

Black entrepreneurs in the earliest days of the Pacific Northwest are related, in terms of jobs to those men whose single job was usually a many-faceted thing. Take fur-trading, for example. Here, one finds the name of Jean Baptiste Point Sable, also known as de Sable. He was a free mulatto and is associated with fur-trading in what is now the Middle West - the big city of Chicago. In 1794 he was there conducting a prosperous fur-trading business out of his own trading house; his customers were usually Frenchmen and Native Americans.

Trading not only meant dealing in animal furs, but where the Native American was involved, many items other than furs became items in commerce goods which were valuable to various family members. Mirrors, combs, etc., were extremely desirable. De Sable had limited competition until after the Louisiana Purchase was completed in 1803. Then big American companies headquartered in St. Louis entered the business. It was difficult for any little man to survive against the Big Ones. Usually, the single operator signed on to work for the Big Companies. According to Savage, one of the earliest Blacks to become so employed was Edward Rose.

But, if one were employed how would one claim to have qualified for an entrepreneur? The nature of business was such that one could use one's talents in variety of activities. Rose used his talents to interpret, sell, trade, guide. All between 1807 and 1832.

Named to the Lewis and Clark Expedition, was Clark's personal servant, York, but he was more than a slave-servant. He functioned as any other member of the Expedition party. And though he and the entire trip was not designed as a money-maker, initially, its long-range-goal was to do just that once Americans gained possession of the Pacific Northwest from the British. While the British and Americans were jockeying for possession of it, a Black man by the name of George Washington, reached Fort Vancouver in 1829, later, traveling to Canada, where he was hired by the Hudson's Bay Company as a middle man. In fur-trading terms this meant one who buys and sells. Washington bought his furs from the Company, then sold same, making him one of a type of entrepreneurs of that period of time in that line of business. According to records in the Provincial Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, Washington carried on this dual-business activity for over a year.

In 1844, another mulatto, named George W. Bush, came to the Pacific Northwest, or Oregon Country. This time he came to stay and became a farmer-homesteader in Thurston County. After his death, he was succeeded in the family farming business by his oldest son, William Owen. This brought the types of entrepreneurs from trading to agriculture, with several spinoffs in between, as was the case with Edward Rose and de Sable.

Bush reached here two years before the Americans and British agreed upon possession of Oregon Country in 1846. Americans by the wagon loads arrived in Oregon and soon to-be Washington Territory, where Bush had come to take up permanent residence. He was also joined by another mulatto from Missouri: George Washington. (No relation to that other Washington who hired on as a middle man).

The George Washington who arrived in the Pacific Northwest in 1850, ultimately homesteaded in Lewis County, next door to Thurston County and became very wealthy from a variety of economic activities-entrepreneur deals. First he farmed; then he bought more land; then he sold more land. Then he founded a city that became known as Centralia; so engaged in real estate dealings, he gave up farming altogether. Unlike Bush, he was not fortunate enough to have sons, one of whom could carry on in his name and success after his death. Yet this Black man has left quite a legacy in the entrepreneur history of the state of Washington.

Opportunities for Blacks were different then than now, particularly for the males who attempted to succeed in business. The relatively small population must have played quite a role in determining success. Without a good character reference, one need not entertain success, either.

Mr. Alex and Mrs. Rebecca Howard proved these points too. They were owners of a hotel and a restaurant in the city of Olympia in the 1870's. They were so successful, their Pacific House was one of the largest such businesses in Olympia and the entire county of Thurston.

Though successful themselves, the Howards must not have been able to set the business up so their adopted son could continue when they passed on. Perhaps this is unfair to Frank Howard, for so far research has not established what happened to their business after the 1880's, nor what happened to him either. I am still seeking answers to both questions. And it is hoped the result will not be too unkind to Mr. and Mrs. Howard.