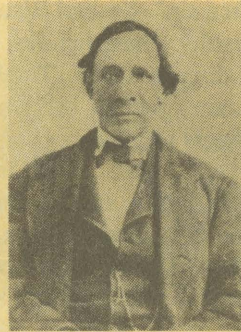


*George Washington,
founder of Centralia*



*Portrait of
George Washington*



*George Washington and his first wife,
Mary Jane Cooness*

Born a slave in Virginia in 1817, another Black pioneer to brave trials of the Oregon Trail was George Washington. Legend has it that Washington's mother was an English lady and his father a slave. Shortly after his birth, Washington was adopted by a white couple, James and Anna Cochran.

Washington did as well as a Black man could in Missouri. He was even made a legal citizen of Missouri in 1843 by an act of the legislature. But Missouri citizenship did not help him prevail in the federal court system. Washington had a business in Missouri, where he gave people goods on credit. One of his customers, a white man, refused to pay his debt. Washington took him to court, where he found that he was unable to prosecute because he was not considered an American citizen. The injustice of this case was the final event that turned Washington's thoughts westward—to land where he thought life would be filled with more opportunity.

Washington and the Cochrans headed for the West Coast in 1850, following the same route as George Bush and many other pioneers. Washington arrived in Oregon and remained there for nearly two years. He probably experienced the same disillusionment that George Bush suffered from the repressive anti-Black laws. He decided to move north to an area called Centerville, which later became Centralia. A few years later, in 1853, the geographic area that would become Washington state had become a

separate territory from Oregon, paving the way for statehood in 1889.

Washington, like Bush before him, found that he couldn't own land because he wasn't a citizen. In 1852, the Cochran's deeded Washington some land, for which he paid them \$2,000. This was the beginning of his considerable landholdings. A few years later, the Cochrans deeded him an additional 640 acres, for which he paid \$3,200. He was now a large landowner.

George Washington was particularly interested in developing the town of Centralia. The town was on the railroad line, and this advantage gave him faith that it would flourish. To that end, he donated land for the construction of several churches. In 1891, as a symbol of his public spirit, Washington platted and designated a block of land as a public square.

Washington's first wife, Mary Jane Cooness, was a Jewish Black woman from Portland. They were married in 1869 and lived happily for the next 20 years until her death. He married again some years later, and his only child was born when Washington was 73. His second wife, who was white, left him and their young son two years later. When Washington died at the age of 88 in 1905, his property was worth \$150,000. He was buried in the cemetery he had donated to the city, and all of his property was left to his second wife, whom he had never divorced.