

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

By David Turnoy

“Welcome back for another trip into the past,” said Mr. B in his friendly manner. You might remember that Mr. B is really Mr. Bernstein, our intermediate level teacher, but all of us students simply call him Mr. B. We had recently completed our after-school enrichment class with him, a class which had covered American history up through the Civil War and Reconstruction, and now we were beginning a study of history in the Pacific Northwest.

“Can anyone remind us what was happening in the southern part of the United States by the early part of 1861?” asked Mr. B.

“Sure,” replied Logan. “There were four million African American slaves in the South, but when Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860, people in the South were afraid Lincoln was going to end slavery.”

“Was there still slavery in the North?” questioned Mr. B.

Angela raised her hand. “No, slavery was no longer allowed in the North. But this wasn’t so much because people in the North were more tolerant, it had more to do with the economy. The plantation system in the South where cotton had become the main crop required huge numbers of workers, but the North had a completely different economy that did not rely on slavery.”

“Very good,” complimented Mr. B. “Do we have any evidence of how white people in the North felt about black people?”

I put up my hand. “During the Civil War, which began in 1861, many people in the North were resentful because they felt they were fighting a war for the freedom of African Americans, especially when they were drafted or forced to fight in the northern army. There were draft riots in which black soldiers were killed.”

“Sad but true. Thank you, Nathan,” responded Mr. B.

“So Mr. B,” started Emma, “was there any place in the United States where there wasn’t racism during this time? How about in the Pacific Northwest?”

“That’s an interesting question,” answered Mr. B. “Let’s first review what we know about American history in this region. Melanie, can you help us out?”

“From what I remember,” Melanie began, “President Thomas Jefferson was trying to acquire New Orleans from the French Emperor Napoleon. Napoleon was busy fighting wars and needed money, so he sold not only New Orleans but all of the Louisiana Territory to the US in 1803. Of course, no one on either side asked the Native Americans living there what they thought.”

Zach added, “And the following year, Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore this area. This led to mountain men coming to the Pacific Northwest to trap animals for their furs.”

“Right you are,” replied Mr. B, “and eventually the Americans had a foothold at Astoria in Oregon while the British established Fort Vancouver in what would later be the state of Washington.”

“So were the British and the Americans arguing over this territory?” asked Angela. “After all, those two didn’t have a good track record of getting along with each other. First they fought the Revolutionary War, then they fought each other in the War of 1812.”

“Yes, Angela, the two countries competed with each other for the Oregon Territory,” responded Mr. B. “At this time the territory included what would later become Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and British Columbia.”

Zach raised his hand with an expression on his face that indicated impatience. Immediately Mr. B stated, “All right, Zach, I know you are ready to travel. Everyone, let’s get on the couch. Let me hand you each a piece of fabric so you will be able to return to the classroom.”

“Where are we going?” asked Emma.

Mr. B answered, “We are headed to Missouri in 1844. Hold onto the couch, everyone.”

[In case you haven’t read the book where our class first appeared, I need to tell you about our method of travel into the past. You see, Mr. B has this great old couch in the back of the classroom that we all sit on. And if everyone puts a piece of the couch’s fabric in his or her pocket, then we can travel on the couch to any place and time in history, and the fabric will help us make sure we return to our classroom in the present. Also, Mr. B has traveled before to all the places we go, which means that he and the historical characters already know each other. Amazingly cool!]

Our couch had placed us on a very pleasant-looking farm. We saw several different crops in the fields, and a large pasture provided grass for many cattle. A boy about our age approached our couch. “Hallo,” he greeted us.

“Hello yourself, William,” replied Mr. B. “Students, this is William Owen Bush, the oldest of five sons born to George Washington Bush.”

“George Washington Bush,” repeated Melanie. “What an impressive sounding name.”

“I suppose it is,” responded William. “My pappy’s from Philadelphia, where his parents worked for a man who died without any family, so that man left his property to my grandsire and grandma’am, who left some money to my pappy. My pappy fought in the War of 1812, then he went west to be a mountain man in the Oregon Territory. Now I hear that our whole family is going to be journeying to the Oregon Territory.”

“But it looks like you have a really nice farm here,” observed Logan.

“My pappy has done pretty well here, but he just isn’t comfortable,” explained William. “You see, my pappy is half African-American. Here in Missouri, they still have slavery. My pappy’s never been a slave, but he doesn’t get treated the same as a white man. Some people treat him badly because of his skin color.”

