



THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

George Washington Bush and the Human Spirit of Westward

The story of the westward expansion of the United States can also be told as a story of the human spirit. The people who moved west dreamed of freedom, made sacrifices, and pursued opportunities for their own happiness. The West was often a harsh and unforgiving place, where people found that they had to depend upon one another to survive. It was this spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance that makes certain historical figures stand out. George Washington Bush was one of these people.

Born in Philadelphia between 1779 and 1790, raised and educated by Quakers, George Washington Bush did not seem to be an extraordinary man, at least not in terms of what he later accomplished. He learned to read and write, and saw military service under Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. After the war, Bush was among the first mountainmen to trap in the Oregon Territory. The Bush family history states that about 1820 or 1821 he made his first trip to the Pacific by horseback with one of the five principal fur companies in St. Louis. Subsequently, he worked as a free-lance trapper, then with the Hudson's Bay Company until 1829.

Bush returned from the frontier by 1830. An only child, he inherited enough from his parents' estate to be financially independent. He married a young woman named Isabella James, the daughter of a Baptist minister of German descent, on July 4, 1831 in Clay County, north of Kansas City, Missouri. During the next eleven years, their Missouri farm prospered. Five sons were born, William Owen

in 1832, Joseph Tolbert in 1834, Rial Bailey in 1837, Henry Sanford in 1841, and January Jackson on January 8, 1843. In the meantime, George Washington Bush served with the Missouri militia during the 1832 Blackhawk War and was wounded.

During 1843, roughly 1,000 people with 120 wagons and 1,500 oxen and cattle went west during the first major migration along the Oregon Trail. Because of his reputation as a mountainman, the following year George Washington Bush was asked by Michael T. Simmons, an Irish immigrant, to help lead a group of 32 people (five families) to Oregon. Bush decided to serve not only as a guide, but also to become an emigrant himself. He gave up a comfortable lifestyle, selling his farm and nearly all his possessions, and readied his wife and five children for the journey. Bush built a double or false floor in his covered wagon, under which he carried at least \$2,000 in silver coins. Others in the wagon train who were not able to fully finance their journey were helped by George Washington Bush.

At Cables Landing, approximately nine miles up the Missouri River from present-day St. Joseph, Missouri, the Simmons-Bush group joined a larger wagon train of nearly 800 people led by General Cornelius Gilliam. On May 10, 1844 they began their journey west. They walked alongside wagons built of seasoned hardwood, most hardly large enough to carry a family's possessions and the necessary supplies to start a new life in an

unknown land.

Each day began at 4 a.m. The grazing stock was brought in, breakfast was served, camp struck, the teams hitched and the wagons were on trail by 6 a.m. At noon, they stopped for an hour or so to rest the stock, have dinner, and teach lessons to the children. On the road again by 1 p.m., they made camp before sundown. Each day they traveled between 13 and 25 miles. Day after day, in the sun or rain, they choked on dust or pulled every step from boot-deep mud. They hauled wagons down and up steep ravines, and forded swollen streams.

It is not clear at what juncture the Simmons-Bush group split from the larger Gilliam train. However, by the time they reached Fort Bridger (in the modern state of Wyoming), some of the group had run out of supplies and clothing. George Washington Bush purchased flour at the wildly inflated price of \$60 a barrel, sugar at \$1 a pound, and calico at \$1 a yard so that all the members of the group were fed, clothed, and supplied before they continued.

Thanks to the knowledge and experience of George Washington Bush, after more than four months and 2,000 miles the wagon train finally arrived in Oregon. At that time the Oregon Territory was not yet part of the United States. A Joint Occupancy Agreement had been signed by Great Britain and the United States in 1827, but despite this treaty U.S. settlers organized an Oregon Provisional Government and passed their first code of laws in 1843.

