

# A reckoning with the past

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Asahel Bush was a newspaper publisher and businessman in Salem, synonymous with the city's early growth and development.

He also was a racist, using the power of the press during the 1850s to flaunt his personal views and incite public support for Oregon's Black exclusion law.

Both are true, yet the latter rarely surfaces when talking about Bush's legacy. A city-owned park and museum bear his name, and The Oregon Statesman he began has morphed into today's Statesman Journal. There's also a Bush Elementary School and a Bush Street.

The narrative is being reexamined at the urging of Oregon Black Pioneers, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving and presenting the history of African Americans in Oregon.

"Tell the whole story," was the message first delivered by Kim Moreland, president of the Oregon Black Pioneers. "Don't hide the truth because the truth is complex and messy."

Bush House Museum, managed by Salem Art Association, welcomed the advice and is taking steps to deepen the history it interprets and unveil new programming it hopes will help heal the impact of systemic racism.

The nonprofit organization formed a reimagining committee with diverse representation from the community and will soon hire a strategic planning facilitator to help craft a new vision and mission statement for the museum with an anti-racist and diversity, equity and inclusion lens.

"We want to confront this racist history, and we want to use art to do that," Matthew Boulay, executive director of Salem Art Association, said. "Art is entertainment, but art also can tell different truths, art can have dialogue, and art can help us heal."

The efforts come during a period of reckoning for cultural heritage sites across the country. Statues have been smashed. Buildings have been renamed. Salem has no statue of Bush, but renaming the museum could be part of the conversation.

Museum director Ross Sutherland described some of those efforts as confrontational, but he and Boulay view this as the beginning of a community-wide conversation that is respectful and inclusive.

"This isn't like it's us against them, and they're telling us this is what's going to happen," Sutherland said. "This is an issue, we have this resource, and we're not serving the community as well as we thought we were. How do we make it better?"

## 'Difficult to read'

Asahel Bush was 26 when he came to the Oregon Territory in late 1850, recruited by Congressional delegate Samuel Thurston to establish a newspaper. Bush settled in Oregon City, and the first edition of The Oregon Statesman published on March 28, 1851.

The four-page weekly quickly flexed its political muscle, supporting the Democratic Party. When the state capital relocated two years later to Salem, Bush followed with the paper.

He led a small but powerful group called the "Salem Clique" during Oregon's quest for statehood. His newspaper promoted its agenda with no concern for impartiality or objectivity, and the subject of slavery provided constant material.

Bush opposed slavery but favored the constitutional ban against allowing Blacks to settle in Oregon. As publisher and editor, he both swayed public opinion and reflected the opinion of most Oregonians at the time.

"He was just one player in a larger so-



A portrait of Asahel Bush hangs in the Bush House Museum in Salem. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

ciety that really looked down on Black people and viewed them as not equal to white people and not deserving of the same rights and opportunities," Zachary Stocks, executive director of Oregon Black Pioneers, said. "That emboldened him to be able to make those statements very publicly through his paper."

Stocks is on the steering committee of the Bush House Museum Reimagining Project and his lecture today at Salem Art Association — "The Statesman and The Freedman: Asahel Bush, Hiram Gorman, and Black exclusion in Oregon" — is one of the first new programming events.

He takes a close look at Bush's words and actions and their impact on early Black residents. Bush's editorials were vitriolic. So were his personal letters.

Stocks points to an 1863 letter written to Matthew Deady, a judge and member of the Salem Clique. Bush expressed his disgust about the wedding of a Black couple presided over by a white preacher and attended by both Black and white people.

"It is really racist and even a little difficult to read," Stocks said.

A small number of Black people settled in Oregon despite exclusion laws enacted in 1844, 1849 and 1857. Bush was considered the architect of the last one, which prohibited Blacks from residing in the state, holding any real estate or making any contracts.

Oregon voters approved the Oregon Constitution on Nov. 9, 1857, and had a say on two sections of the Bill of Rights. They overwhelmingly voted against slavery but for exclusion, according to returns published by The Oregon Statesman and posted today in an exhibits section of the Secretary of State's website.

"There are scholars who have been talking about this for a long time," Stocks said. "But I think the general public is still largely unaware of the role of Bush and the Oregon Statesman in crafting Black exclusion in the Oregon constitution."

Gorman, who worked for the Statesman after Bush sold the paper, was one of those early Black residents. He operated the power press, turning the wheel by hand.

Gorman was a successful and well-liked member of the community, referred to in the paper as a giant and "the fighting editor," his name often prefaced with titles such as "Prof." and "Col." An 1887 article described him carrying a 400-pound barrel of ink upstairs with ease.

"I think that when they wrote it, those were playful descriptions," Stocks said. "They viewed him as a friend and a colleague and someone that had a personality and was appreciated and welcomed at work."

"However, it's important to recognize how that might be a racist act as well.



An early view of the house that Asahel Bush II had built on Mission Street in Salem, circa 1885. COURTESY OF BUSH HOUSE MUSEUM

They took a stand nearly a century before the civil rights movement, the backlash well-documented in the Statesman archives. Dickinson often was personally attacked in Bush's editorials.

Dickinson denied requests to hold separate services, drawing the ire of some white church members. Charlotte would later tutor Black women and children in their home.

And it was Dickinson who presided over the wedding of America and Richard Bogle, the one referenced in Bush's letter, in January 1863.

Dickinson doesn't have a park, school or street in Salem named after him.

## Cementing a legacy

Later in 1863, Bush became a widower. His wife Eugenia's death of tuberculosis left him with four children under the age of 7. He sold the newspaper but remained influential in regional politics and local business.

Bush co-founded Ladd and Bush bank, Salem's first financial institution. The building with the ornate cast-iron facade, on the southeast corner of State and Commercial streets downtown, is now home to the Ladd and Bush Branch of U.S. Bank.

He used some of his earnings to build an elegant new home on a hillside south of the state capitol, a 100-acre farmstead he and his wife had earlier acquired. The parcel was a portion of the donation land claim Rev. David Leslie established in 1851 on ancestral lands of the Kalapuya Tribe.

The Oregon Donation Land Law was

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## Poet

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might be able to play a part in this new community center," he says.

In May 2022, during National Poetry Month, he established a tele-poem hotline where a caller could listen to a poem recorded by former Oregon Poet Laureates Paulann Petersen, Kim Stafford, and Elizabeth Woody.

Mojgani had originally conceived the idea for the tele-poem hotline in 2020 but had to put it on hold due to the pandemic.

Now two years later, he has a second chance to finish the projects like the hotline that the pandemic brought to a halt in 2020.

"One of the projects I've been wanting to do since I took the position is to create something that's rooted in poetry that's on something as disposable and familiar as a newspaper," he says. "Here's this opportunity to continue doing something that I really enjoyed doing. But I also have two years' experience of what that feels like. So any of the



Oregon Poet Laureate Anis Mojgani is returning for a second tenure as the state's chief wordsmith. PROVIDED BY ANIS MOJGANI

elements of growth to experience during the position, I know what this role entails."

And now that the weather is starting to warm up, Mojgani even plans to return to the balcony of his Portland art studio to recite poetry once again.

"We are always surrounded by poems, even if they are not taking shape as poems. And what are the ways that we may let some of that poetry into our lives?"

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