

Sand Creek Massacre

Sand Creek Massacre
National Historic Site
Colorado

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



By the dim light I could see the soldiers, charging down on the camp from each side . . . at first the people stood huddled in the village, but as the soldiers came on they broke and fled . . .

—George Bent, son of trader William Bent and Owl Woman, a Cheyenne

(Left) Bent is shown with wife Magpie, niece of Black Kettle and survivor of the massacre. Cheyenne leader War Bonnet (right) died at Sand Creek.

It is difficult to believe that beings in the form of men, and disgracing the uniform of United States soldiers and officers, could commit or countenance . . . such acts of cruelty and barbarity . . .

—Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, 1865

Col. John Chivington (near left), leader of the attack, and Pvt. Joseph Aldrich, who was killed at Sand Creek.

In the 1800s columns of U.S. Cavalry were a growing presence on the Great Plains.

BACKGROUND PHOTO: NPS, WAR BONNET & CHIVINGTON: WWW.PICTUREHISTORY.COM;

OTHER PORTRAITS & CAVALRY: DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY

SAND CREEK—a windswept place haunted by violence and broken promises. The 1864 massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho people opened the last phase of a broader conflict between Native Americans and a rapidly expanding nation. At stake were two ways of using the land, of seeing the world. The massacre deepened Plains Indian resistance to American expansion, spurring a cycle of raids and reprisals. But the savagery at Sand Creek also helped awaken America to the plight of its native peoples. This remains sacred ground—a place to honor the dead and dispossessed, a place where they are not forgotten.

The Sun rising at their backs, a long column of riders moved up dry Big Sandy Creek toward the tipis along its banks. The village's 700 Cheyenne and Arapaho people were stirring, tending to chores. The temporary camp was along the northern border of the Fort Wise Treaty lands, where most felt protected. Hearing distant hoof beats, Indian women called out, "The buffalo are coming!"

But on this cold November morning the "buffalo" were hundreds of blue-clad soldiers. The alarm went through the village. Peace Chief Black Kettle raised a U.S. flag and a white flag of truce, signals of peaceful intentions. Men gathered weapons and young herders moved the pony herds. Women, children, and elderly

began their evacuation up the dry creek channel and onto the plains. Cheyenne chiefs Black Kettle, Standing In The Water, and White Antelope, with Arapaho chief Left Hand, walked toward the mounted soldiers to ask for a parley. Cavalrymen crossed the creek, firing into them and the village. All but Black Kettle were killed or mortally wounded.

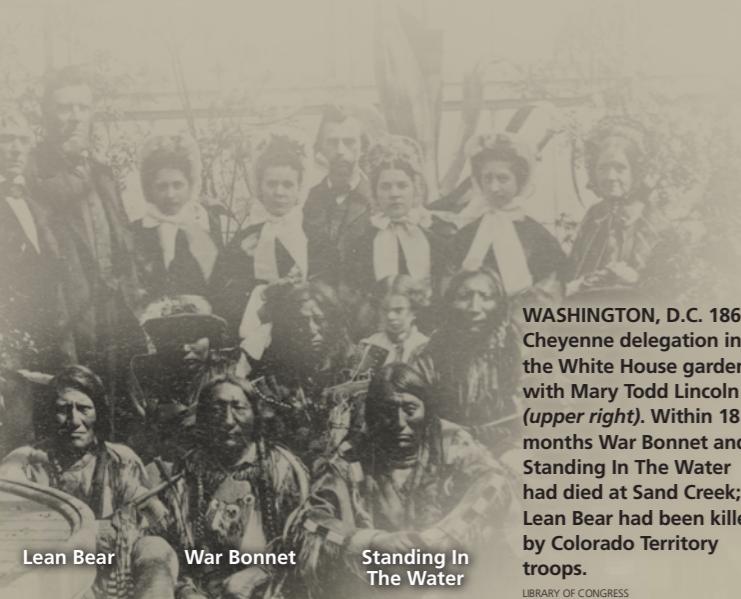
Col. John Chivington arrived with the artillery at the edge of the village. He gave the order to fire, then ordered the howitzers upstream. As soldiers scattered over many square miles, command and control was soon lost, and soldiers died in their own crossfire. The Colorado 3rd Regiment, a group of 100-day U.S. Volunteers, lost all unit integrity. Soon individuals and small

squads chased after Indians in all directions. Captain Soule's and Lieutenant Cramer's units of the First Regiment refused to fire, standing down and remaining in formation.

