

Medicine Creek Treaty Tree Memorial

Contributed by Benjamin Helle, Olympia Branch Archivist

On a bluff overlooking Interstate 5 and the Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge sits an imposing marker you've likely never seen, but has been part of the landscape for almost 40 years.



Students of Timberline High School's Indian Studies class add cement to the memorial, May 1976. WSDOT Photograph Collections, Washington State Archives.

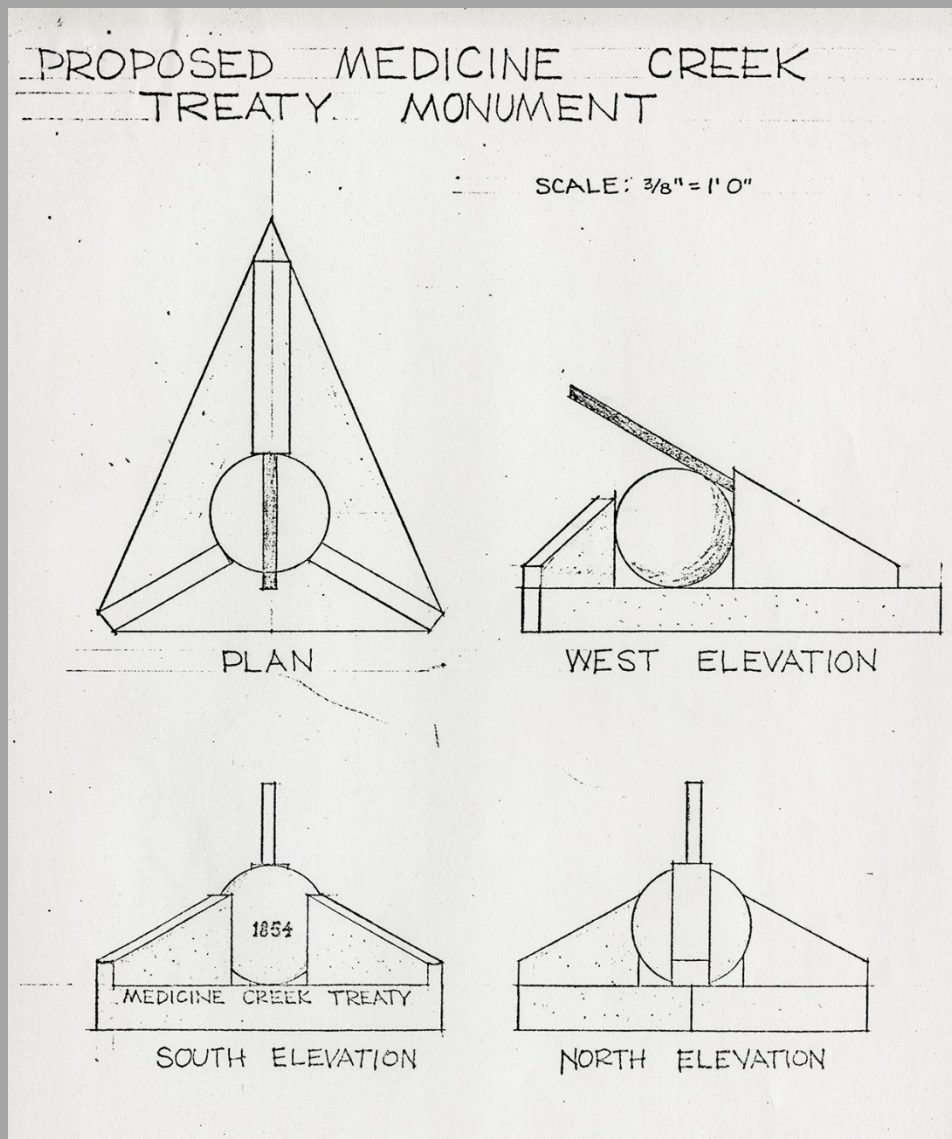
As part of the American Bicentennial celebrations in 1976, a group of teachers and students from Timberline High School in Lacey organized the Medicine Creek Treaty Tree Memorial Committee to construct a monument to the nearby dying Treaty Tree and commemorate the importance of peaceful resolution between peoples. The Treaty Tree marked the location of the Medicine Creek Treaty, signed in December 1854. Governor Isaac I. Stevens, acting as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Washington, negotiated the treaty on behalf of the United States and the Nisqually, Puyallup, Steilacoom, Squaxin, Snohomish, Steh-chass, Peek-sin, Squi-aitl, and Sahehwamish tribes. Through the treaty, tribes reserved the right to hunt and fish in their traditional places, while non-Indians were granted clear title to lands.



