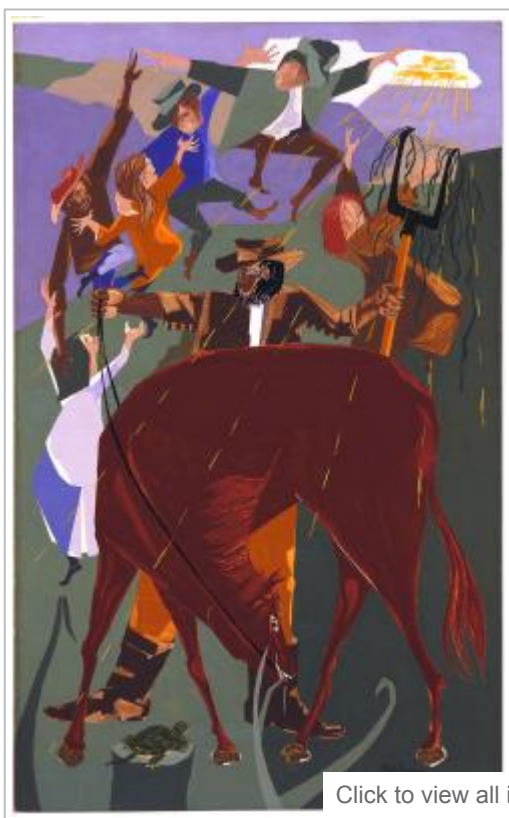


Narrative of a Pioneer: Jacob Lawrence tells the story of George Bush

by [Lisa Edge \(/users/lisa-edge\)](#) | November 7th, 2018



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[Jacob Lawrence, No. 1. On a fair May morning in 1844, George Washington Bush left Clark County, Missouri, in six Conestoga wagons, 1973, casein tempera and gouache, 31½ × 19½ inches, series piece. Collection of Washington State Historical Society. Image use courtesy ARS.](#)

Traveling from the eastern shores of the United States to the mountainous region of the Pacific Northwest is a journey that could take a handful of hours or days depending on the mode of transportation. Rewind the clock back to the mid 1800s and those making the trip faced rugged conditions and none of the modern comforts we've come to expect while traveling. The first transcontinental railroad wouldn't be complete until 1869 so people who wanted to relocate traversed the land on foot or by horse and wagon. The other option was a much longer route by sea going around South America. Either way, grit and perseverance were required.

One of the early pioneers to this state was George Bush, a Black man who co-founded a settlement now known as Tumwater. He's the subject of a series of narrative paintings from artist Jacob Lawrence. The five works are on view at The Washington State Historical Museum in Tacoma in the exhibition titled "Collections Selections: Jacob Lawrence." It's a rare opportunity to see the paintings in person.

Intended to be taken in from right to left, they're a reflection of Bush's migration from the Midwest to Washington state, which was then still Oregon territory. Director of Audience Engagement Mary Mikel Stump said that after an internal negotiation, and with low lighting, they're able to share Lawrence's work with visitors to the museum.

"Because this is work on paper it's particularly sensitive so we can't show them that much. We can't have them on view all the time, which we would love to," said Stump. "These are such great examples of narrative paintings. They're so easy to teach from and talk about and they're so didactic. You can really get a sense of what that was like."

Lawrence packs a cornucopia of details in each of the panels. Beginning with the first, jubilation is the overall tone as the sun shines on the group. Bush, his wife and their six children plus four other families departed Clay County, Missouri, in six Conestoga wagons in 1844. Members of the party are jumping up off the ground as they begin a new chapter of their lives. It's a reflection of the promise and excitement of any expedition.

Bush was a Quaker who was raised in Virginia, according to Director of Statewide Outreach Susan Rohrer. His parents were a Jamaican seafarer and an Irish maid. Rohrer said the prosperous farmer left Missouri for a life out west because he was repulsed by slavery and racism. He is also said to have been traveling with 70 pounds of silver.

"He had a lot of money and he helped to pay for the other people in the wagon train who joined," said Rohrer. "He helped pay their way for their expenses. He brought all kinds of things with him that the normal pioneer didn't bring. A lot more equipment."

The second panel shows where another wagon train joins them in Iowa. In it everyone is pitching in as they join forces. A man loads up a crate of chickens, farm tools are featured and a woman cradles a baby. Bush traveled with White pioneers who later became well known in the South Sound.

The centerpiece is where Bush and the convoy reach the continental divide. Lawrence shows Bush leading the group as they enter white-out conditions, which take up half the frame. It marks a treacherous part of their journey.



Jacob Lawrence, No. 3. The hardest part of the journey is yet to come--the Continental Divide, stunned by the magnitude of roaring rivers, 1973, casein tempera and gouache, 31½ × 39½ inches, series piece. Collection of Washington State Historical Society. Image use courtesy ARS.

“Bush is the largest central figure,” said Stump of the panels. “He has a real place of prominence and so there are some formal qualities that Lawrence is using to make him the most important figure in each one of these individual stories.”