All the new emigrants of the Simmons-Bush party were welcomed to the new territory, all except George Washington Bush. Neither wealth nor friends could protect Bush from the Provisional Government's law prohibiting him from settling in Oregon. Bush was excluded for just one reason: the color of his skin. His father, Matthew Bush, had been an African American born in India, the life-long servant of an English merchant named Stevenson. Stevenson later settled in Philadelphia, where he owned several ships. Matthew Bush married an Irish maid of Stevenson's, and together they cared for Stevenson in his declining

years. Since Stevenson had no children, he left a substantial fortune to Matthew Bush.

The story of George Washington Bush might have ended with the rebuke he received by the laws of the Oregon Territory, but Bush had friends who exemplified the spirit of the West. Thankful for the gifts and assistance rendered by Bush during their western trek, the entire Simmons group decided not to settle anywhere Bush could not. As a result, the Simmons-Bush group spent their first winter at Washougal on the north bank of the Columbia River, about twenty miles east of present-day Portland, Oregon. It was an area the British Hudson's Bay Company had heretofore refused to allow American overlanders to settle, so the Oregon government's code was not enforced there. Some said that Dr. McLoughlin, the British agent at Fort Vancouver, permitted this incursion because he was sympathetic to the plight of the party's women and children during that winter. Others said it was because he was sympathetic to Bush's problem, because McLoughlin and his Native American wife understood prejudice.

The small community formed by the Simmons-Bush party maintained itself by making and selling cedar shakes (rough wooden shingles). In July 1845, Simmons made an excursion north from Washougal to find a suitable permanent location for a town. On a second expedition, George Washington Bush accompanied Simmons to an area south of Puget Sound that he 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 became the State of Washington, and its success encouraged others to follow.

George Washington Bush staked out 640 acres of high land. He and Michael Simmons built the area's first gristmill and sawmill, and Bush

helped finance Simmons' logging company. Bush's compassion was substantial. He divided his crops with needy friends and maintained good relations with neighboring American Indians. Along with Mrs. Bush, he nursed Indian people through epidemics of measles and smallpox. In 1852 the grain supply was low on Puget Sound, and speculators attempted to accumulate the entire wheat crop. They offered Bush a high price for his wheat, but Bush told them that he would keep his grain, "so my neighbors will have enough to live on and for seeding their fields in the spring. They have no money to pay your fancy prices, and I don't intend to see them want for anything I can provide them." Old-timers felt that for the Bush family, the way was never too long or the night too stormy to come to the assistance of a neighbor. Bush embodied the human spirit of the American West.

An 1846 treaty set the northern boundary of the Oregon Territory, and the Oregon Provisional Government's code was extended to the 49th parallel (the modern northern boundary of the State of Washington). Although it was the settlement of Tumwater which solidified the American claim to what is now the State of Washington, George Washington Bush's land claim was put in jeopardy by the laws of Oregon. Fortunately, Michael Simmons had been appointed a Justice of the Peace and was able to temporarily prevent the loss of Bush's claim. In 1853, Washington Territory was separated from Oregon, and in 1854 a group of Bush's friends succeeded in passing a memorial through the Washington Territorial Legislature requesting that the United States Congress grant the Bush family title to the land on which they had been living for nine years. On January 30, 1855, the U.S. Congress passed this special act.

George Washington Bush died on April 5, 1863 at the age of 84 years, the only veteran of the War of 1812 buried in Thurston County. Isabella James Bush died September 12, 1866. Their sons carried on their tradition of farming skills and public service. One, William Owen, served twice in the Washington legislature.

The Washington state historian, Ezra Meeker,

wrote that George Washington Bush "was a true American and yet without a country; he owed allegiance to the flag and yet the flag would not own him; he was firmly held to obey the law and yet the law would not protect him, and his oath would not be taken in a court of law." The West, by its very nature, promoted the interaction and interdependence of many different ethnic and social groups. The human spirit of cooperation as well as the ugliness of intolerance can be found in stories like that of George Washington Bush, an important pioneer and an extraordinary American whose story promotes pride in our heritage and exemplifies the spirit of the West.