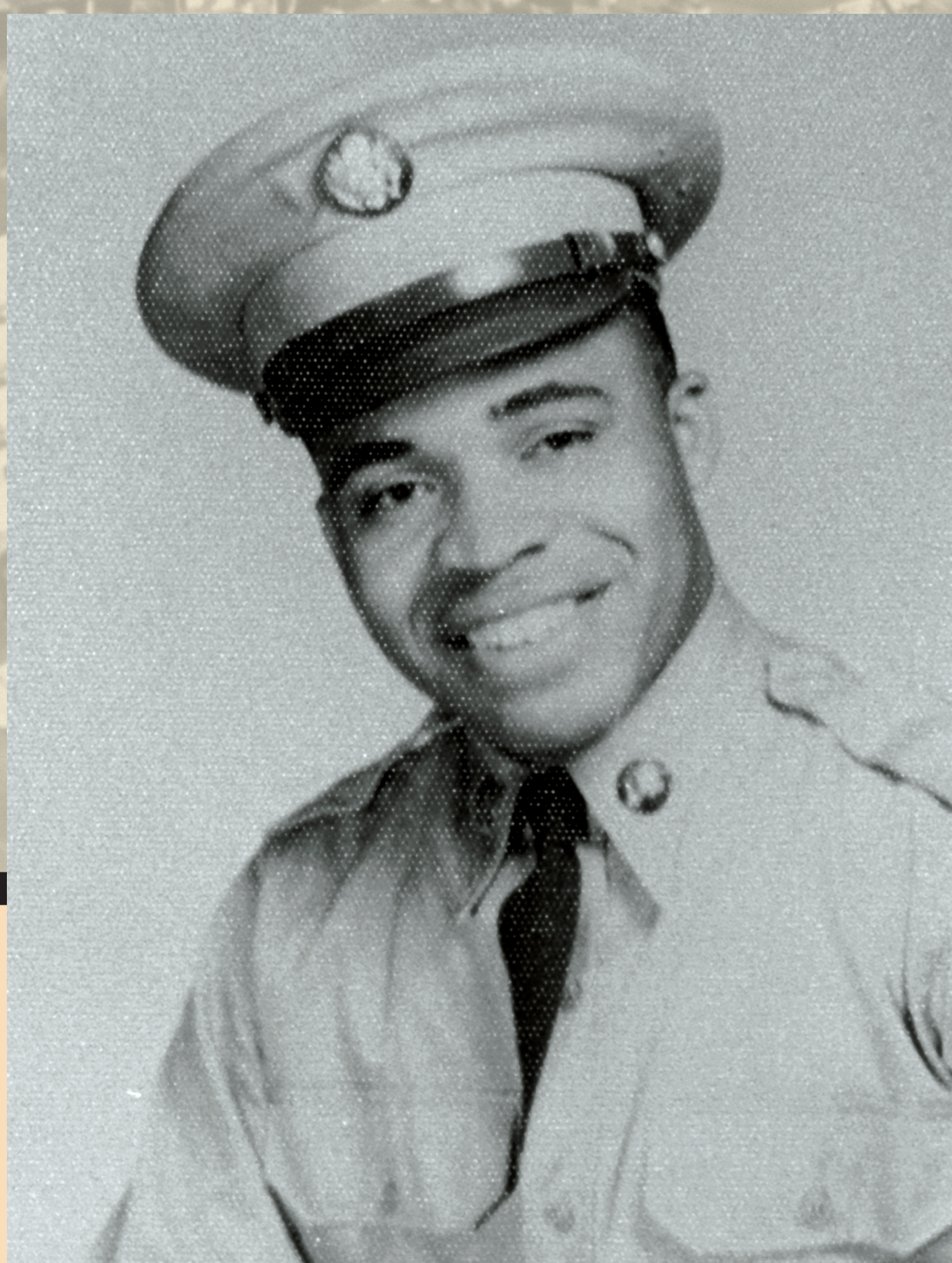
GIBSON WHEN HE WAS IN THE ARMY, CIRCA 1956.



KEN GIBSON (RIGHT) AND HIS BROTHER HAROLD, SHOWN HERE AS CHILDREN IN ALABAMA.