“So you’re going to go on the Oregon Trail?” I asked.

“That’s something in train,” answered William.

“Something in train?” asked Emma.

“That’s an expression that was used a lot during this time period,” answered Mr. B. “It means something being planned or considered. Please go ahead, William.”

“You see,” continued William, “last year, in 1843, the first big group of Americans traveled west to Oregon. Here in Clay County, there are four families who want to move to Oregon. The leader is Michael Simmons, but he knows that my pappy’s experience as a mountain man would be really helpful in getting them safely to Oregon. When he asked my pappy to be the guide, my pappy said we would all go on the trail to Oregon.”

“William, we wish you all the best on the trail,” Mr. B stated. “We are going to leave you while you get started on your trip. But we will catch up with you along the trail to see how things are going.”

“God be with ye, everyone,” William replied. “I will look for you on the trail when we go hence.”

We were back on the couch. Angela had a question. “So Mr. B, it seems like five families traveling almost 2,000 miles is a pretty small group. How did they do?”

Mr. B explained, “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 6:00 AM. They stopped at noon for an hour to rest, eat, and teach lessons to the children.”

“How far did they travel each day?” asked Emma.

“They completed 13 to 25 miles every day before they stopped to pitch camp for the night,” responded Mr. B. “At some point the Simmons-Bush group split from the larger wagon train, though, and we are going to catch up with them as they reach Fort Bridger in what would later become Wyoming.”

When our couch settled in, we saw a serious discussion going on. William came over to our group to explain. “Hallo, everyone,” greeted William.

“Hi William,” we all answered. “What’s going on?”

William explained, “Well, you see, some of the members of our group have run out of supplies and habiliments.”

“Clothing,” interjected Mr. B.

“My pappy is telling them he will buy them what is necessitated to continue, but the folks that sell supplies along the trail charge a whole lot more money than in the towns, and our needy members don’t want my pappy to have to spend his money on them.”

We heard George Washington Bush talking. “Friends, you know I was lucky enough to inherit some money from my parents, and I made a good living on my farm in Missouri. I have more than enough money for myself and my family, and I want to share it with you so all of us can go to Oregon together. Let’s have no more palaver about this. I’m sure that if you had the opportunity to help me, you would do it, wouldn’t you?”

All the other folks nodded their heads in agreement. So they agreed to have no more palaver [useless talk], and it was settled that George would purchase flour, sugar, and calico. This meant that all the members of the group were fed, clothed, and supplied before they continued.

We got back on our couch, satisfied that George Washington Bush was a very generous man. Mr. B told us, “We are going to skip ahead to the end of their journey. The Simmons-Bush settlers will just be pulling into Oregon City.”

Our couch put down in the new frontier town of Oregon City, the place where many of the travelers stopped to get information and decide on their next step. “Let’s follow Michael Simmons and George Washington Bush into that building so we can hear what happens,” advised Mr. B.

“Welcome, welcome,” the man behind the counter addressed Michael Simmons, never making eye contact with George. “Looks like you made it in pretty good shape.”

“Well, thank you,” responded Michael Simmons. “If it wasn’t for my partner George here, a true man of rectitude [honest, moral, and generous], we wouldn’t have been able to travel these 2,000 miles in just four months.”

“Partner?” asked the man, a surprised look on his face. “I was going to ask if he was your slave, as we don’t allow slavery here in Oregon.”

“That sure is welcome news,” replied George. “That’s the reason I have brought my family out here. We want to live where we will be treated equally.”

“Oh, you are mistaken about that,” continued the man behind the counter. “We don’t allow slavery because we don’t allow black people to settle here in the first place. Our new government just passed some laws about this. You will have six months to leave the Oregon Territory. If you don’t, you will receive no less than 20 and no more than 39 lashes of the whip every six months until you do leave. And you certainly will not be allowed to own any property here.”

“WHAT?!” shouted both Michael and George.

“Sorry, that’s the way it is here,” stated the man behind the counter.

We followed Michael and George out of the building, where William and the rest of the group were waiting. Michael and George explained what they had learned, and a big groan sounded from the throats of all the travelers.

“What will you do now?” asked Melanie from our group.

Michael responded. “If it wasn’t for my partner George here, I warrant we would have never made it to Oregon. Not only did his experience help us get here safely, without his generosity some of us would not have been able to afford this journey. I’m not going to settle anywhere that George isn’t allowed. What about the rest of you?”

