Famous Fossils
In Washington
Megalonyx: the “Great Claw”

The **Seatac Sloth** might have the most unusual story of all of the famous fossils of Washington. The story includes Thomas Jefferson our 3rd president, air ports, the **Ice Age** and of course the animal the giant ground sloth. Let’s tell the story from oldest to youngest.

Thirty five million years ago some sloths moved from the trees to the ground. They lived in South America which was **not** connected to North America as it is today. Eight million years ago North and South America connected enough that the ground sloth could move to North America. By about 3 million years ago sloths had found their way to Washington and had grown to giant size.

Notice that 3 sites are in Washington State, one is all the way up in Alaska and some are way down in Florida. Also there are some in West Virginia.

This is where President Jefferson joins the story in 1796. Jefferson became aware of a giant ground sloth fossil and because of its very large claw, he gave it the name **Megalonyx**, which means “great claw”.
The Ice Age may have caused Megalonyx to move south, as ice covered large parts of what is now Washington, but by 12,000 years ago the ice was retreating and sloths had moved back into the Puget Sound area. How do we know? This is where the airport comes in. In 1961, Gordon Simons was driving a bulldozer during construction at the SeaTac Airport when he spotted bones sticking out of the ground. Scientists moved in and excavated the skeleton which turned out to be one of the most complete *Megalonyx jeffersonii* ever to be found.

The Seatac Sloth is on display at the Burke Museum in Seattle on the campus of the University of Washington.

http://www.burkemuseum.org/static/burke_boxes_materials/fossils/interactive/01_fossils.html
Tooth and Claw

Giant ground sloth fossils sometimes include claws and teeth. Scientists use these fossil parts to try and decide what the animal might have been like when it was alive. For example was a ground sloth a meat eater like Sabre tooth tiger or a plant eater like the Columbian mammoth?

1. Look at the models of the claw and the tooth of a giant ground sloth.
2. Look at the pictures of the giant ground sloth in the story.

What do you think scientists decided about the ground sloth being a meat eater or a plant eater? What is the evidence in the picture that is the best clue?