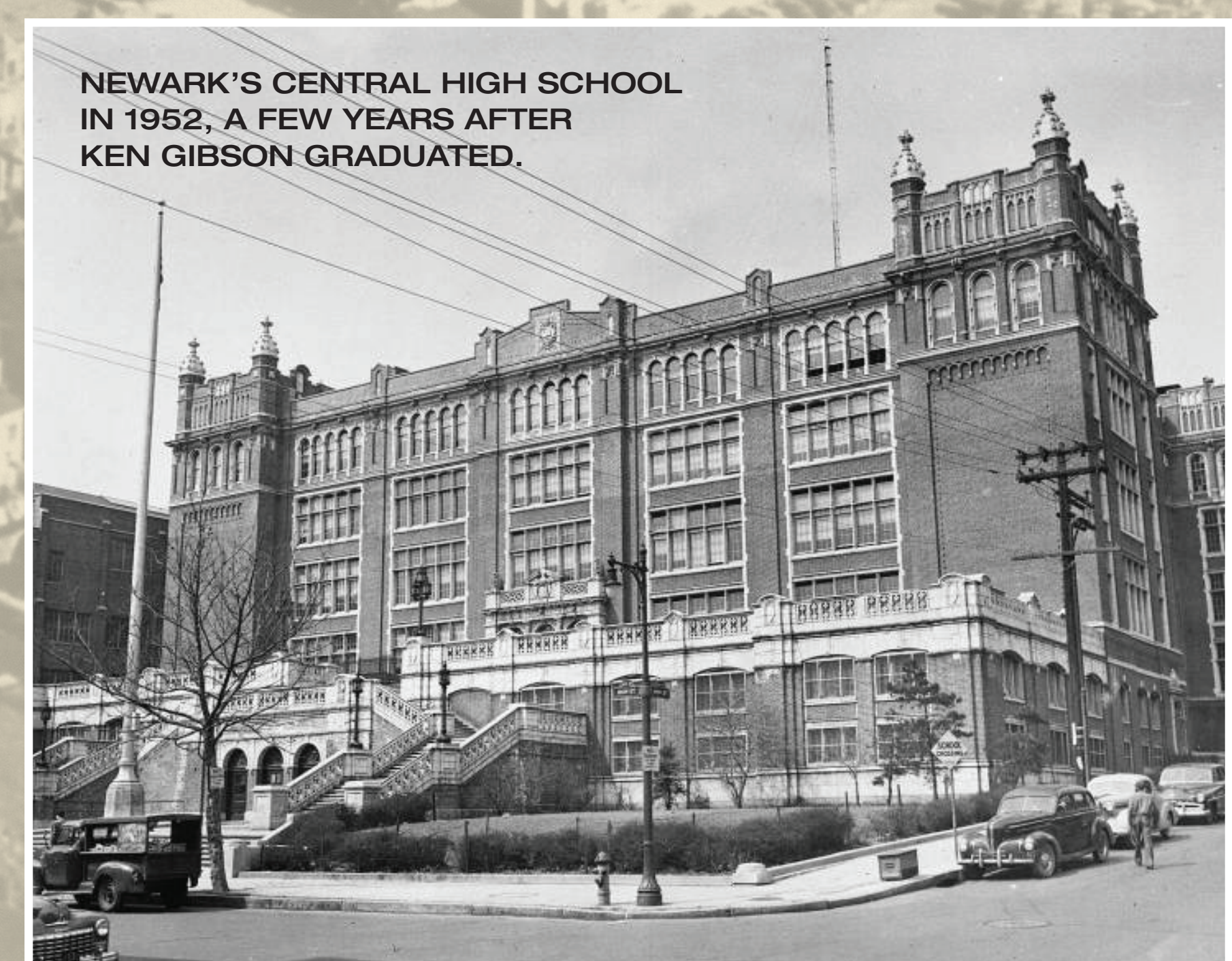


AN AFRICAN AMERICAN MAN IN THE SOUTH WAITS FOR A BUS BENEATH A SIGN SAYING "COLORED WAITING ROOM." LAWS IN THE SOUTHERN STATES ENFORCED SEPARATION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS, AND MADE THE LIVES OF BLACK PEOPLE DIFFICULT.

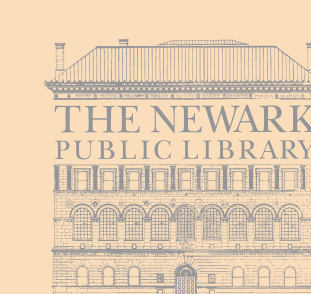


"I decided that anybody who told me that I couldn't do something, that was the reason I was going to do it."
KEN GIBSON

DOWNTOWN NEWARK AS IT APPEARED IN 1944. THE GIBSON FAMILY, LIKE MANY OTHER AFRICAN AMERICANS COMING NORTH AROUND THIS TIME, WERE ATTRACTED TO INDUSTRIAL CITIES LIKE NEWARK. THERE WERE JOBS AVAILABLE IN THE CITY'S MANY FACTORIES.



