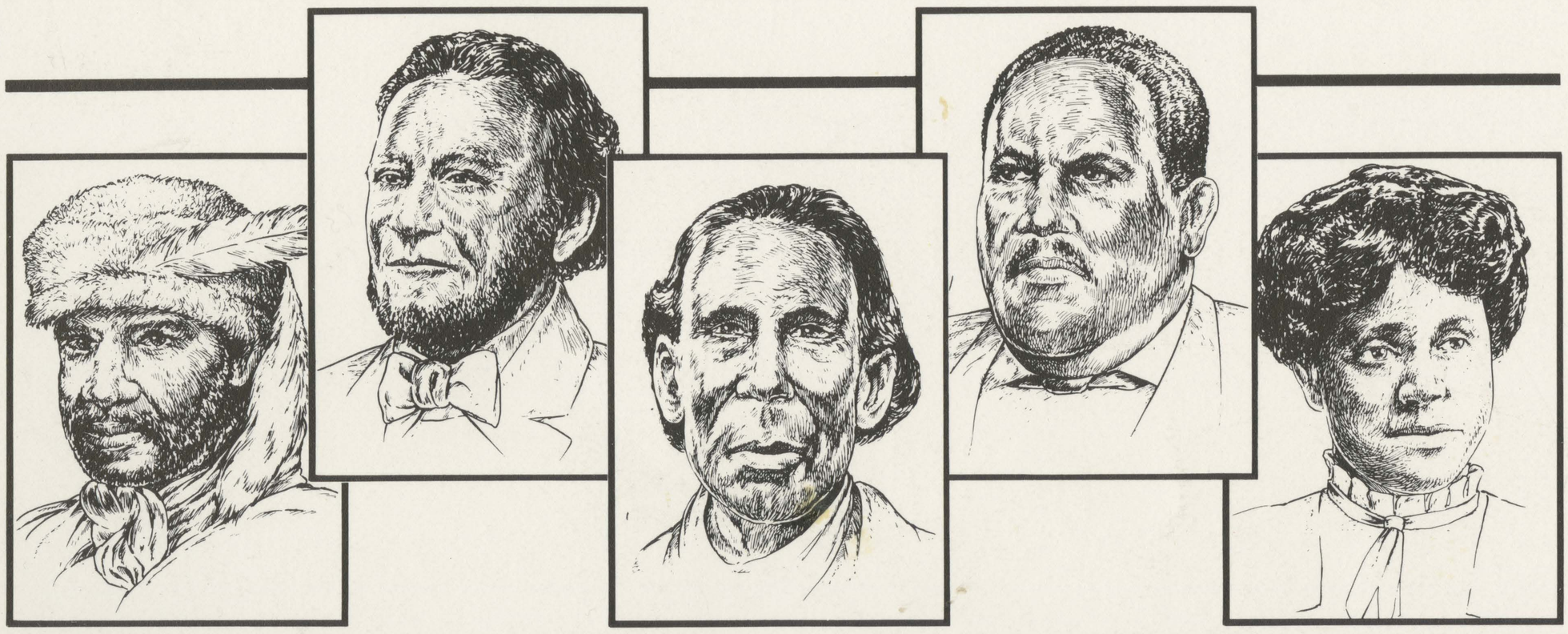


NORTHWEST BLACK PIONEERS

A CENTENNIAL TRIBUTE

BLACK HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Up until 1788, the Pacific Northwest region was occupied mainly by Native Americans and a few British and French fur traders. A trickle of explorers started to arrive in the area in the early 1800s, followed closely by settlers interested in farming the fertile land north and south of the Columbia River. By the late 1800s, there were several thriving towns, including Olympia, Centralia, Tacoma and Seattle.

The black population grew along with the development of the state of Washington. Black explorers gave way to black settlers, and finally black urban pioneers made their mark on the development of many cities and towns in Washington.

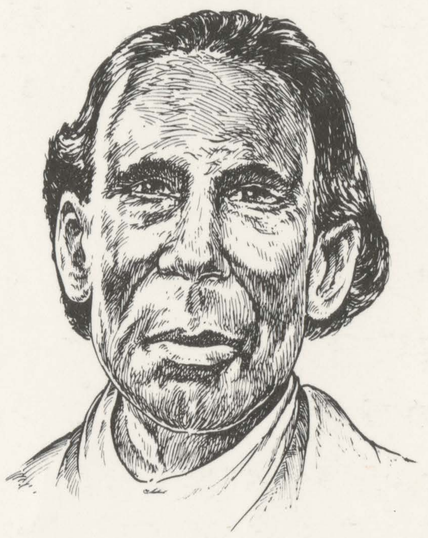
York of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

In 1804, the Lewis and Clark Expedition left Missouri with a group of about thirty men, including Clark's black servant, the slave York. In the diaries of the expedition, Clark makes mention of York's abilities as a hunter and his resourcefulness on the trail. The expedition was considered a tremendous success, and York was given his freedom in 1806.

George Bush, Early Settler

Among the steady stream of immigrants to the Columbia River area were a number of black men and their families, including George Bush. In 1844, at the age of fifty, Bush, his wife and five children left Missouri with 800 others and headed for the Pacific Northwest. The group spent seven months on the Oregon Trail before reaching the Dalles on the Columbia River. But the freedom Bush sought eluded him in Oregon. The provisional government there had recently passed anti-black laws that were as repressive as those he had left behind in Missouri. Bush crossed the Columbia River into what would become Washington state and formed the first American community there.

George Washington, Founder of Centralia



Another black pioneer to brave the trials of the Oregon Trail was George Washington. Born a slave in Virginia in 1817, Washington was adopted by a white couple, the Cochrans. Washington and the Cochrans headed for the West Coast in 1850. He eventually moved north to an area called Centerville, which later became Centralia. Washington was particularly interested in developing the town of Centralia. It was on the railroad line, which meant the town would flourish and grow. To that end, Washington donated land for the construction of several churches. In 1891, as a symbol of his public spirit, he platted and designated a block of land as a public square.

William Grose, Urban Pioneer

Blacks also moved into the growing towns along the Puget Sound. William Grose moved to Seattle in 1860. There he worked at the trade he knew best—cooking. In 1876, he opened his own business, a combination inn and restaurant named "Our House." In 1883, he expanded his business by building a three-story hotel on Henry Yesler's wharf. "Big Bill the Cook," as he was nicknamed, was a prominent figure in the black middle class and was renowned for his generosity. He died a very wealthy and popular man—it is said that sixteen carriages were not enough to carry all the mourners at his funeral.

Susie Cayton, Woman of Accomplishments

Susie Cayton came from an illustrious background—she was the daughter of one of the few black senators in the United States. Susie Cayton herself was one of the few women of the day to attend college, where she studied journalism. She published many articles and stories and developed a reputation as a writer. After her marriage to Horace Cayton and subsequent move to Seattle, she became a prominent member of the black middle class in that city. In 1900 she became the associate publisher of *The Republican*, the black newspaper published by her husband. It was unique enough for a woman to go to college and have a career; it was doubly unique for a *black* woman to do so.

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