Of the 100 fighting-age men in the camp, some formed lines of battle, trying to cover those fleeing. Into the early afternoon soldiers poured a relentless fire into stragglers until their ammunition ran out. Most who surrendered were executed. The treeless stream bed provided little cover. Groups of villagers dug pits in the bed in a desperate attempt to escape bullets. These "sand pits" proved worthless against almost point-blank howitzer fire. Most of the women, children, and elderly who were killed lost their lives in the sand pits.

Soldiers pursued Indians fleeing over the prairie, riding down and killing those they found. When the firing ended, 165 to 200 Cheyenne and Arapaho people were killed—two-thirds of them women, children, and elderly. Another 200 were wounded or maimed. Of the army's 675 soldiers, about 16 were killed and 70 wounded.

The next day some soldiers looted, scalped, and mutilated the dead. After ransacking and burning the camp, they left the site bearing human body parts as trophies and 600 horses, scattering the rest of the herd. Surviving Cheyenne and Arapaho people, many of them wounded, hid during the days, making their way north in frigid weather to encampments on the Smoky Hill River.



WASHINGTON, D.C. 1863
Cheyenne delegation in the White House garden with Mary Todd Lincoln (upper right). Within 18 months War Bonnet and Standing In The Water had died at Sand Creek; Lean Bear had been killed by Colorado Territory troops.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Map (left) shows the attack in relation to the park area. The Core Area includes archeological evidence of part of the encampment and the creek bend shown in survivor George Bent's 1914 map (right).

Bent showed sites of Black Kettle's band (1), other bands (tipis closer to creek bend), and a pit (2, upper left) dug by women to escape the bullets. Warriors tried to defend it from their rifle pits (3, in creek bed), but were besieged by soldiers (4) from all sides.

COURTESY OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Immigrants from the United States poured onto the plains. Settlers, miners, and speculators crossed what was then called the "Great American Desert," seeking wealth or simply a new start. By 1850, through treaty, annexation, and war, the United States and its territories spanned the continent. The discovery of gold in the Rockies brought more immigrants, more settlement. By 1864 land speculation became a major business interest in a Colorado Territory poised on the brink of statehood.

The stage was set: Here were two vastly different cultures, one a rapidly growing, expansionist nation employing industrial technology, intent on fulfilling its self-proclaimed "Manifest Destiny." Directly in its path was a nomadic people dependent on the buffalo hide trade. The clash of these two cultures produced a great American tragedy.

Cohoe, Cheyenne survivor of Sand Creek, d. 1924

PHOTO BY MARY CHAPMAN (LONG NECK WOMAN), © SERLE CHAPMAN; TIP POLES WITH FLAGS AND MOCCASINS, © SERLE CHAPMAN

Two Cultures, One Land

The Great Plains in the 1800s was a seemingly endless expanse of prairie stretching east from the Rockies toward the Missouri, covered with grass and shrub, threaded with tree-lined streams, tracked by great herds of buffalo. This land was the prize, the scene of both struggle and accord between Native Americans and the United States.

The Cheyenne and Arapaho came from the north. In the 1600s they had farmed from the Great Lakes to western Minnesota. Pressured from the east by other tribes, they migrated west, eventually reaching the Black Hills. In less than 50 years the horse became a crucial part of their lives. Moving south onto the plains, they entered what is now Colorado by the 1820s. They gathered and traded wild horses and hunted buffalo and other animals that provided food, shelter, tools, and hides for trade.

