Five Oaks

and the Fourth of July
In the early years of U.S. settlement in the Pacific Northwest, two landmark Fourth of July celebrations took place at the Five Oaks historic site and became a source of both pride and pain.

In the historical record—including in our museum’s previous publications—the celebrations are lauded as “grand, harmonious affair[s].”

The mood may have been festive, but using the Five Oaks site for gun salutes and congratulatory speeches was likely a strategic display of American settler colonial power.
We chose to rename the museum after the Five Oaks historic site because of the complex and layered history that took place there.

This complicated site speaks to our journey as a museum to share a more whole history of this region and demonstrates the need to offer a platform for communities who are not adequately heard, respected, and cherished, so that we may all learn, heal, and create a better world.

We are starting this journey by telling the truth. May truth be the foundation for justice.
Prior to the Oregon Trail, the grove of oak trees was associated with Native land stewardship and then with British economic and social power.

Five Oaks was a known gathering place of Tualatin Kalapuyan peoples, who intentionally developed abundant oak savannas across their land.

The Five Oaks historic site is located in present-day Hillsboro, Oregon on unceded Kalapuyan land.
In the 1840s, the sheer number of Americans who walked the Oregon Trail and established private farms permanently changed the region’s ecosystem and politics.

For thirty years, the British Hudson’s Bay Company enforced British laws in the Oregon Country. Seasonally, Hudson’s Bay Company fur trappers would set up a temporary trading fair under the Five Oaks.

Present-day Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Vancouver Island, BC.

Both the United States and Great Britain claimed Oregon Country without regard for the territorial rights of hundreds of Native tribes living here since time immemorial.
In 1845, the new white American settlers selected the Five Oaks site for the first Fourth of July celebration in all of Oregon Country. They shot rifles into the air and listened to a speech by settler Peter H. Burnett. The words of Burnett’s speech weren’t recorded, but the gesture of holding the first Fourth of July celebration at a site associated with Native and British people remains a clear expression of how white American power was consolidated through armed exclusion and land grabs.

Burnett was an enslaver and major proponent of Black exclusion, Chinese exclusion, and Native genocide who later became California’s first governor.
In the ten years between recorded celebrations at the Five Oaks, the U.S. signed a treaty with Britain to invent the current-day U.S./Canada border, fought the Mexican-American War to take control of California and the Southwest, and passed the Donation Land Claim Act to award 640 acres of land to married white settlers, for free.

Without any recognition of Native sovereignty and land rights, these new legal frameworks asserted white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy which enabled white Americans to force out Mexican ranchers, prevent Black settlers, limit Asians to exploitative male labor crews, and drive Native peoples into hunger and sickness.
In 1855, settlers again selected the Five Oaks site for Oregon Territory's Fourth of July celebration. Historical records describe many hours of gun salutes, prayers, singing, and feasting.

At the time of this celebration, Indian Agents were in the midst of reinforcing settler colonialism. They forcibly removed tribes from their ancestral homelands and onto reservations, either coercing tribes with broken promises of food, medicine, and protection from gun-toting settlers, or fighting wars with tribes that insisted on their right to remain.

Could this Fourth of July celebration at the Five Oaks site be interpreted to invoke the assertion of white American land claims through armed exclusion from a decade prior?
Five Oaks Museum is on a journey to share a more whole history of this region.

How do you feel when you hear about the complexities of how the freedoms that make up the foundation of Oregon and the United States were established?

We would love to hear from you in the comments <3