

Washita Battlefield

National Historic Site
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site was enacted on November 12, 1996. The park commemorates the dawn attack of the 7th U.S. Cavalry under Lt. Col. George A. Custer on the Southern Cheyenne village of Peace Chief Black Kettle. The controversial strike was hailed by the military and many civilians as a significant victory aimed at reducing Indian raids waged against frontier settlements. Washita remains mutually controversial because many whites and Indians labeled Custer's attack a massacre.

BACKGROUND

The cultural collision between pioneers and Indians, was played out on the Great Plains in the decades before and after the post-Civil War years. For a time it had been government policy to insulate the Tribes from the settlers by means of establishing an Indian Territory, present-day Oklahoma. Some tribes accepted reservations, others like the Cheyennes, Kiowas, and Comanches did not, preferring to hunt and live

on traditional lands outside Indian Territory. But in the post-Civil War era, land-hungry settlers were penetrating the plains along the river valleys. Hunting grounds were encroached upon by European cultures. Indians could no longer retreat into wilderness but were forced to defend their way of life.

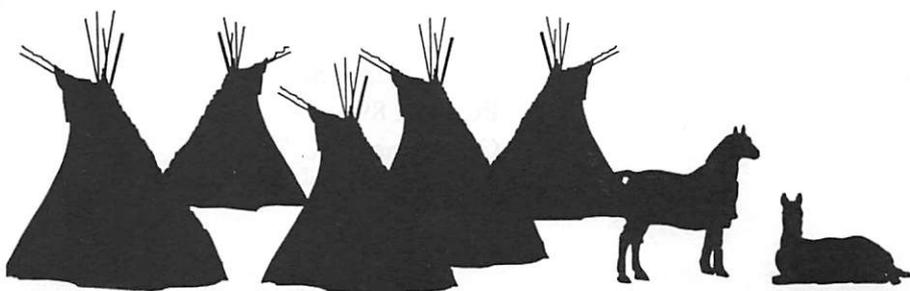
THE BATTLE

The story of the Battle of the Washita begins with the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 when on November 29 Col. J.M. Chivington surprised and destroyed the camp of Chief Black Kettle and Chief White Antelope on Sand Creek, 40 miles from Fort Lyon. Black Kettle's village flew an American flag and white flag and considered themselves at peace and under military protection. The terrible slaughter caused the creation of a Peace Commission to devise a plan by which the plains people could be converted from their nomadic way of life and settled on reservations.

On the Southern Plains, this culminated in the Medicine Lodge Treaty of October 1867. Under treaty terms the Arapahos, Cheyennes, Comanches, and Kiowas were assigned to reservations in the Indian Territory. There they would have permanent homes, farms, agricultural implements and annuities of food, blankets, and clothing. The treaty was doomed to failure. Many chiefs did not sign and those who did could not control their people.

Major General Philip H. Sheridan, in command of the Department of the Missouri, adopted a policy that "punishment must follow crime." He mounted a winter campaign when the Indian horses were weak and unfit for all but the most limited service. The Indians only protection in the winter was isolation and brutal weather.

