2026 TALKING HEADSTONES

Brenda Wilmoth, Sacajawea Chapter, DAR, presenting "The Joseph Cornell Family Narrative" Union Pioneer Calvary Cemetery. Tumwater, WA.

Welcome to the Cornell Family. Their story begins long before they reach the Pacific Northwest. Their lineage traces back to Thomas Cornell (1595—1655), who emigrated from England to New England and whose descendants spread across colonial America. *The Northwest Genealogy of the Cornell Family* published in 1902 documents these branches, including those who later migrated westward — a path that aligns with the life of Bela Smith Cornell. * (Bela, Beeley, Belay, or B.S. as on marker were noted during research)

Bela Smith Cornell was born October 10, 1798, in Pennsylvania to Joseph Cornell and Mary Van Kirk, part of a long-established American family. In May of 1819, he married Jane McLaran, and together they raised at least six children — Joseph, Elizabeth, John, Hugh, Hayden; and Marion. Each of the Cornell children represents a different thread in the larger pioneer story. *

The Cornells moved steadily westward. Beeley lived in Pennsylvania, then Indiana, and eventually his family's story reached Washington Territory, where their eldest son Joseph would leave a lasting mark. He was the first-born child (1820) in Wayne County, Ohio, he is most deeply tied to Tumwater's early identity and is recognized today as a Tumwater Pioneer. He and his wife traveled by ox team over the plains, making the long and difficult journey that brought so many pioneer families to the Pacific Northwest. They settled in first Bush Prairie then moved to what was then called New Market, later known as Tumwater, becoming part of the earliest American families to establish permanent homes in the region. (*today we call it* Old Town Tumwater)

During the gold excitement of 1855, Joseph and his good friend Mr. Thomas Prather accompanied a party to the Colville mines. Their journey made history: they were the first Americans to cross Priest Rapids on the Columbia River. This feat placed Joseph among the earliest explorers pushing into the interior Northwest during the gold rush era. Back home, Joseph worked at the water-powered Ward and Hays Sawmill, founded in 1849 at the Upper Falls of the Deschutes River — one of the foundational industries of early Tumwater. His commitment to public service was equally significant. Joseph served

a County Commissioner for eight years, helping to shape the early civic structure of Thurston County. He also became Tumwater's first Marshal responsible for maintaining order in a frontier town still finding its identity. (*Brewery Park. Tumwater. WA)

Joseph lived in Tumwater for 40 years, and for the last 38 years of his life, he never once left Thurston County. His roots in the community ran deep. Joseph lived to the age of 74, passing away in 1894. He and his wife Sarah were married for 51 years, a remarkable span for pioneer families who endured hardship, isolation, and constant change. Local memory recalls her nearly 80 years old on Christmas Day, with a cane, and still carrying her corn-cob pipe! The Cornell family's story from Thomas Cornell's arrival in New England in the 1600s to Joseph's life in Tumwater reflects the larger movement of families who shaped the Pacific Northwest. Their journey mirrors the endurance, courage, and quiet determination that built the communities we know today. Joseph Cornell, whose life in Tumwater remains most visible. His story is part of the foundation of this region — and part of the heritage we continue to honor.

Narrative written by Brenda S. Wilmoth.
***Credit for research, Find A Grave, Family Search and History online sites.**