NEWARK'S CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL IN 1952, A FEW YEARS AFTER KEN GIBSON GRADUATED.



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“Wherever American cities are going, Newark will get there first.”
KEN GIBSON

Kenneth Gibson entered

politics in the 1960s, during the Civil Rights Movement, by joining the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

The Civil Rights Movement was a nationwide effort by African Americans to achieve equal treatment under the law.

“What people don’t understand is that segregation didn’t just exist in the South,” said Gibson. Even in Newark, African Americans had to sit in the balcony in movie theaters and were not welcome in the restaurant at Bamberger’s, the premier department store when Gibson was growing up.

Gibson ran for mayor in 1966. He joined the mayoral race only six weeks before the election. Mayor Hugh J. Addonizio was reelected, but Gibson got more votes than expected. Gibson would spend the next four years preparing for the 1970 mayoral campaign.

The following year, the Newark Rebellion occurred. African Americans had little political power in Newark, even though they made up the majority of the people in the city. There were also a lack of jobs and decent housing available to black people. In July of 1967, African Americans in Newark rebelled when a black taxi driver was arrested and

beaten by white police officers. Over five days, 26 people died, but the violence sent a message that Newark’s African Americans were no longer willing to be treated as second-class citizens.

In 1970, Gibson ran for office again and won. He became the first African American mayor of a Northeastern city. He assumed the job when Newark was on the verge of bankruptcy, and there were sharp divisions between the black and white people who lived here. His calm temperament and attempts to appeal to different groups helped soothe tensions. He provided jobs in city government for African American and Latino residents, two groups which had previously been excluded from them. Newark was still recovering from the Rebellion of 1967 and Gibson was credited for reviving the city’s economy.

Mayor Gibson also sought aid from state and federal authorities for housing, health, employment, and other needs. He has said he is proudest of creating health centers to improve the well-being of Newark’s citizens.



MAYOR GIBSON TAKING PART IN A GROUND BREAKING IN THE 1970S, ONE OF THE CEREMONIAL JOBS MAYORS PERFORM.



MAYOR GIBSON SPEAKING IN FRONT OF CITY HALL DURING HIS 1978 REELECTION CAMPAIGN. GIBSON SERVED FOUR TERMS IN OFFICE BETWEEN 1970 AND 1986.