By Christmas of 1844 they arrive in Fort Vancouver, then continue on to present-day Washougal, Washington, which was still considered Oregon territory. Bush and his party did not stay long.

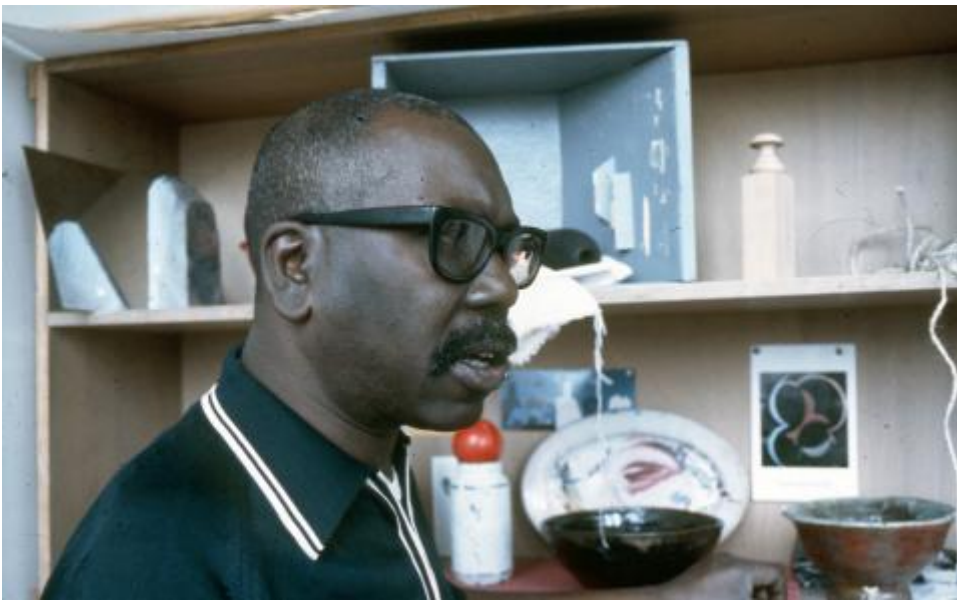
“The Oregon exclusion laws were some of the most racist in the United States and were not off the Oregon Constitution entirely until 1929,” said Rohrer. “There’s evidence of slavery and people being held in bondage in Oregon up to the 20th century.”

In 1843 voters outlawed slavery, but the following year it was amended with a “Lash Law.” Black and mixed-race people, referred to as mulatto at the time, living in the territory would be subject to two whippings a year if they stayed. It was a punishment ultimately to get all of them to leave.

Rohrer said Bush decided to move away from seats of government and populace, choosing to settle north of the Columbia River. “They have to hack their way through, which is an interesting story in itself because the first territorial governor doesn’t come for almost 10 years. This is really uninhabited land and well before the big wagon trains show up,” said Rohrer.

The final panel shows Bush and his party taming the land of south Puget Sound. Logs of wood are prominently featured and wood chips fly through the air. The title in part reads “Thank God All Mighty, home at last!” Just as he helped others on the journey to Washington, Bush continued assisting other pioneers who ventured west and made it to his farm. Initially Bush wasn’t allowed to own his land but that changed in 1855. Daniel Bigelow, a Harvard-trained lawyer got a bill passed allowing him to be a landowner. Rohrer said despite that particular bit of progress Bush was never granted citizenship. He died in 1863.

Bush is often referred to as George Washington Bush, which Rohrer said is an error. Research shows Washington was never a part of his name on any of the ledger documents. Rohrer said it’s likely the details of his life story have been conflated with another Black pioneer, George Washington, who founded Centralia in 1875.



Jacob Lawrence in his studio, 1972. Taken while he was working on the George Bush series of paintings. Collection of Washington State Historical Society, C1973.27.7.4.

In 1972 the Washington State Capital Museum, now part of the Washington State Historical Society, commissioned Lawrence to create a work depicting the life of Bush. As part of the exhibition, a typed letter from Lawrence to then director Kenneth Hopkins is on display. In the letter he lays out details of the project including proposed dimensions for the panels. Initially he was only going to paint the center panel and the remaining four were only going to be drawings.

In part Lawrence writes, “I have given much consideration to this project, its purpose and the fact that it is for a public and not a private institution. If my proposal is accepted, the work will begin as soon as we return from Munich-not later than the 14th of September.”

The letter also sheds lights on Lawrence’s painting process. He states his best work is done as he works on the final project and he doesn’t do preliminary sketches. Instead he offered visits to his studio at the University of Washington or photographs to show his progress. In 1973 Lawrence completed the series. The result is an easily understood body of work that shares an important part of Bush’s life.

Lawrence depicting Bush’s migration is a convergence of two important pioneers. Bush, in the literal sense as he moved out west a century before The Great Migration, and Lawrence because of the barriers he broke within the art world. The series is an opportunity to learn more about two people who thrived in spite of entrenched barriers.

WHAT: “Collections Selections: Jacob Lawrence”

WHEN: Runs until Jan. 20, 2019

WHERE: Washington State History Museum, 1911 Pacific Avenue, Tacoma