



NEWS RELEASE February 23, 2021

Black History Project: New marker on Capitol Campus to honor contributions of Bush family

George Bush was the first Black pioneer in Washington Territory; his son William Owen was the state's first Black legislator

OLYMPIA - A new monument honoring the legacy of Black pioneer George Bush and his family is coming to the Olympia Capitol Campus.

The marker was developed as part of a project to celebrate the history of Black Washingtonians, led by the [Washington State Historical Society \(WSHS\)](#). The state [Department of Enterprise Services \(DES\)](#) will oversee the installation of the monument.

"I'm honored to help facilitate the long overdue recognition of George Bush and his family at our state's capitol," said DES Director Chris Liu. "This is a great step forward in recognizing and celebrating the diversity and spirit that shaped Washington. The Bush family's legacy is remarkable, and even more so when we consider the adversity they had to overcome. It's past time we pay tribute at the seat of the great state they helped to build."

The monument will commemorate pioneer George Bush and his son William Owen Bush, who was the first Black American to serve in the Washington State legislature. The monument's location on campus also relates to the family's heritage. When the Bush family left their home in Missouri, they brought root stock to establish trees in their new home. From one of those trees, more than a century old, a nut was cultivated, planted on the Capitol Campus in 2010 and named the [Bush Butternut Tree](#). The granite and bronze Bush monument will be located in view of this tree, near the WWII monument.



Two men identified as **Lewis Nisqually Bush** (left), youngest son of William Owen Bush, and **Henry Sanford Bush** (right, with beard), son of George and Isabella Bush, with a fanning mill on the farm originally settled by George and Isabella Bush, pioneers of Thurston County. The fanning mill is a large wooden machine, designed to separate impurities from grain prior to storage. Circa 1895-1915.

Source: WSHS Catalog
ID: C2016.0.90.5

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"We are in the production phase for a monument to honor George Bush, his wife Isabella and his son, William Owen Bush, in recognition of the contributions the Bush family made to our state's history," said Jennifer Kilmer, WSHS director. "As the first Black pioneer to settle in the Washington Territory, and one of the earliest pioneers, period, George Bush and his family played a vital role in establishing Washington Territory as American soil. It took tremendous fortitude to migrate across the country into little-known region, especially when also facing racism and discriminatory laws along the way."

Stephanie Johnson-Toliver, President of the [Black Heritage Society of Washington State](#) and a member of the advisory committee for the project, believes the accolades for George Bush and his family at the state's capitol are long overdue.

"This acknowledgement is more than something we talk about or a fun fact," Johnson-Toliver said. "There will be a significant tribute to him on the campus, a place where we can point people. We can always talk about George Bush and lift him in our conversations, but to have him and his family recognized at the state level in this way is huge."

The production schedule and installation of the monument have not yet been finalized. You can find updates as information becomes available on [WSHS's website](#).

Bush's Journey West

In 1844, George Bush and his wife Isabella began their journey from Missouri to Oregon across the Oregon Trail in hopes of escaping prejudice and discrimination. However, when the wagon train arrived in the Oregon Territory, they found a hostile environment for freed slaves and Black pioneers attempting to settle in the area. The party decided it would not settle in a place where Bush and his family weren't welcome, so they traveled north of the Columbia River hoping to move beyond the reach of the area's racist laws.

In 1845, Bush and his family established a prosperous farm in the area that is now Tumwater. It was the first non-Indigenous American settlement in the region.

In 1889, George's oldest son William Owen Bush became the first Black American to serve in the Washington State Legislature. He is also credited in helping found Washington State University.

William Owen Bush
(1832-1907)
Son of pioneer George Bush
Circa 1905.

Source: WSHS Catalog
ID: 2015.0.74

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download.**



[Learn more about George Bush and his family](#) and join WSHS on Feb. 25 at 6 p.m. for the free online program, [From Migration to Mark Making: George Bush, Jacob Lawrence, and the Impact of Black Pioneers in Washington State.](#)

Washington Black History Project

In 2020, the Legislature allocated \$100,000 in the state's capital budget to WSHS for the celebration of Black History Month in 2021 at the state Capitol. The advisory committee led by WSHS set project goals, including the Bush monument, a Black History in Washington app, and digital educational resources. The committee's aim is to build history resources that will connect Washingtonians to Black history in our state not only in 2021, but into the future.

"The Washington State Historical Society is honored to be part of this project and grateful to the legislature for allocating funds to celebrate Black history in our state," Kilmer said. "We thank the advisory committee who have worked with us to define and advance this project."



Bush Prairie, Thurston County, Washington, June 1909. Black and white glass plate negative, showing an automobile with three men inside, traveling on a rural dirt road between split-rail fences on the George Bush family homestead, Bush Prairie.

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A letter from the U.S. House of Representatives to pioneer George Bush, the first Black settler in what is now Washington, dated Feb. 16, 1855. The letter confirms Bush's land claim "to you and your wife."

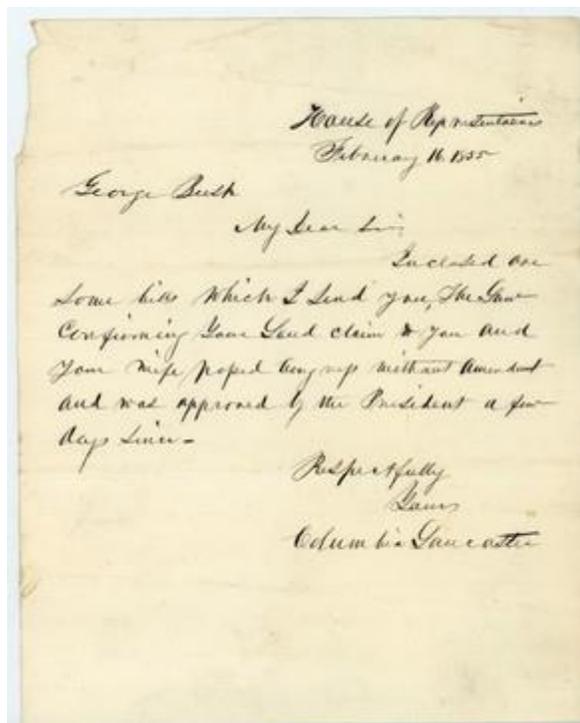
Source: WSHS Catalog ID: 2010.70.18.

My Dear Sir,

Enclosed are some bills which I send you, the law confirming your land claim to you and your wife passed congress without amendment and was approved by the President a few days since.

*Respectfully yours,
Columbia Lancaster*

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