



George Bush of Tumwater: Founder of the First American Colony on Puget Sound

Columbia Magazine, Winter 1994-95: Vol. 8, No. 4

By Darrell Millner

AFTER THE 1844 Oregon Trail crossing and wintering along the Columbia River, five families and two bachelors - 31 Americans in all - settled in the Tumwater area on November 6, 1845. One of these settlers was George Washington Bush, whose family included his wife Isabella and five sons.

Bush developed a farm that was considered by his contemporaries to be one of the most valuable and productive in early Washington. His personal qualities of humanity, generosity, hospitality, warmth and charity led him to aid many later arrivals in ways that made their successful settlement possible, winning him tremendous respect and admiration from other pioneers. Bush's role in the decision to establish a settlement north of the Columbia and the circumstances surrounding that decision had significant national and international, political and diplomatic consequences.

It is important to note that George Bush was a black man, a free mulatto, on the western frontier. His story provides a dramatic counterpoint to the all-Caucasian stereotypes of western development and an opportunity for us more clearly to understand the truly complex multiracial reality of American expansion in the 19th century.

Bush's early years are, for the modern student, shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. For example, it is not known exactly when or where he was born. Oral family history provided by 20th-century descendants gives his year of birth as 1779. A prominent pioneer contemporary, Francis Henry, listed it as 1778, but the federal census in 1850, giving his age at that time as 56 and his birthplace as Virginia, makes his birth year 1794. Adding to the confusion, the 1860 federal census gives his birthplace as Pennsylvania and lists his age as 70, which would make his birth year 1790.

Many historians consider this last date most reliable. To accept the family version of 1779 would make Bush 65 years old when he started the journey across the country in 1844. That is, according to some, an advanced and unlikely time of life to accomplish such a difficult task and endure the hard-ships that the next two decades forced on him. However, the earlier family date of 1779 fits well and consistently with other remarkable improbabilities we know to be true about his life, and thus provides a fitting beginning to his story.

What else do we know of the early Bush years? It is believed that he spent his childhood in Pennsylvania, raised and educated under Quaker influence. Though Bush was a literate man, none of his writings have survived. He is believed to have relocated to Tennessee as a young man and then again to Illinois when he was about 20. There he entered the cattle business, an occupation that is believed to have financed his Oregon trip. Around 1820 he is supposed to have relocated again to Missouri, the place from which he

departed for Oregon in 1844. There are few facts documented with certainty that can be fitted between the reference points on this sparse outline.

He is supposed to have gone to the Far West as a young man. His work in the fur trade industry is said to have taken him as far west and north as Vancouver Island, and as far south as the Santa Fe Trail, where he is supposed to have known Kit Carson. Some descendants claim he worked for a time for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). There is no specific documentation for any of this.

Family sources also state that George Bush was wounded while fighting in the Black Hawk Indian War and that he participated in the Battle of New Orleans under Andrew Jackson in 1815. We do know that on July 4, 1832, he married Isabella James, a white native of Tennessee, in Clay County, Missouri. This union eventually produced nine sons, five of whom made the trip across the Oregon Trail with him in 1844. His marriage was the source of much of his success, stability and happiness for the next 30 years.

Was George Bush black? It was a key question during an era in which one's race could be the single most important factor in determining one's fate. The answer to this seemingly simple question becomes complex and even controversial. In American culture race has never been a simple issue of biology, legal and cultural factors being at least as important. Little is known about the lives of Bush's mother and father. To sort out Bush's racial status it is necessary to look at evidence supporting both sides of the issue.

There is some evidence that he may not have been black. It is well-established that his mother was an Irish maid in the household of a merchant named Stevenson in Philadelphia during the late 18th century. Racially speaking, it is generally concluded that his father Matthew Bush was black, having been born in India and brought to the United States by Stevenson sometime before 1776. There he married the Irish maid, and George was their only offspring.

SOME SCHOLARS suggest that Matthew Bush could have been from the West Indies rather than East Indies, given the large African-American population in the Caribbean, but this is only speculation. It was suggested by a great-granddaughter, Mrs. Belle Twohy, that having the dark skin of those from India, Matthew Bush was mistakenly categorized as a Negro by Americans of his generation. This is, in theory, quite possible.

