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Essay for your consideration

JOHN BUSH

African American National Biography

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Bush, John (1725-c. winter 1757/1758), provincial soldier during the “old French wars” of the mid-18th century, prisoner of war, originator of the “Lake George School” of powder-horn engraving, one of the earliest forms of American folk art. Born in the north parish of Shrewsbury (now Boylston), Massachusetts, John Bush was one of eight children (and third son) of George Bush (1687-1767) a free black landowner and his wife, “from South America.” John Bush’s marital status is unknown.

In 1747, during the final years of King George’s War, Bush enlisted as a provincial soldier of Massachusetts, and served sporadically for the next eight years as part of the modest garrisons of 20-100 men manning each of the “line of forts” protecting settlements in the Connecticut River valley. He was on recurring and often extended duty (with deployments ranging from 3 to 64 weeks at a stretch) at remote Forts Massachusetts, Shirley, No. 4, and Dummer. Bush spent his 20s during that eight-year stretch, on frontier duty fully 46% of the time. He was as close as anyone came in mid-18th-century Massachusetts to being a professional soldier.

When war between France and Great Britain broke out again in North America in 1754, Bush and his brothers enlisted in the Massachusetts provincial service. John served again at Fort Massachusetts for almost a year, until he was replaced by brother Joseph.

In September 1755 full-blown warfare resumed on the Lake George frontier of northern New York. Brother George, Jr., served with Gen. William Johnson’s forces at Lake George during the 8 September 1755

battle, and died of his wounds three weeks later. Then the remaining two brothers served together as part of the winter garrison of some 400 men living in newly roofed but still-windowless barracks, holding Fort William Henry against the French from 27 November 1755 to 14 March 1756. Brother Joseph served that winter with Capt. Jeduthan Baldwin's company of Col. Josiah Browne's Massachusetts regiment, but perished the following spring, probably the victim of one of the "camp fevers" running rampant. John served at Fort William Henry with Captain James House's company until he mustered out in March 1756.

John Bush shortly enlisted again for the summer 1756 campaign (with Capt. Joseph Ingersoll's company, Col. Jonathan Bagley's Massachusetts regiment) and served again at Fort William Henry as company clerk—a recognized master of spelling and penmanship, as well as military form.

In the British and provincial army camps at Lake George during the opening years of the Seven Years' War, soldiers sought souvenirs of their military experience. John Bush became a skilful engraver of powder horns, made from the outer shells of hollowed-out cow horns used to create waterproof containers for gunpowder. The images and calligraphy engraved on the horns became one of the earliest forms of American folk art. John Bush "originated" the "Lake George School" of engravers working during the early campaigns of the Seven Years' War (French & Indian War) in North America (Guthman, *Antiques*, 1993, p. 494). Collector and historian William H. Guthman identifies key attributes of Bush's calligraphy, format, and decoration which were soon adopted by later carvers in the "Lake George School" (1757-1761: Selkirk-Page carver, JW carver, Memento Mori carver, and Jacob Guay) as the British fruitlessly struggled to drive the French from the Lake George/Lake Champlain valleys during most of the next six years.

The earliest wartime souvenir horns that can be confidently attributed to John Bush are dated 1755-1756 ("William Williams," ca. 1755, Historic Deerfield, Inc.; "Dr. Thomas Williams," signed by John Bush, 8 September 1755, location unknown; and "Robert Rodgers," 3 June 1756, Fort Ticonderoga Museum). During long years of service on the western frontier, Bush had served repeatedly under Capt. Ephraim Williams, Jr., brother of Thomas and older cousin of William.

On stylistic evidence, Guthman suggests that at least three earlier horns—all with ties to Shrewsbury, Massachusetts—may have been engraved by Bush between 1748 and 1750: Samuel L. Crosby, 1748, Historic

Deerfield; Asa Hopgood, 1749, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Levi Whitney, 1750, Historic Deerfield (Guthman, *Antiques*, 1993, p. 494). Guthman believed that the Crosby horn, now in the Historic Deerfield collection, demonstrated Bush's launch of what would evolve into the "Lake George School." Four horns (Nathan Whiting, Jesse Austin, David Baldwin, and Israel Putnam) attributed by Guthman to John Bush were made at Fort William Henry between September and November 1756 and employ the same verses and similar decorative elements Bush had used on the signed horn he carved for Dr. Thomas Williams the previous year. (There is some contention on these attributions by other historians.)

Correspondence in 1891 between a descendant of David Baldwin and historian Rufus Grider suggests that Grider had identified John Bush a century ago as an expert engraver: "Your horn was made by a professional horn decorator—his name was John Bush. He had a certain sett of patterns—which he used partly on every horn he decorated & although he may not have subscribed himself [autographed], once acquainted with his work, one can know it" (Guthman, *Drums a'Beating*, pp. 92-93).

Bush continued to serve during the siege of Fort William Henry a year later; was captured during the so-called "massacre" (10 August 1757); and was taken north to Canada as a prisoner of war. Black British and provincial soldiers, in particular, were singled out by Indian attackers: "they Pickt out the negrows Melatows and Indiens and dragged them Away and we Know not what is Become of them" (quoted in Steele, p. 123). "They killd & Scalpt all the Sick & wounded before our faces, and then took out from Our troops, all the Indians and negroes and Carried them off" (Kochan, p. 356). By the end of 1757, more than 300 of the Fort William Henry garrison were still "missing."

After the deaths of two sons and loss of a third, father George Bush, wrote Governor Thomas Pownall:

Shrewsbury, Sept ye 14th 1758

Honorable Sr. I have a Son In Captivity at Cannaday if he be Living that was Taken Last year at Lake George when it was reduced. I never have heard from him Sence he was Taken only when our men Reton^{ed} thay Say he was not killed but Carried of by the Indiens: his Naime is John Bush a mellator Fellow about 30 years of Eage: pray sr. if thair be any oppportunity to Exchang Captives let my son be Remembered. In So Doing your hon^{ble} Sarvent will be much obliged.

--George Bush (Bush, Letter to Gov.
Thomas Pownall.)

By September 1757, the French Governor General in Canada had begun shipping home to France prisoners captured in the capitulation of Fort William Henry so that they did not become a burden on dwindling food supplies in New France. John Bush escaped servitude in New France, the fate of many other blacks, and was shipped to France as a prisoner of war. He died “on board in the Passage to France” (*Boston Gazette*, 9 October 1758). On 25 April 1757 he had declared his Will as “a Negro,” which was probated on 14 October 1758 after receipt of the news of his death as a French prisoner of war. John Bush left possessions valued at £24/6/8 to his father, remaining brother, and sisters.

Bush’s artistry was so distinctive that key elements such as his floriated capitals and animal and fish icons were adopted by other carvers after Bush “went missing” after the 1757 siege of Fort William Henry. Collectively those carvers are known as “the Lake George School” by collectors, folklorists, and art historians. But the School had its origin in John Bush’s richly decorative work.

Further Reading

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Illustrations

Thomas Williams powder horn, 8 September 1755, signed by John Bush. Drawing by George H. Harris, Rochester. New-York Historical Society. Rufus Grider Collection.

William Williams' powder horn, ca. 1755, attributed to John Bush. Guthman Collection. Helga Photo Studio. Now in the collection of Historic Deerfield, Inc.

Robert Rodgers' powder horn, "Fort W^m henry June 3 1756." [FTA #PH-4190]. Acquired from Mrs. Myrtle Cuneo in honor of her late husband, John R. Cuneo, 1987. Photo by Tad Merrick.

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