2026 TALKING HEADSTONES

Art Dolan, George Rogers Clark, SAR, presenting the "George Bush Narrative" Union Pioneer Calvary Cemetery. Tumwater, WA

Tumwater was the first major American settlement in the Puget Sound region, and the territory that would become Washington. And it was founded by George Bush, an African-American.

By May 1st, 1844, the Bush family, following the Oregon Trail, was on their way to The Rogue River Valley, Oregon. The motivation was the Land Donation Act granting 320 acres for each traveler plus an additional 320 acres if married.

What he did not know was in June of 1844 Oregon passed the "Lash Law." The Oregon Provisional Government passed the first Black Exclusion law. It states any "Black who tried to settle in Oregon would be publicly whipped -39 lashes - every 6 months until they left Oregon."

"Finally exiting the Blue Mountains, through Umitilla and the Dalles, George and family finally made it to the Willamette Valley only to discover: By a resolution by the Oregon Provisional Government, George and his family were not allowed to enter Oregon because of his color.

Aloud, he stammered, "There must be a way. Never Look back. Always look ahead."

Wintering the 1844-1845 in the Dalles they patiently waited for the snow to melt and spring would allow them to continue on the remainder of their journey. The family decided they wanted North Oregon in the "Sound area." Discussions formed around the beautiful country south of Budd Inlet where the falls of the Dechutes River would be a perfect location for a grist mill with soil just right for a plow.

George, with his knowledge of agriculture, animal husbandry, combined with fertile soil, found the Deschutes river an excellent settlement location in the spring of 1845. George departed in May of 1844.

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"George Bush Narrative"
Talking Headstones - Union Pioneer Calvary Cemetery.
Tumwater, WA

Bush's crops were abundant in 1846 and the colony's health excellent. Land was claimed under the Land Donation Act, but settlers wanted more: Schools, roads, and tugboats. After working the land the settlers believed they were entitled to it. George and family were prosperous again growing wheat and rye. Their farmland expanded and with his knowledge of farming and managed to develop the most productive farm in northern Oregon.

On September 27,1850, the Donation Land Act passed Congress. George was disappointed to learn the Act specifically stated, "for white Americans only, and half-breed Indians."

In 1854 Washington Territory was formed by Congress. On March 17, 1854, the Territory Government, meeting in Olympia petitioned Congress to grant special dispensation to George Bush to own the land he has worked and improved since 1845.

On February 10, 1855, Congress passed a special act granting him the land claim on which he had settled a decade earlier. In April 1855 the local legislature issued full citizenship to Bush for the many services Washington's first black man had rendered them.

In closing: George and his family were renowned for their generosity. One story that has been told through the generations is of a man who was traveling alone by horseback. He arrived at the Bush farm while en route to Olympia. The Bush family made him a meal and hosted him.

The man attempted to pay them for their kindness, but Bush never accepted payment for good deeds. The man explained that he was Isaac Stevens, the first governor of the new Washington territory. Stevens reportedly hid a gold coin under his plate before he left.

Narrative written by Art Dolan