

## **George Washington Bush and the Early History of African Americans in the Pacific Northwest**

By David Turnoy

By 1861, due to the profitability of the cotton industry in the South, four million African American slaves toiled and suffered in fields and homes in America's South. That was the year the Civil War began with the shelling of Fort Sumter by the Confederate Army. Slavery had existed in the North as well, but by the beginning of the war it had long since been outlawed in northern states because it was not seen to be necessary to the economy of the North. This does not mean there was no racism and prejudice in the North, as draft riots during the war directed at black soldiers in northern cities proved. What about the Pacific Northwest? Did racism and prejudice exist?

President Thomas Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the newly purchased Louisiana Territory in 1804, and of course this territory included the Pacific Northwest. French Emperor Napoleon had sold this vast tract of land the previous year for money to fight his wars in Europe. Of course, no concern was paid to the native peoples who already lived in this territory; the two governments bought and sold the land as if no one lived there. Soon after the journey of Lewis and Clark, mountain men began trapping in the Pacific Northwest. John Jacob Astor's company founded the town of Astoria in Oregon as an American outpost, while Britain's Hudson's Bay Company founded Fort Vancouver across the Columbia River from Portland in what is today the state of Washington, thus leading to competition between Britain and the US for the Oregon Territory.

At first small parties of Americans trickled in to the Oregon Territory, often helped by the British agent in charge of Fort Vancouver for the British Hudson's Bay Company, Dr. John McLoughlin. But by 1843 the trickle had become a steady stream of Americans looking to start a new life in the rich farm country of the Willamette Valley in Oregon. That same year slavery was outlawed by the group of Americans in Oregon acting as a provisional government, not because they were racially tolerant but because they wanted no black people in their territory. In 1844 a law was passed that required all black people to leave the territory within three years; it included a "Lash Law", which provided for 20 to 39 strokes with a whip every six months until the African American person should leave the territory. This black exclusion law was not repealed until 1926. In 1857, as Oregon was preparing to become a state and enter the Union, its new constitution prohibited black immigration and denied black people the right to vote, make contracts, or own property. A law adopted by the state in 1862 required all ethnic minorities to pay a \$5 annual tax. White and black people were not allowed to marry each other until 1951. The 15<sup>th</sup> amendment to the US Constitution, making it illegal to deny the right to vote on account of race and passed just after the Civil War ended, was not officially recognized by the state of Oregon until 1959.

The story of George Washington Bush provides a more personal example of the racial policies of the early American governments in the Pacific Northwest. George was born in

Pennsylvania around 1779 to an African American father and an Irish American mother. He was raised as a Quaker and educated in Philadelphia. George's parents both worked for a wealthy English merchant named Stevenson in Philadelphia, and they served Stevenson until his death. Mr. Stevenson had no other family, so he left the Bushes his substantial fortune, which would later enable George to be financially independent.

George served in the War of 1812, and later he headed west to become a trapper in the Pacific Northwest, becoming one of the first mountain men to become a trapper in the Oregon Territory. George returned from the frontier to Kansas City, Missouri, and in 1831 he married a European American woman named Isabella, who had been trained as a nurse. George settled down on a farm, had five children, and prospered, becoming very successful. At this time, Missouri was a slave state, so while George and his family did well economically, he may have faced some prejudice. He had never been a slave and remained a free man, but he did not enjoy the same legal status as a white man.

1843 marked the first major migration of Americans to the Oregon Territory, and the following year some residents of Clay County, Missouri, decided to find a new life by moving to Oregon. George and his family were asked to join the party of four other families led by Michael T. Simmons, an Irish immigrant, because of George's reputation as a mountain man. Not only would George guide the group on the Oregon Trail, he would also financially help others in his party who were not able to completely afford the trip. Why was George willing to give up a comfortable lifestyle, selling his farm and nearly all his possessions, and readying his wife and five children for this arduous journey? George confided to a fellow traveler that it was his hope to escape racial prejudice out west.

Shortly after starting on the trail, the Simmons-Bush group joined up with a larger wagon train of about 800 people heading west. Each morning these travelers rose at 4:00 AM, gathered up their grazing stock, ate breakfast, struck the camp, hitched the teams to the wagons, and were on the trail by 6 AM. They stopped at noon for an hour to rest, eat, and teach lessons to the children. They completed 13 to 25 miles every day before they stopped to pitch camp for the night. At some point the Simmons-Bush group split from the larger wagon train, and by the time this smaller group reached Fort Bridger in what would later become Wyoming, some of the group had run out of supplies and clothing. George purchased flour, sugar, and calico, unfortunately at very high prices which were charged along the trail, so that all the members of the group were fed, clothed, and supplied before they continued. After four months and 2,000 miles, thanks in large part to George's knowledge, experience, and generosity, the wagon train finally arrived in Oregon.