The Treaty Tree rises next to Interstate 5 in the Nisqually Delta, ca 1968. WSDOT Photograph Collections, Washington State Archives.

During the year, the students worked with the Department of Highways in selecting a site on Nisqually Hill that looked over the Treaty Tree and secured donations of building material from the US Navy and Burlington Northern Railroad. Explaining its design, the committee stated:

"The spherical form of the monument attempts to symbolize the Indian's view of the circular nature of life and their culture. The straight steel beam symbolizes white society - a linear, industrial society. The two elements are juxtaposed evenly, one against the other; together, yet with the integrity of each standing separately. We seek to show a perfect harmony, balance, and peace. The three vertical elements, give location and background to the two dominant symbols."



Proposed plan for the marker designed by Timberline students, 1976. WSDOT Photograph Collections, Washington State Archives.

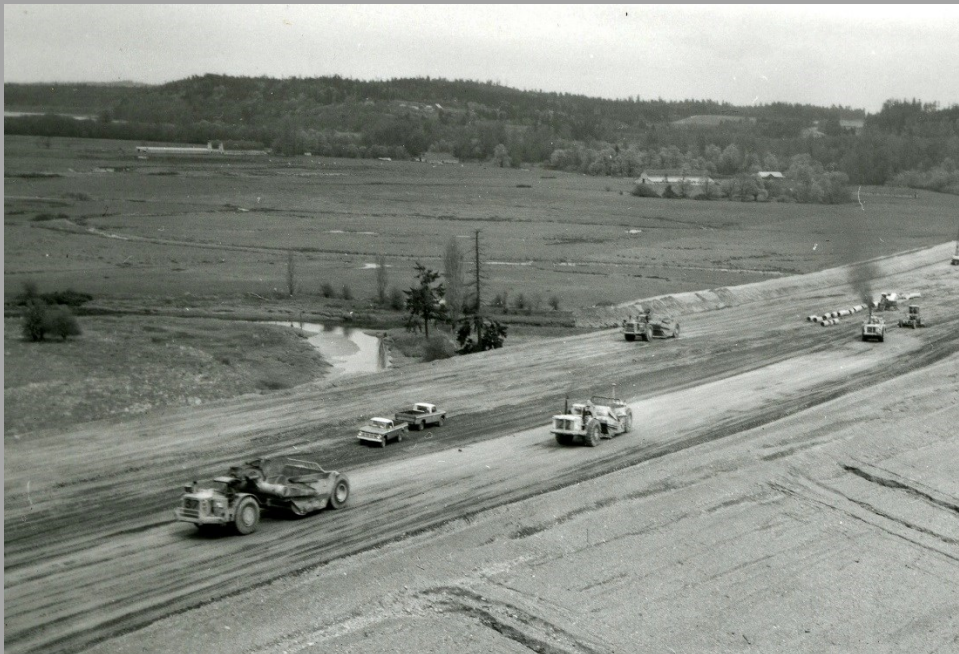
The sphere itself was hollow, and contained a "time chamber" filled with material relevant to the purpose of the project to be opened in 2176. It included a copy of the 1854 treaty, copies of Lacey and Olympia newspapers, names of all students and faculty-administrators involved, typical "artifacts" common to 1976, messages from officials to the future, and a letter to the future Timberline students of July 4, 2176.

In addition to erecting the memorial, progeny seedlings from the original Treaty Tree, a Douglas fir, were planted next to the memorial. Collected by state landscape architects beginning in 1975, the seeds have since produced several descendants that have been gifted to local tribes. The Treaty Tree eventually succumbed and was declared dead in 1979. In 2007, the tree, which was estimated to be almost 200 years old, blew down in a winter windstorm.



Students plant the Treaty Tree's progeny seedlings, June 1976. WSDOT Photograph Collections, Washington State Archives.

The Medicine Creek Treaty Tree Memorial was dedicated on October 13, 1976, with two busloads of Timberline students in attendance, as well as representatives from the Department of Highways, Fisheries and Game, and Governor Evans' office.



The Department of Highways was careful to avoid the Treaty Tree, center, when it constructed I-5 through the area in the 1960s, but fill placed in the right of way likely affected its health. WSDOT Photograph Collections, Washington State Archives.