
The Settlers

In the early to middle 1800's, the United States did not offer much opportunity for Black people. Slavery was still in existence in the South, and Blacks were not considered citizens, even if they were born free. The basic rights to own land, travel freely and pursue a chosen profession were not widely available to Blacks. In fact, Missouri had a law on the books forbidding Blacks to settle in the state for more than six months.

The West, with its wide open spaces and lack of structured government, held great appeal for many pioneers. From the early 1800's, caravans of settlers made the long, perilous journey across the country, seeking land and opportunity. Many followed the Oregon Trail, ending up at the Columbia River.

Among the steady stream of emigrants to the area were a number of Black men and their families, including George Bush. Born in Pennsylvania as a free man, Bush moved to Missouri and married Isabell, a white woman. In 1844, at the age of fifty, Bush, his wife and five children left Missouri with 800 others and headed for the Northwest.

Bush was considered one of the wealthiest members of the expedition and used his wealth to help several other families emigrate. The group spent seven months on the Oregon Trail before reaching their destination, a settlement on the south side of the Columbia River called the Dalles.

But the freedom Bush was seeking eluded him in Oregon. The Provisional Government had recently passed anti-Black laws that were as repressive as those he had left behind in Missouri. Gravely disappointed by what he found, Bush, his family and several others crossed the Columbia River into what would become the state of Washington and formed the first American community there. He settled in what was "Bush Prairie," which later became Thurston County. Bush was among many settlers trying to take advantage of the Homestead Act. The act stated that if an American citizen took possession of unsettled land and showed improvements on that land within four years, the land would legally belong to that



George Bush, Early Settler



The home of George Bush (backside).

person—without putting out a cent of cash to purchase it. Because Blacks were not American citizens, land ownership was still a dream for them. Bush's friend, a white man named Michael T. Simmons, helped Bush obtain ownership of his homestead. Bush had helped Simmons and his family emigrate to Washington several years earlier. One of the first acts of the Provisional Government in Olympia was to approve George Bush's petition to own his land.