Every member of the party agreed with Michael, they were all loyal to George. George spoke up then. “I am honored to be with such a fine group of people. It is obvious that racism isn’t a natural part of white people. So let’s decide where we are going to go next.”

“Good idea,” chimed in Michael.

“As I see it,” began George, “we have two choices. We can head south to California, which still belongs to Mexico, a country that does not allow slavery. Or we can go north away from these Oregon people.”

“But if we go north, we will still be in the Oregon Territory,” responded Michael.

“Ah, but north of the Columbia River, there is more of a chance to avoid racist treatment,” continued George. “You see, both the United States and Britain claim the Oregon Territory. The Americans are stronger in the area below the Columbia River. North of the river is more under the control of the British because of Fort Vancouver, where there is no law preventing African Americans from settling. And the man who runs the fort is Dr. John McLoughlin, who has an Indian wife, which means he understands prejudice. Winter is coming soon, and I hear he cares about preventing women and children from suffering in harsh weather. I think perchance he will give us an opportunity.”

“Then let’s give it a try,” responded Michael. “We are much closer to the Columbia River than California.”

As the travelers returned to their wagons, we returned to our couch.

“What’s going to happen next, Mr. B?” asked Logan.

“Michael and George end up leading their group across the Columbia River into what is today the state of Washington,” answered Mr. B. “They were the first Americans that John McLoughlin allowed to come into this area and stay. The group went up the Columbia a little ways until they reached what is today the town of Washougal, where they would spend the winter.”

“Will they stay in Washougal?” asked Melanie.

“No, they will head further north to be farther away from the American government,” replied Mr. B.

“In the meantime, how will they make a living?” asked Zach.

“They know how to make cedar shakes, you know, rough wooden shingles,” answered Mr. B. “People can use them for siding or roofing on houses. They will do this into 1845 until they will be able to move north. But now let’s join them in their new location.”

As we got off the couch, we noticed a beautiful waterfall. We saw William, so we walked up to him to find out where we were.

“William, where is this place?” I asked.

“We are about one hundred miles north of where we were last winter,” William replied. “My pappy and Mr. Simmons explored to find a good place for all of us to settle, and they came across this area on the Deschutes River. We are just south of Puget Sound in an area my pappy remembered from his trapping days.”

“What is the name of this place?” asked Angela.

William replied, "Mr. Simmons calls it New Market, but the native people who lived here called it Tumchuck."

"What does that name mean?" questioned Emma.

"It means throbbing waters," responded William. "My pappy is talking about calling this place Tumwater, which is a name that is much closer to the original Tumchuck."

"Has your father staked a claim to some land here?" asked Logan.

"All five families have done that," answered William. "My pappy has claimed 640 acres for us, and some folks are already referring to this as Bush Prairie."

"Wow, that's so cool," I said, "having a place named after your family."

"We're pretty happy about it," William confessed, "especially because we don't have anyone giving us any problems due to our skin color."

"William, we have to get going now, but we will catch up again with you later," announced Mr. B.

"Students, I want to tell you about what was going on between Britain and the United States during this time," explained Mr. B. "Earlier we heard how both countries were trying to establish a foothold so that they would have a better claim on the territory."

I raised my hand. "Uh-oh, I have a bad feeling about this. I am guessing that when the Simmons-Bush group started their settlement at Tumwater, it gave the United States more of a claim to the area that would later become Washington State."

"Excellent observation, Nathan," complimented Mr. B.

"But why is that a bad thing?" asked Zach. "Go USA!"

"Zach, do you remember the laws of the Oregon Territory relating to black people?" I responded.

"Oh yeah, black people were excluded from the part controlled by the US," answered Zach. "So if Washington is part of the Oregon Territory claimed by the US, that means that blacks won't be able to stay."

"Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened," added Mr. B. "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 claim against Britain for this territory. In 1846 Britain and the US negotiated a treaty setting the border between British and US territory at the 49th parallel, making the territory above that line British Columbia and the territory below it the Oregon Territory, owned by the US and later to become Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Oregon's laws now included Washington, which meant that George, as a black man, was threatened with losing title to his land, even though it was his effort in bringing Americans to Tumwater that made Washington part of the US and not Britain."

"Wow, that's not right," complained Angela. "So what happened next?"

