



EMIGRANT TRAILS HALL OF FAME

OREGON-CALIFORNIA TRAILS ASSOCIATION

Biography

- Born: About 1790, Pennsylvania
- Died: 1863, Tumwater, Washington
- Married: Isabella James, 1830
- Trail pioneer, farmer

Achievements

- Organized, helped finance, and led the Bush-Simmons party of emigrants from Andrew County, Missouri to the Pacific Northwest in 1844, becoming the first group of Americans to settle north of the Columbia River.
- Founder of New Market, which later became Tumwater, Washington

Putting Down Roots

The Bush Family settles in Washington Territory

Black pioneer George Bush (c.1790-1863) helped establish the first non-Indigenous American settlement in Washington. George, his wife Isabella and others traveled the Oregon Trail to escape discrimination and prejudice in Missouri, only to arrive in the Oregon Country to find that newly adopted racist laws prohibited Black settlers. Continuing north of the Columbia River, they established a farm called Bush Prairie near today's Tumwater. The Bush family was known to be generous and welcoming, and are credited with saving the lives of fellow settlers with food from their farm during the famine of 1852. This first settlement drew other pioneers and furthered the claim of this area by the United States. In 1850, the U.S. Congress passed the Donation Land Claim Act which excluded people of African descent from making land claims. The Washington Territorial legislature successfully petitioned Congress to grant the Bush family the right to retain ownership of their farm. Bush died a landowner but still not allowed to vote. His son, William Owen Bush, served in the first Washington State legislature (1889-1890) and helped found Washington State University. From their home in Missouri, the Bush family brought root stock to cultivate at Bush Prairie; a nut from one of those century-old trees grew into a sapling that was rooted on this campus in 2010 and named the Bush Butternut Tree.

*Text of plaque
Bush Family monument
Washington State Capitol campus
Olympia, Washington*

George Bush

George Bush was born and educated in Pennsylvania. Details of his early life and work are both limited and conflicting. Although the exact date of his birth is unknown, his gravestone indicates that he died on April 5, 1863 at the age of 74. Records indicating that he served under Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812 are the subject of dispute among historians.

Bush, the son of a mixed-race couple, settled in Missouri in the late 1820s. Although it was a slave state, he lived freely and achieved success as a farmer. Nevertheless, prejudice and stories of the kidnapping and enslavement of free Blacks were of significant concern to him and led to his interest in leaving.

Bush and Michael Simmons became the leaders of a party of emigrants that left Missouri in May 1844. During their journey the provisional government of the Oregon Territory enacted discriminatory laws barring settlement by African Americans. Upon arrival Bush was thus faced with a dilemma and appealed to Dr. John McLoughlin, Chief Factor and Superintendent of the Columbia District of the Hudson's Bay Company for help.

McLoughlin waived his company's policy forbidding Americans to settle north of the Columbia River and gave the Bush family and others in the party permission to be the first Americans to settle near the company's Fort Nisqually on Puget Sound.

In 1845 they settled a few miles south of New Market on a prairie that later became known as Bush Prairie. Bush financed the construction of a grist mill. With a mill to process their grain, emigrants found another reason besides the diminished availability of arable land south of the Columbia River to migrate north.

Bush expanded his farm and introduced modern equipment into his operation. It became one of the leading farming operations in the area. Bush was widely respected for his generosity and assistance to immigrants. Ezra Meeker commended Bush for his generosity, noting instances where he gave crops to immigrants in need rather than sell them to speculators.

One of the first acts of the Washington Territorial Legislature in 1854 was a petition to the United States Congress for a waiver of a provision of the Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 that prevented his acquisition of title to the land he and his family had claimed and farmed. "An Act for the Relief of George Bush, of Thurston County, Washington Territory" was passed by Congress in 1855, confirming his land claim.