By 1841, through trade along the Santa Fe and other trails, these tribes built far-ranging trade networks and alliances. Bent's Fort (now Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site), southwest of Sand Creek, was one trade center. As marriages between traders and Native American women solidified these ties, the deepening economic relations significantly altered the material lives of the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

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Setting for a Tragedy

Native Americans across the plains grew resentful as white settlement of the West disrupted their nomadic ways. Economic developments and increasingly busy overland and river routes cut across Indian lands and interests. Travelers and settlers competed for grass, water, fuel, and game. To dampen growing tensions the U.S. government signed a treaty with the tribes at Fort Laramie in 1851. In exchange for allowing safe passage for whites, much of the Great Plains was promised to the tribes, with the Cheyenne-Arapaho portion stretching between the North Platte and Arkansas rivers (see map below).

In a few years this arrangement was no longer convenient. After gold was discovered in the Pikes Peak area in 1858, miners, business interests, and homesteaders began using the Smoky Hill Trail through the 1851 Cheyenne-Arapaho reserve. They wanted protection. Then in early 1861, with seven southern states having already seceded and civil war looming, the federal government decided to organize a new territory to

secure the gold fields for the Union. To pave the way for the Colorado Territory and protect the routes through it, politicians called for a reduction of the treaty lands. A fraction of the Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs, including Black Kettle, were called in to negotiate the Treaty of Fort Wise in September 1860. Only six of the Cheyenne Council of Forty-Four and a few Arapaho leaders agreed to a greatly reduced reserve—the northern border of which was the "Big Sandy," now called Sand Creek. Most Cheyenne headmen did not acknowledge or may not have been aware of the new treaty; many still hunted and lived on their old grounds.

Further complicating the situation, Colorado Territory politicians and businessmen—led by Gov. John Evans—aspired to statehood. To improve prospects they lobbied to protect trade along the Santa Fe Trail, bring a rail line to Denver, and create a South Platte River spur off the Oregon Trail. Troubles

with tribes in the territory were an obstacle. Anxieties deepened after Confederates invaded New Mexico in a failed attempt to gain access to the Colorado gold fields and transportation routes. Many regular soldiers were committed to the war elsewhere; some settlers and commercial interests felt vulnerable.

In early 1864 Native American raids on ranches and stage stations followed by punitive and preemptive Army expeditions dimmed prospects for peace. Throughout that spring and summer hysteria and fear increased on both sides: From some quarters the cry went up to solve the "Indian problem." Many southern Cheyenne and Arapaho, led by chiefs like Black Kettle, were still dedicated to peace talks, but warrior societies like the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers stiffened their resistance to further white incursion, raiding along the Platte and Arkansas rivers. Events accelerated toward a tragic culmination at Sand Creek.

1850s

1860s

1864

1870s–90

Chief Whirlwind survived the massacre; he signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty in 1867.

COURTESY FIRST PEOPLE; WWW.FIRSTPEOPLES.US

In 1700s and 1800s Cheyenne and Arapaho had moved from Great Lakes to western Minnesota, then North Dakota. Pressure from Lakota pushed them farther west into South Dakota and Wyoming. They adopted the horse and began moving south onto the Great Plains. The 1825 Friendship Treaty formalized relations between Cheyenne and U.S. government.

1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie assigns to tribes a large swath of the Great Plains and promises annuities. Tribes guarantee free passage for settlers along Oregon Trail.

1850s U.S. wars with Plains tribes in Kansas.

1858 Discovery of gold in Colorado.

1861 (Feb. 18): Treaty of Fort Wise greatly reduces 1851 treaty lands. Treaty would turn Cheyenne and Arapaho into farmers; disputed by Cheyenne Dog Soldiers. Supply problems undermine the plan.

1861 (Feb. 28) Colorado Territory organized out of Kansas, Nebraska, Utah, and New Mexico territories. Civil War begins six weeks later.

1862 Dakota War in Minnesota: disputes over annuity payments and treaty violations kill hundreds and cause widespread fear.