A testament to the imprecision of racial identification in George's era is the fact that the 1830 federal census in Clay County, Missouri, where he was a resident, George Bush is listed as a free white person. There is, however, stronger evidence that Bush was black or, specifically, that he was mulatto. Perhaps the most powerful evidence of his racial designation as black is found in how his contemporaries considered and described him. The scant documentary and narrative evidence available is consistent in describing Bush as a mulatto. This includes a statement by John Minto, a fellow member of the 1844 migration who knew Bush well. Minto described a conversation he had on the trail with Bush concerning the treatment of people of color in Oregon:

"Bush was a mulatto, but had means, and also a white woman for a wife and a family of five children. Not many men of color left a slave state so well-to-do and so generally respected." A more indirect reference is made by Ezra Meeker, a trail pioneer who met Bush at Tumwater in 1853. Meeker observed: "George Bush doubtless left Missouri because of the virulent prejudices against his race in the community where he lived."

Further evidence that Bush was considered black and treated as such by his contemporaries involves the Donation Land Act that was passed for the Oregon Territory in 1850. It stipulated that only whites (males and married females) and "American half-breed Indians" were eligible to receive free land in Oregon.

Bush was so well liked and respected by his white fellow settlers that 55 of them asked the new Washington territorial legislature on March 1, 1854, to petition the United States Congress to exempt Bush from these provisions to the act:

"The Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Washington...would most respectfully represent unto your honorable body, that George Bush, a free mulatto, with his wife and children, emigrated to, and settled in, now Washington Territory, Thurston County, in the year 1845...."

On February 10, 1855, the United States Congress passed a special act granting Bush his land claim. Bush neither denied nor challenged his description as a mulatto in these proceedings. It is clear that whatever the biological origins of George Bush might have been, legally his contemporaries considered him a black man, which meant that, in addition to the normal obstacles of frontier life, he would have to surmount the additional difficulties presented by the racial conventions of the 19th century.

When searching for the reason why a man like Bush, evidently with some economic and material comfort, a commodious family life and perhaps advanced age, would choose to tackle the Oregon Trail, his race may provide some insight. A descendant, Emma Belle Bush, told University of Washington graduate student Paul Thomas in a 1960s interview: "I am not sure why George came west in 1844. As far as I know, he was having a hard time in Missouri. People would not sell him anything because they said he was a Negro. That is probably one reason why he wanted to leave there," she said, adding that George was "the roving type of person."

TAKEN TOGETHER, THESE circumstances probably provided his main motivations. The trail outfit Bush assembled included six Conestoga wagons equipped with enough provisions for a year (according to John Minto) he also helped provision two other families for the trip - the Kindreds and the Joneses.

The train that these families joined was organized around the first of May 1844, about 30 miles west of St. Joseph, Missouri. It was commanded by Colonel Cornelius Gilliam and divided into four "companies." The Bush group was in the company of Captain R. W. Morrison. The trip across the Oregon Trail itself was difficult, as it was for everyone, but in the context of that experience it was relatively uneventful. In December 1844 the group arrived at The Dalles. There they split up, with most members going on to Washougal, near Fort Vancouver, where they stayed through the summer of 1845. George Bush and the others wintered their livestock near The Dalles and brought them down to Washougal the following spring.

Prior to 1845 the prime location of American influence and settlement in the Oregon Country was the Willamette Valley, south of the Columbia River, with Oregon City as the focal point. The decision by Bush and the other members of his party to settle at Tumwater, north of the Columbia, was a significant departure from the usual pattern of American settlement.

Some historians suggest that this decision played a large part in the eventual British-American compromise that created the modern Canadian border and gained possession for America of the present-day state of Washington.

The presidential election of James Polk in 1844, with his "54-40 or Fight" slogan reflecting a strong desire by many Americans to acquire all of the Oregon Territory, provided the national political backdrop to these events. But it is also true that more local events and personal motives were at least part of that fateful decision to settle north of the Columbia. George Bush, a free mulatto, was traveling west at least in part to escape the stifling racial discriminations of the slave state of Missouri. For him, racial factors were an unavoidable consideration.

In June 1844, only months before Bush's arrival, the Oregon provisional government adopted the Black Exclusion Law, introduced by Missourian Peter Burnett, who had made the migration in 1843. This new law made it illegal for blacks to settle in Oregon Territory. Punishment for violation of this act was 39 lashes, delivered in a public whipping, repeatable every six months until the person departed.

