



Burnt Ridge Nursery & Orchards, Inc.
432 Burnt Ridge Rd.
Onalaska, WA 98570
phone: 360-985-2873
fax: 360-985-0882

email: mail@burntridgenursery.com
website: burntridgenursery.com

George Bush & the Giant Butternut

This story has absolutely nothing to do with the 41st and 43rd Presidents of the United States.

George Bush was born the son of a free black man and an Irish immigrant mother, in Philadelphia. It was 1790, the year of Benjamin Franklin's death. Over 200 years later and 3,000 miles away, a living legacy grows on as a champion of it's species and a memorial to it's planter.

As a teenager, Bush became indentured to a pioneer nurseryman who emigrated through the Cumberland Gap to settle in the wilderness of Tennessee, where he learned how to grow trees.

During the war of 1812, Bush fought under Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans. Bush roamed the West as a mountain man, explorer and trapper during the 1820's, amassing enough money to start a farm in Missouri, marrying and raising a family.

By the mid 1840's Bush was a prosperous man, well liked and highly regarded in Clay County, Missouri. But the politics of race & slavery were such in Missouri that Bush joined the great Westward migration in 1844 on the Oregon Trail, hoping to find greater freedom further west.

Bush had two wagons for the journey. One for his large family, their provisions and their worldly goods & one wagon filled with fruit & nut trees.

After an incredibly arduous, 9 month journey across the Great Plains, deserts, over the Rockies and down the Columbia River, they arrived at Fort Vancouver in December. Only to be told that the newly formed Oregon Territorial Legislature had just passed a law excluding blacks from settlement in the Willamette Valley.

At this time, Fort Vancouver was a Hudson's Bay Trading Post owned by Great Britain. The British were actively discouraging any American settlement in what is now Washington State, hoping to claim it for themselves. Excluded from Oregon, Bush & his friend Michael Simmons explored North to the Puget Sound country, found a spot to their liking and blazed a trail through the wilderness to return with their families and wagons. Michael Simmons went on to found the town of Tumwater, building a sawmill & gristmill. George Bush built up a prosperous farm & was widely loved for his kindness, generosity, & hospitality.

These men helped to open the floodgate of American settlement, which overwhelmed the British outposts. Thus making Washington State part of the United States.

Many fruit trees from the Bush pioneer farm still live. Remarkably a butternut tree that survived the trek West in 1844 still stands on the homestead site.

This butternut tree is among the biggest of its species ever recorded, with a trunk nearly 20 ft in circumference. Some of its branches are 4 feet thick.

Most of the Bush farm is now the Olympia Airport and this tree has been topped over the years, as it is on the flight path to approaching planes. A monument to the Bush Family survives at the southeast corner of the airport.

The property is for sale, and is zoned industrial, yet the tree is recognized for it's historic value and hopefully will be preserved for generations to come. It still produces a crop and we are pleased to be growing seedlings from this tree.

August 2026 update: on May 2021 the tree collapsed, but several seedlings, descendants of the original continue to produce good crops nearby as does a seedling planted on the Capitol Campas in Olympia, Washington. We have a direct descendant tree producing well at our farm here on Burnt Ridge, Onalaska Washington. Remarkably, when visiting the shattered stump several years ago, a new sprout of butternut was observed growing from the base of the tree.



The Giant George Bush Butternut.



The George Bush Butternut right after it fell.



The George Bush Butternut now, a young sprout emerges!