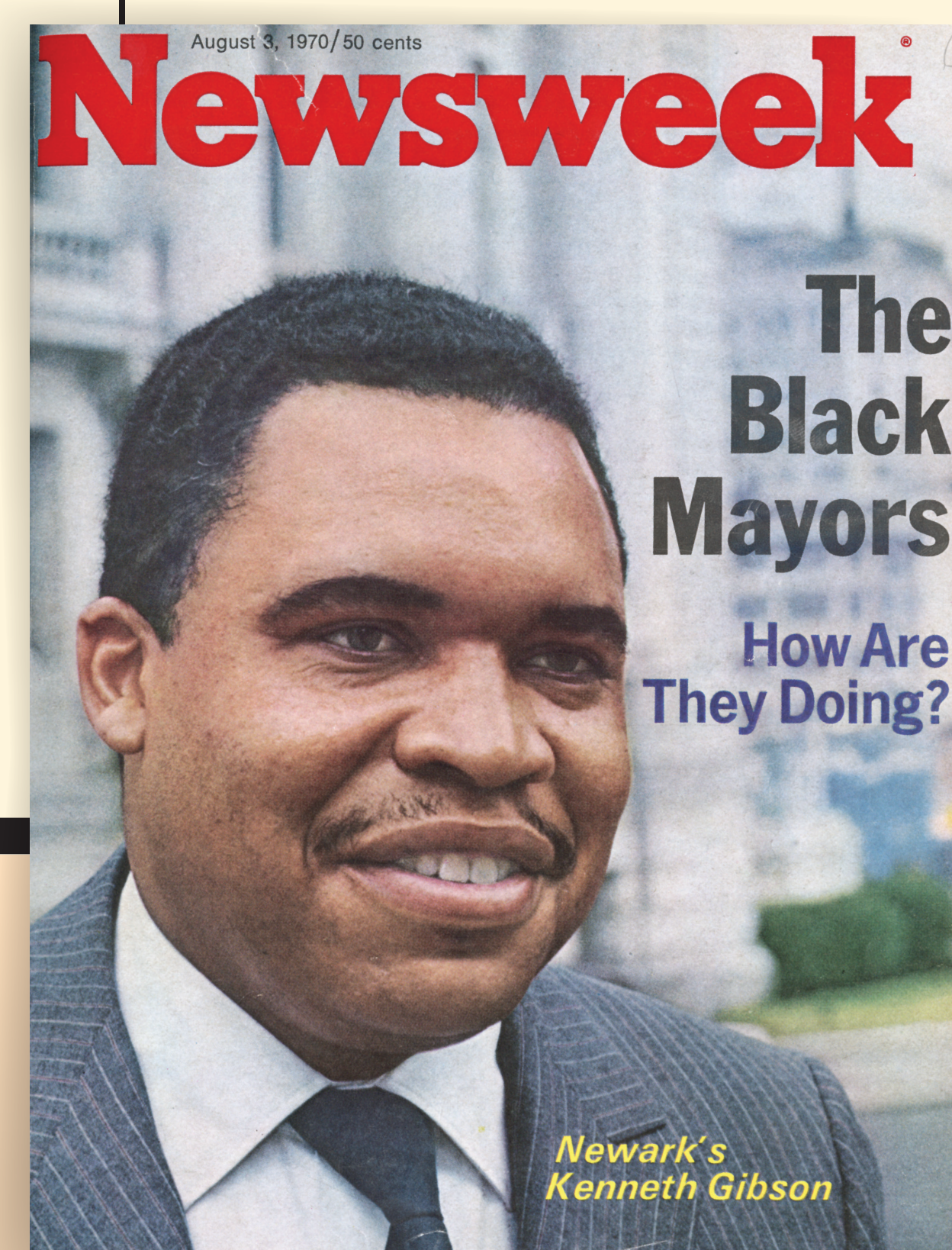
GIBSON AT THE SWEARING IN OF EDWARD KERR AS NEWARK’S FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN POLICE DIRECTOR, 1972. GIBSON APPOINTED MANY AFRICAN AMERICANS AND LATINOS TO POSITIONS NEVER BEFORE AVAILABLE TO THEM.



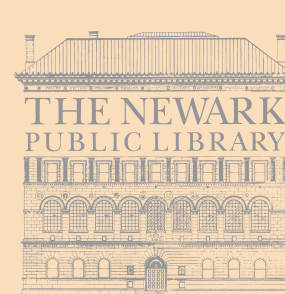
A SCENE OF NEWARK’S SKYLINE AND WATERFRONT IN THE 1970S. WHEN GIBSON WAS MAYOR, MUCH OF DOWNTOWN NEWARK WAS REBUILT. SMALL, OLDER BUILDINGS WERE REPLACED BY OFFICE TOWERS LIKE 2 GATEWAY CENTER BEING BUILT ON THE LEFT IN THIS PHOTO.



MAYOR GIBSON AWARDS A PROCLAMATION IN 1977 FOR “HEALTH DAYS” IN NEWARK TO MAXINE JONES, WHILE PHIL MASSEY LOOKS ON. GIBSON IS PROUD OF HIS ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN THE AREA OF HEALTH CARE WHEN HE WAS MAYOR.



WHEN GIBSON WAS ELECTED, HE BECAME ONE OF THE NATION’S FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN MAYORS, AND WAS FEATURED ON THE COVER OF NEWSWEEK MAGAZINE.



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DOWNTOWN NEWARK AS IT APPEARED IN THE EARLY 1980S, IN THE LATER YEARS OF MAYOR GIBSON'S TIME IN OFFICE.



Kenneth Gibson inspired

other African Americans to enter politics. Following his term in office, other Northeastern cities like Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York have elected black mayors.