George was greeted by some difficult news: the white settlers of Oregon had just voted to exclude black people, and black people were therefore not allowed to own land. The white members of the Simmons-Bush group were welcomed, but George was not due to the color of his skin. However, the rest of George's group was loyal to him, especially after all he had done for them, and they decided they would not settle anywhere that George could not. They had two options: head south to California, then owned by Mexico, or go north further away from the

provisional government of the Oregon Territory. They decided to go north, and they spent their first winter at Washougal, very close to what would become Portland, Oregon, but north of the Columbia River. Americans had previously not been allowed north of the Columbia by the British. Dr. McLoughlin was sympathetic either to the plight of the women and children as winter approached or to George because the British agent had a Native American wife and understood prejudice. The Oregon exclusion law did not apply here.

Moving ahead into 1845, the Simmons-Bush party maintained itself by making and selling cedar shakes (rough wooden shingles). In the meantime, first Michael Simmons and then both Simmons and George went looking for a suitable spot for their party to settle. They found it just south of Puget Sound in an area that George remembered from his trapping days. By October 1845, the entire Simmons-Bush group had made a claim for lands that later became part of Thurston County, Washington, on a waterfall of the Deschutes River just south of Olympia. Simmons called the settlement New Market, but the name was later changed to Tumwater, which was close to the Native American name of Tumchuck, meaning “throbbing waters.” Tumwater was the first permanent American settlement in what would become the State of Washington, and its success encouraged others to follow. Historians believe that the Bush-Simmons group’s move to Tumwater was the start of the organizing of Washington as a territory, which helped lend weight to the US in its claim against Britain for this territory. The very next year Britain and the US negotiated a treaty setting the border between British and US territory at the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, making the territory above the line British Columbia and the territory below it the Oregon Territory, owned by the US. This territory would later become Oregon, Washington, and Idaho.

At Tumwater, George Washington Bush staked out 640 acres of high land for himself and his family, often called Bush Prairie, but he continued to be a generous neighbor, especially to new settlers. George’s homestead provided a good place for weary travelers to stop near the end of their trail. Many of the travelers were on their way to the two smaller settlements founded further northward: Seattle in 1851 and Tacoma in 1852. From 1846 to 1863, the year of his death, George welcomed exhausted travelers and gave them food and rest free of charge.

George and Michael Simmons built the area’s first gristmill and sawmill, and George helped finance Simmons’ logging company. When friends did not have enough to eat, George divided his crops with them. George also maintained good relations with neighboring American Indians, nursing them through epidemics of measles and smallpox along with the help of his wife, the former nurse. In 1852, when the grain supply in the Puget Sound area was low, instead of selling his crop to speculators who were trying to accumulate the whole crop so they could charge high prices and make lots of money, George refused their high price offer and instead kept his wheat to feed his neighbors and to provide them seeds for planting. George was always willing to help his neighbors.

The treaty negotiated between Britain and the US in 1846 provided for the extension of Oregon’s code of laws to include Washington. This meant that George, as a black man, was threatened with losing title to his land, even though it was his effort bringing Americans to

Tumwater that made Washington part of the US and not Britain. Luckily, Michael Simmons had become a justice of the peace, and he was able to prevent the taking of George's land for the time being. Meanwhile, George prospered on his new farm. He was an expert farmer, and he planted several trees from Missouri that he had brought with him; one of these is the butternut tree which still stands on his property today.

In 1853 Washington separated from Oregon. In 1854 a group of George's friends got a law passed in the Washington Territorial Legislature requesting that the US Congress grant the Bush family title to the land on which they had been living for nine years, and Congress complied. Yet George was still denied full citizenship, as his own legislature turned down his request for the right to vote. Even in the Pacific Northwest a generous, hard-working African American could not escape prejudice and intolerance.

### Questions for discussion

- *Why were there still slaves in 1861?*
- *Why was George willing to give up his comfortable life in Missouri to travel to Oregon?*
- *Why do you think the settlement at Tumwater was important?*
- *Did George ever become a full citizen and get the right to vote? Can you cite the reason for that?*

### Further reading and exploration

“State owes much to George W. Bush -- a black pioneer”, Cecelia Goodnow, Seattle Post Intelligencer, February 4, 2002, <http://www.seattlepi.com/lifestyle/article/State-owes-much-to-George-W-Bush-a-black-1079278.php>.

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“George Bush, Tumwater Pioneer”, Bush Prairie Farm, <http://www.bushprairiefarm.com/bush-farm-history.html>.

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