Minto recalled a conversation on the trail in which Bush revealed his apprehensions about what awaited him in Oregon. "He told me he should watch, when we got to Oregon, what usage was awarded to people of color, and if he could not have a free man's rights he would seek the protection of the Mexican government in California or New Mexico."

When Bush reached Oregon and was confronted by Burnett's exclusion law, he was torn by an ironic dilemma. To achieve personal racial security he had to avoid American-controlled portions of Oregon. In 1845 that could be done by settling in the more tolerant regions under English control or by proceeding south into Spanish territory. To settle in the English regions might be self-defeating by contributing to the American acquisition of that area in the contest between England and America for ownership of Oregon. Eventually that could bring him once again under the jurisdiction and oppression of American racial dispositions. However uneasy he may have been about the possible consequences, Bush eventually chose the Tumwater option.

What was life like on the Tumwater frontier? What were the conditions at the early settlement? The first difficulty was getting there. To do so, it was necessary to travel the Columbia River by boat from Fort Vancouver, then go up the Cowlitz River and walk overland on mere foot trails. The approximately 100-mile trip took about 15 days.

The first years in Tumwater were very hard. The party arrived with only the material they could tie on the pack animals or carry themselves. The land was heavily forested, with no roads and little open ground. They had only very crude tools with which to clear the land for crops and construct shelters. In addition, they arrived at the onset of winter. According to Paul Thomas, the first homes were "crudely constructed shelters made of split logs" with bare earthen floors, no windows, and wood "shake" roofs. The beds were made of either planks or stretched animal skins and could accommodate four or five people. Reportedly, more than one family shared a cabin during that first winter.

IN THE EARLY years settlers had five essential sources of food: the original supplies they brought with them from Fort Vancouver; the natural resources of the region, available through hunting, fishing, and gathering; supplies acquired from the HBC post at Fort Nisqually; provisions given by, traded for or bought from the local native population; and eventually the produce and products of their own developing farms.

Typical of early American settlers everywhere in Oregon, their early success was unlikely, or would have been very difficult, without the support and goodwill of Dr. John McLoughlin, chief factor of the HBC's Fort Vancouver.

When they left Fort Vancouver in 1845 the pioneers carried with them a letter of "instruction" from McLoughlin to Dr. Tolmie (the chief factor at Fort Nisqually) to provision the settlers on credit with the supplies they would need. Records indicate that "with it they obtained 200 bushels of wheat, 100 bushels of peas, 300 bushels of potatoes and 10 head of cattle."

These constituted the main elements of their diet that first winter. Records also indicate that the only members of the original party of settlers who did not draw upon this letter of credit from McLoughlin were the Bushes. This suggests that Bush had been able to pay cash for his needs and was better off than the other families at that time.

Food from the local Indian population was also important in those early years. Seafood, such as oysters, clams and salmon, came from native sources. The settlers also acknowledged that it was the native population from whom they learned what they could eat from the forests, things like fern roots, camas and other plants.

The settlers hunted a variety of game, including deer, elk, bear and waterfowl. Eventually they grew their initial crops of wheat, peas and potatoes, but the first yields were very small and most of it had to be saved for the next year's planting. Sarah McAllister, an early settler, recalled that it was nearly three years before they had bread from the wheat of their own land. But by 1850 the settlers had established themselves, and Bush's farm was prospering. That year his farm produced large crops of wheat, rye, oats, potatoes and hops. He also turned out large quantities of wool and butter.

AN ESPECIALLY CRUCIAL and difficult problem for all settlers was the acquisition of domestic animals for their farms. The Bush family slowly accumulated the necessary stock from a wide variety of sources under difficult circumstances over a number of years. For example in 1846 Bush took two weeks to ride to Cowlitz Prairie and return with a hen and a setting of eggs from Simon Plamondon, a friend and former French-Canadian HBC employee. Mrs. Bush, through hard work and personal diplomacy, secured the family turkey flock. Their first flock of sheep was acquired from HBC holdings at Fort Nisqually. In 1850 the farm was home to more than 100 horses, cattle, sheep and pigs and 10 oxen, altogether valued at over \$2,000.

The protection and preservation of domestic stock in a frontier environment was an ongoing challenge. The dangers included theft by any variety of people as well as predation by the still-numerous bears and cougars in the area. Bush family tradition tells of a 200-pound cougar, or "tiger" as the boys called it, that they killed on the farm in the 1850s after it had attacked one of their ponies.