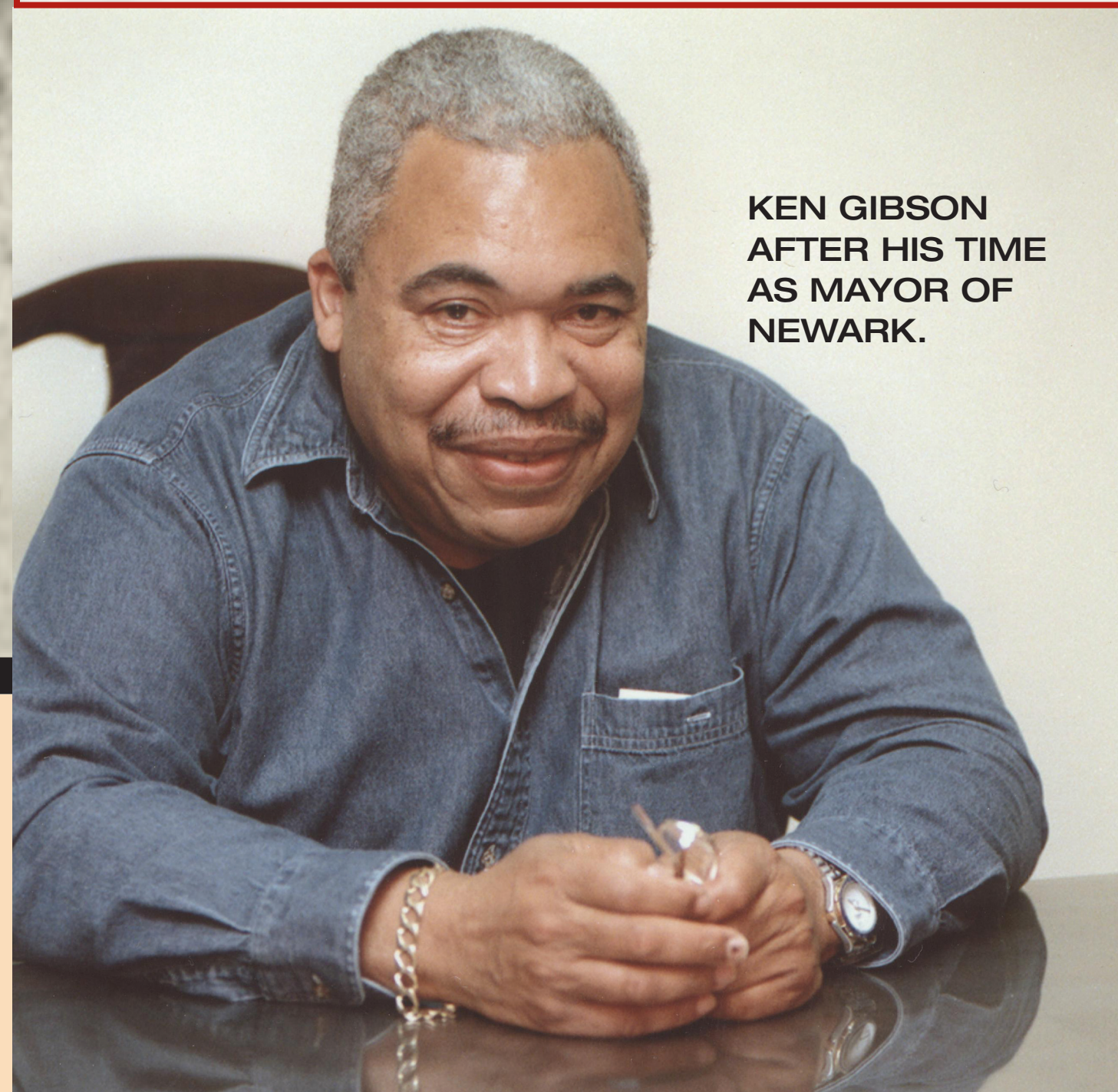
Gibson also paved the way for other African Americans pursuing important political posts in Newark. When he entered office in 1970, only three City Council members were African American. By the time he retired in 1986, the majority of the City Council was of African American descent.

After unsuccessful runs in 1981 and 1985 for the Democratic nomination for New Jersey governor, Gibson was also defeated in his bid for a fifth consecutive term as mayor by Councilman Sharpe James. Gibson left office in 1986, and ran an engineering consulting business until 1989. In 1998, Gibson said that, "the timing was right" to return to politics. He ran for Essex County Executive but lost in a close vote to James Treffinger.

Gibson's time as mayor and his life after were far from ideal, but when asked about these challenges in 2005 he observed that "when the history books are written, Ken Gibson's name will be there."

In 2016, Gibson made an appearance at The Newark Public Library, inspiring a new generation of Newarkers with stories of his life in and out of politics.