“Luckily,” began Mr. B, “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. Let’s move forward now to 1854, and we will go visit George and his family again.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Logan. “Things sure have changed around here.”

“We’ve done really well,” replied William. “My pappy is an expert farmer, and he planted several trees from Missouri that he had brought with him. One of these is the butternut tree over there; I’ll bet it will still be standing 150 years from now.”

“Cool!” commented Melanie. “And is your dad still helping lots of people around here?”

“You bet,” stated William. “He has been especially generous to new settlers. Our homestead has provided a good place for weary travelers to stop near the end of their trail. Many of the travelers have been on their way to the two smaller settlements founded further north of here: Seattle in 1851 and Tacoma in 1852. My pappy has welcomed exhausted travelers, and he gives them belly timber and rest free of charge.”

“Belly timber?” asked Logan.

“Wait, let me guess!” shouted an excited Zack. “I’ll bet it means food.”

“Right you are, Zach,” agreed Mr. B.

“I’ll bet William has more to tell us,” guessed Emma.

“Well, my pappy and Mr. Simmons built the area’s first gristmill and sawmill, and Pappy helped finance Mr. Simmons’ logging company,” added William. “When friends did not have enough to eat, Pappy divided his crops with them. He also kept good relations with neighboring American Indians, nursing them through epidemics of measles and smallpox along with the help of my mother, who used to be a nurse.”

“Has everyone had enough belly timber?” I asked.

“Funny you should ask,” replied William. “In 1852, when the grain supply in the Puget Sound area was low, instead of selling his crop to businessmen who were trying to take over the whole crop so they could charge high prices and make lots of money, Pappy refused their high price offer and instead kept his wheat to feed his neighbors and to provide them seeds for planting. Pappy has always been willing to help his neighbors.”

“Is your dad’s claim to his land still safe?” asked Angela.

“Actually, yes. In 1853 Washington separated from Oregon. This year a group of my pappy’s friends got a law passed in the Washington Territorial Legislature requesting that the US Congress grant our family title to the land on which we’ve been living for the last nine years, and Congress went ahead and did it.”

“Wow, that’s great!” exclaimed Zach.

“Except for one thing,” William said sadly. “My pappy still can’t vote. Because he is black, he still is not a full citizen. Even our own legislature turned down our request.”

“I just don’t get it,” wondered Angela. “Even in the Pacific Northwest a generous, hard-working African American could not escape prejudice and intolerance.”

“That’s unfortunately correct, Angela,” confirmed Mr. B. “Students, we have come to the end of our journey. William, thank you so much for sharing with us. We are going to have to leave you now.”

“God be with ye, Mr. B,” said William. “You and your students come back anytime you want to learn more about us.”

“Goodbye, William,” everyone replied.

The couch was back in the classroom. We were all a little stunned by what we had witnessed; it seemed so unfair.

I raised my hand once more. “So Mr. B, when would some of these unfair laws be changed?”

“Excellent question, Nathan,” responded Mr. B. “In 1857, as Oregon was preparing to become a state, its new constitution continued to prevent black people from entering the state, and black people were denied the right to vote, to make contracts, or to own property. The law that kept black people out of Oregon was not changed until 1926. 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 15th 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.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Melanie. “What’s up with that?”

“Racism is a hard thing to get rid of,” answered Mr. B. “In Oregon in the 1920s, one fourth of the adults were members of the Ku Klux Klan.”

“Really?” I asked. “We normally think of the KKK as being in the South. That’s where the KKK started after the Civil War, causing misery to newly-freed African Americans.”

“Yes, but that’s a story for another day,” added Mr. B. “By the way, if you are interested, George lived until 1863, so he lived a long life. His son William eventually became a member of Washington’s state legislature, where he introduced a bill that established Washington State University.”

“I thought he seemed like a pretty sharp guy,” commented Emma.

“Any final thoughts about today’s lesson?” asked Mr. B.

Angela raised her hand once more. “It is so important that we try to stop intolerance and prejudice right now in our generation. We know it existed a long time ago, we know it still exists, and we have to educate other people about this so we can stop it. George Washington Bush was as fine a man as there ever was, and his color shouldn’t matter one bit. Maybe the more people who learn about him, the more they will realize that skin color doesn’t matter.”

At the end of Angela’s statement, everyone clapped their hands. “I can’t say it any better than that,” said Mr. B. “So long, everyone.”