

James Bushnell (1826–1912)

By Timothy Bergquist, PhD

James Addison Bushnell was a Junction City businessman and an active member of the Christian Church. He worked with Eugene C. Sanderson to found the Eugene Divinity School (EDS) in 1895 and served as president of the Board of Trustees from 1895 until his death in 1912. The name of the school has changed many times, and its most recent renaming on July 1, 2020, to Bushnell University honored its earliest supporter.

Bushnell was born in Chautauqua County, New York, on July 27, 1826. After moving several times, his family settled in Kirksville, Missouri. In 1847, he was baptized and became a member of the Christian Church. He married Elizabeth C. Adkins in September 1849, and in the spring of 1852 he traveled on his own to California by way of Oregon. In June 1853, Bushnell left for Missouri to get his family, but they had already left on an overland journey to the Cascade Mountains by way of the Elliott Cutoff as part of what became known as the Lost Wagon Train of 1853—the group had to be rescued after a “shortcut” left them stranded. Bushnell retraced his journey, this time crossing through Panama, and joined his family in Springfield in November 1853.

Bushnell filed his first Donation Land claim of 320 acres near Clear Lake. He started the first school in that part of Lane County in December 1855 and expanded the claim to 800 acres in 1864. In 1855, he also helped establish the First Christian Church of Clear Lake, where he served as deacon.

After Elizabeth died in 1868, Bushnell married Sarah E. Page in April 1870. In 1875, they settled in Junction City, just north of Eugene, where he operated a grain warehouse for the next thirty-five years. In 1880 he helped found the Church of Christ in Junction City and was elder for many years. He was President of the Lane County Evangelistic Board, Vice President of the Oregon Christian Missionary Society, and Secretary of the Oregon Christian Convention. Bushnell lost several of his children to disease during this time, and he wrote about their deaths with great grief in his autobiography.

Several years later, in 1893, Bushnell and C. W. Washburne established Farmers & Merchants Bank; Bushnell served as its president until his death. He was president of the Junction City Hotel Company, which in 1891 established a half-block-long brick opera house and hotel that was said to be “the finest to be found between Seattle and San Francisco.” The building burned in 1915. He also started the first Chamber of Commerce in the area.

Eugene C. Sanderson founded the Eugene Divinity School, near the University of Oregon, to prepare ministers for service as part of the Stone–Campbell Restoration Movement, a reform effort to reunify all Christians under the New Testament. Bushnell was active in helping EDS grow, leading the fund-raising effort to build what is now the Martha Goodrich Administrative Building in 1908. He and his wife provided the funds for Sanderson to purchase rare bibles for the school’s first library, which was named for them. Established in 1913, the Sarah E. Bushnell Bible and Rare Book Collection remains an important collection in the Kellenberger Library at Bushnell University.

Bushnell died on April 10, 1912, and was buried in Luper Pioneer Cemetery northwest of Eugene. The family home in Junction City still stands.

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