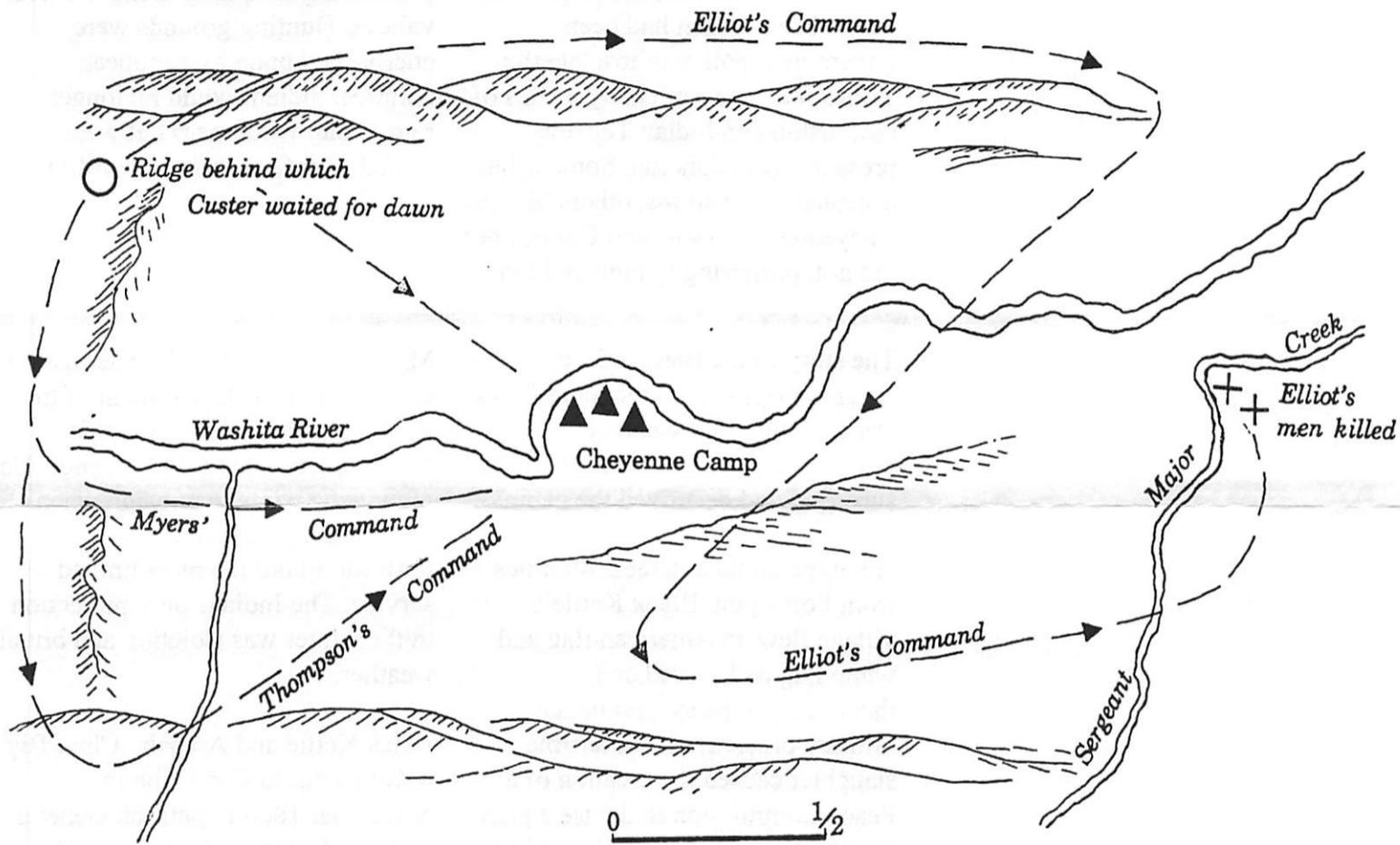
Black Kettle and Arapaho Chief Big Mouth went to Fort Cobb in November 1868 to petition General William B. Hazen for peace and protection. A respected leader of the Southern Cheyenne, Black Kettle had signed the Little Arkansas Treaties in 1865 and the Medicine Lodge Treaty in 1867. After giving the chiefs flour, blankets, and other goods, Hazen told the chiefs that he would not allow them to bring their villages to Fort Cobb for protection because their warriors (the Dog Soldiers) had participated in the raids in Kansas and that the "Big Chief Sheridan" had made war upon them. With that announcement, the chiefs returned to their peaceful winter encampments on the Washita River.



Also, in November, 1868, the 7th Cavalry established a forward base of operations at Camp Supply, Indian Territory. With 800 troops Lt. Col. George A. Custer marched south on November 23 traveling through a foot of snow. Four days later the command reached the Washita valley and took up a position near the village after midnight on November 27. Before dawn Custer's troopers attacked the 51 lodges killing less than 100 men, women, and children. More than 50 Cheyennes were captured, mainly women and children. Custer ordered

the destruction of the Indian pony and mule herd estimated at more than 800. The Cheyenne-Arapaho lodges with all their supply of winter meat, food, and clothing were torched. Killed in the battle were Chief Black Kettle and his wife. Custer's losses were light, 2 officers and 19 enlisted men killed. Most of the soldier casualties belonged to Major Joel Elliott's detachment, which were trapped and killed by Cheyennes and Arapaho warriors (Dog Soldiers) coming to the aid of Black Kettle.

Custer returned triumphantly to Camp Supply with his captives in tow. The Cheyennes and other Plains tribes scattered following the Washita debacle. As a result of the unprovoked attack on the Cheyenne camp, many of the bands were forced to reservation life.



TODAY

The National Historic Site is comprised of approximately 326 acres, the core of the battlefield. This area includes the site of Black Kettle's village, Custer's command post, and troop and Indian positions recently discovered during a November 1995 survey of the battlefield.

Location: Approximately 140 miles west of Oklahoma City and 128 miles east of Amarillo, Texas

Facilities: Limited, overlook of Battlefield open daily, daylight to dusk.

General Information: Black Kettle Museum in downtown Cheyenne, Oklahoma contains exhibits about the Cheyenne and the Battle of the Washita.

Address: Superintendent
PO Box 890
Cheyenne, OK 73628