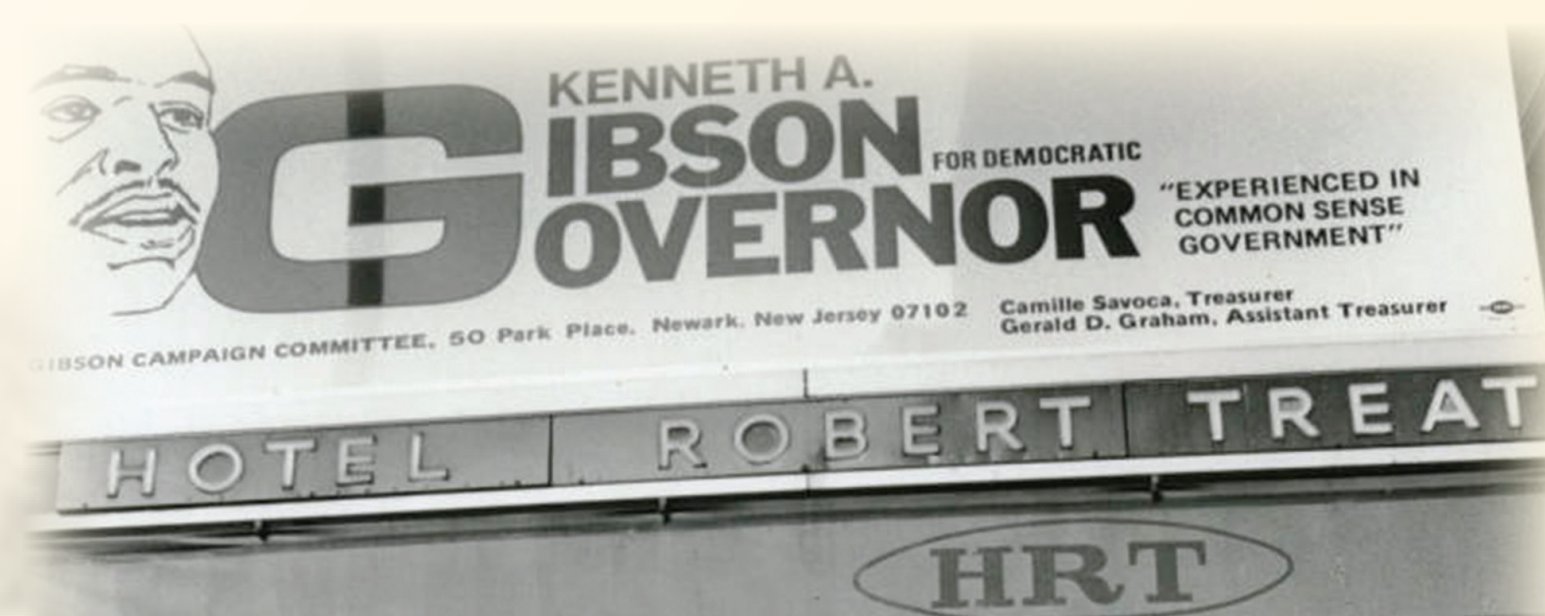
Being the Mayor of a city is an important and challenging job. Would you like to be the mayor? How would you convince people to vote for you? What would you do to help your city?



KEN GIBSON AFTER HIS TIME AS MAYOR OF NEWARK.

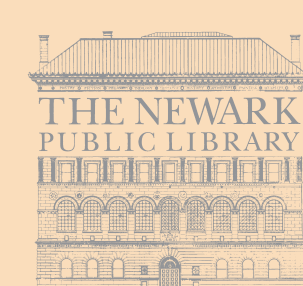


MANAGEMENT OF THE NEWARK SCHOOLS WAS A CONTENTIOUS ISSUE DURING GIBSON'S TIME AS MAYOR. IN 1982, CITY VOTERS CHOSE TO MAKE THE BOARD OF EDUCATION AN ELECTED BODY, TAKING AWAY HIS ABILITY TO APPOINT MEMBERS OF THE BOARD.



KEN GIBSON AND HIS WIFE, MURIEL, AT A CAMPAIGN STOP AT THE ROBERT TREAT HOTEL WHILE GIBSON WAS RUNNING FOR GOVERNOR IN 1981. HE LOST THE ELECTION.

GIBSON RUNNING IN WEEQUAHIC PARK. A DISTANCE RUNNER, HE ALSO RAN THE BOSTON MARATHON WHILE HE WAS MAYOR OF NEWARK.



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