1862 Battle of Glorieta Pass, New Mexico: Union victory protects Colorado gold fields.

1863–64 Cheyenne/Arapaho, Kiowa/Comanche raid in Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska.

June 11 Murder of Nathan Hungate family is blamed on "Indians." Victims' remains are displayed in Denver, spurting calls for revenge.

June 24 Colorado Territory governor John Evans issues a proclamation to the "friendly Indians of the plains." He tells them to go to designated "places of safety." Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho are sent to Fort Lyon (formerly Fort Wise) on the Arkansas River.

August 11 Governor Evans issues a proclamation authorizing citizens to "kill and destroy . . . hostile Indians." The War Department authorizes a 100-day volunteer cavalry (Third Regiment). Col.

John Chivington is given command of the military district.

August 29 In response to Evans' proclamation of June 24, Black Kettle has two educated "half-bloods," including George Bent, write letters to the Indian agent at Fort Lyon, asking for a meeting. They turn over their prisoners and agree to a meeting with territorial and U.S. Army representatives.

September 28 Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders, including Black Kettle, meet with Governor Evans and Colonel Chivington near Denver. Chivington tells them to lay down their arms and turn themselves in at Fort Lyon, promising nothing else.

October Evans writes that "winter . . . is the most favorable time for their chastisement . . ." (when the Indians' horses are weak and tribes typically do not make war). Cheyenne arrive at Fort Lyon. Following discussions they go to Sand Creek, where Black Kettle's band is already camped and the game and forage are better. By mid-October about 130 tipis are pitched there. The 700 people are mostly Cheyenne, with a few Arapaho.

November The Third Colorado Cavalry, having seen no combat, has been mockingly labeled the "Bloodless Third." Chivington leaves Denver Nov. 20 with command staff. Companies from the First and Third Cavalry are already en route. Other companies join them along the way.

November 28 Chivington arrives at Fort Lyon with over 850 men. To keep his plans secret, he halts outgoing mail and restricts everyone to the fort. He leaves Fort Lyon that night with about 675 men and four 12-pounder mountain howitzers. Column heads for Sand Creek, navigating by the North Star.

1864 After Sand Creek Cheyenne and Arapaho retaliate, attacking wagon trains, stations, settlements, and ranches along the South Platte River Trail between Julesburg and Denver.

1865–69 Dog Soldiers try to close Smoky Hill Trail.

1868 (Nov. 27): Lt. Col. George Custer leads attack on Black Kettle's band of Cheyenne on the Washita River. Black Kettle is killed.

1868 Ulysses Grant becomes president; promotes "Peace Policy" in relations with Native Americans.

1868 14th Amendment's definition of citizens as "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof . . ." is used to exclude Native Americans. Naturalization is also denied them.

1869 Battle of Summit Springs decimates Dog Soldiers.

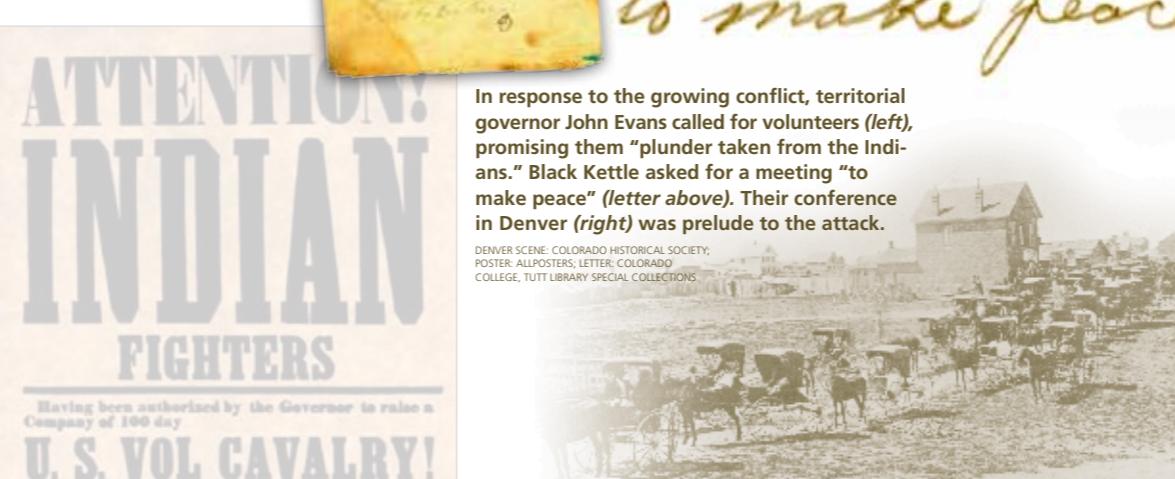
1871 Indian Appropriations Act ends treaty-making, opens era of assimilation.