The settlers also had difficulty acquiring many of the amenities of "civilized" life and other necessities of successful settlement. Lewis, the youngest son, was about 12 years old before he had his first pair of shoes. Presumably, he wore Indian-style footwear or went barefoot before that age.

There were other problems that made life on a frontier farm challenging and unpredictable. Weather, for example, could be as great a barrier to success or even survival as any factor on the frontier. Disease was a constant threat to settlers and natives alike. The Tumwater enclave faced a measles epidemic in the winter of 1847-48 and an out-break of smallpox in 1853.

What developed in subsequent years into a significant concern was the relationship between the incoming American settlers and the resident native population. The Indians had been on generally good terms with the HBC for years, and the relatively small number of early American settlers, like the Bush-Simmons group of 1845, did not seriously upset this equilibrium.

This is not to say that relations with the Indians were always smooth or that serious elements of danger did not exist in the early years. Sanford Bush, for example, recalled one occasion when two warring local tribes (with participants numbering in the hundreds) fought all day against each other on the Bush farm but refrained from attacking the settlers. By the 1850s, however, greater strains began to appear in the Indian-settler relationship, due mainly to pressures created by increased numbers of settlers occupying more and more land and thus removing it from traditional Indian uses. This culminated in the Indian War that broke out in 1855-56.

The Bush clan suffered no casualties during these difficulties. Nonetheless, it was not a time or place in which normal agricultural pursuits could be followed, and frontier farm life in the area was seriously disrupted. At one point the Bushes and their neighbors constructed a fort on the Bush homestead to provide

protection. The conclusion of the war doomed the traditional life-style of the local tribes and opened the way for further settlement. Bush's prosperity continued to grow with the passing years. By 1860 his holdings had increased to 880 well-cultivated acres, making it one of the largest and most prosperous farms in Thurston County and the territory.

Life at Bush Prairie was not all danger and hard work. There were dances, parties, picnics, holiday celebrations and other joyful events that spiced the social life in the frontier settlement. The Bush homestead became famous for its hospitality and generosity by virtue of the family's treatment of travelers, strangers, visitors and any locals in need of a hot meal or warm bed. If success can be measured by the possession of material comfort, economic security and the love and respect of one's family, neighbors and contemporaries, then George Bush was a most successful pioneer. Just as he had done in overcoming the physical, emotional and environmental challenges presented by the trail and the western farming frontier, Bush was able to defeat the additional societal impediments created by racism.

Two of his most effective aspects were the nature of his personality and the great humanity of his character. In the memorial to Congress seeking to legitimize Bush's land claim in 1854, this testament to both qualities appeared: "He has contributed much towards the settlement of this territory, the suffering and needy never having applied to him in vain for succor and assistance...."

The trail experience typically drained not only the emigrants' physical and emotional resources but also their economic resources. Most arrived at the end of the trail little able to self-supply or afford to purchase the material required to survive the first winter. Nor did many possess the necessities for getting in the all-important first crops the following spring. Many settlers in the area owed their success to George Bush. Ezra Meeker remarked on Bush's behavior in 1852-53 when the large number of new immigrants combined with a small local harvest to create a dangerous food crisis:

"The man divided out nearly his whole crop to new settlers who came with or without money.... 'Pay me in kind next year,' he would say to those in need; and to those who had money he would say, 'Don't take too much...just enough to do you'; and in this wise divided his large crop and became a benefactor to the whole community."

GEORGE BUSH DIED on April 5, 1863. At the time of his death, the United States was consumed by a great internal military conflict that would dramatically revise the place and role of his race within its embrace. He lived long enough to witness the historic Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln in January 1863, but died before the Civil War ended and the new era of American race relations began.

It is not hard to imagine the satisfaction George Bush must have felt at the time in his life when he could look back on the wondrous role he had played in the seminal events of the 19th century and look forward to the new challenges and opportunities the coming years would offer his descendants and his race. Nor is it difficult to appreciate the legacy that a man with the abilities; character and humanity of George Bush bequeaths to us as we continue to struggle through our national evolution on today's racial frontier.

Darrell Millner is Chairman of the Black Studies Department at Portland State University. The study of African-American history is one of his special areas of interest.

MLA Citation:

Millner, Darrell. "George Bush of Tumwater: Founder of the First American Colony on Puget Sound." *Columbia Magazine*. 4.8 (Winter 1994-1995): 14-19. Date accessed <http://columbia.washingtonhistory.org/anthology/settlers/georgeBush.aspx>.