1876 (June 25) Cheyenne and Lakota annihilate Gen. George Custer's 7th Cavalry near Little Bighorn River.

1877 Dawes Act spurs assimilation, dividing reservations into allotments; Native Americans holding land patents are granted citizenship.

1889 Unassigned lands in Indian Territory (later Oklahoma) are opened to white settlement.

1890 Sioux begin Ghost Dance; over 200 Lakota killed at Wounded Knee, S.D.; event is considered end of Indian Wars.



... to kill and destroy, as enemies of the country, wherever they may be found, all such hostile Indians.

—1864 proclamation by Colorado Territory governor John Evans

Aftermath of the Massacre

The effects of the attack reverberated for years, profoundly unsettling the Cheyenne and Arapaho people. Several bands and their cultural traditions were essentially destroyed. Losses left many families without providers and children without parents. Thirteen Cheyenne chiefs and one Arapaho chief were killed along with any chances for peace, damaging the traditional governing council for generations. The treachery of the attack damaged the credibility of remaining Peace Chiefs like Black

Kettle, gaining recruits to the warrior societies. Across the plains, Cheyenne warriors declared all-out war.

Some Denver citizens cheered the returning soldiers, who displayed their human trophies on stage. But some were appalled at the killing and mutilations. The Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War took testimony, finding that Chivington had "surprised and murdered, in cold blood . . .

unsuspecting men, women, and children . . . who had every reason to believe that they were under [U.S.] protection . . ." Despite this condemnation, no one connected with the massacre was ever indicted or tried in military or civilian court.

The events at Sand Creek, while setting off a new round of conflict, eventually helped fuel a reappraisal of the treatment of Native Americans. The glaring contradiction between America's ideals and

events like Sand Creek, Washita, and Wounded Knee would increasingly trouble citizens. Emphasis gradually shifted from military, economic, and cultural subjugation of native peoples to their "assimilation" into American society in the 1900s. The goal was to turn them into settled farmers and end loyalties to tribe and chief—"Kill the Indian; save the man." This attempt to end the Plains Indians' way of life would only partly succeed due to the resilience of the Cheyenne and Arapaho people.

Sand Creek Today

Park hours are posted on the website: www.nps.gov/sand. Please contact the park for updated seasonal hours, upcoming events, or to make an appointment in the off-season.

For Your Safety The park is in an isolated area. Bring water and appropriate outdoor clothing. Please stay on the walking trail at all times. Caution large vehicles and motorcyclists: Eight miles of dirt and sand roads lead to the site.

Regulations All pets must be on a leash. Camping is not allowed at the site. See the park website for firearms regulations.

Accessibility The park contact station and some paths are accessible to wheelchairs. Service animals are welcome.

The park hosts special programs associated with the events at Sand Creek and today's Cheyenne and Arapaho. These events, including annual Spiritual Healing Runs and other activities, help to commemorate and memorialize the tragic history and legacy of the Sand Creek Massacre. Please check the park website for dates and more information.



More Information

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site
910 Wansted St.
Eads, CO 81036
Site office: 719-729-3003
Eads office: 719-438-5916
www.nps.gov/sand

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