

Sand Creek Massacre

Bent's Old Fort

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site
Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site



The Family of William Bent

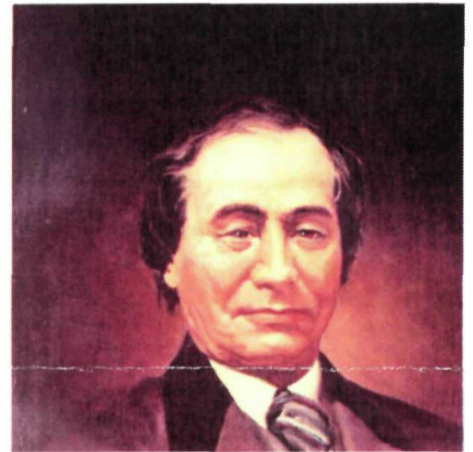
Walking Through Change

The Wives of William Bent

While he lived in Colorado, William Bent married three Cheyenne sisters and a young mixed-blood woman. Three of the wives were daughters of White Thunder, the Cheyenne Arrow Keeper, which permitted Bent to join the Cheyenne tribe. These were Owl Woman and her sisters Yellow Woman and Island. Bent married Owl Woman in 1835, shortly after completing his trading post Fort William or Bent's Fort, near present-day La Junta, Colorado. As a result, trade blossomed at his fort, which served as a home for William, though his wives and children lived, for the most part, in tipis near the fort, instead of dwelling within it. With the death of Owl Woman, the departure of Yellow Woman to join the Dog Soldiers and Island's decision to live with another trader, Bent married Adaline Harvey, a young mixed-blood, in 1867 two years before his death.

William Bent's Children

William Bent and Owl Woman had four children together: Mary in 1838, Robert in 1841, George in 1843, and Julia in 1847. Owl Woman died shortly after Julia's birth. Yellow Woman gave birth to Charley in 1845. Bent and Island had no children together; however, Island's presence gave the five children a caring stepmother. Bent's children grew up in a mixed world, blended between the nomadic hunting/gathering of the Cheyenne and the sedentary life of a frontier trading post.



William Bent in the 1860's
Image courtesy History Colorado

Growing Up Between Two Changing Worlds

Living within the Cheyenne villages, the mothers raised the Bent children in traditional Native fashion. Mary and Julia learned to sew, dress skins, cook, and forage for edible/medicinal plants, while the boys practiced hunting, wrestling, and equestrian skills. In 1849, William abandoned his fort, moving to Fort St. Vrain before constructing a new trading post (Bent's New Fort) near presentday Lamar in 1853. All of Bent's children, except Julia, were sent to Westport, Missouri, to receive an American education in 1853-54.

Divided Loyalty During the Civil War



Robert Bent
Image courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society

With the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861, the brutal repression of pro-secessionist southerners by Union General Nathaniel Lyon generated sympathy among the Bent Family. George joined the secessionist Missouri State Guard, who turned away Charley for being underage. Robert, a loyal Unionist, avoided the war by remaining in Colorado and running the family trading business with Mary at Bent's New Fort. Julia and Charley chose to live with their Cheyenne relatives far away from the conflict.

George fought for the Confederacy as an artilleryman, but in August 1861, Union cavalry captured him near Corinth, Mississippi. The influence of William Bent led to George's parole in September and he was released into his brother Robert's custody, ending his involvement with the Confederacy.

The Bent Family and the Sand Creek Massacre

George chose to live with his Cheyenne relatives shortly after his return to Colorado. In 1864, he joined Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle's camp in the Smoky Hill River basin (Kansas). George wrote one of the letters that led to the September 28 Camp Weld Conference in Denver, between Territorial Governor John Evans and prominent Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders. Leaving the conference with instructions that implied peace, the Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders agreed to relocate to the Upper Arkansas Agency, there to await a peace delegation. In October, George and his half-brother Charley camped with bands of Cheyenne and Arapaho, including the peace chiefs White Antelope, War Bonnet, Lone Bear, Black Kettle, and Left Hand on the banks of the Big Sandy Creek.

When detachments of the 1st and 3rd Colorado (U.S.) Volunteer Cavalry, under the command of Col. John Chivington, marched to the village on November 28, they brought Robert Bent, forcibly conscripted from his father's ranch to guide the soldiers to Sand Creek. Robert watched the November 29 attack on his family and friends, powerless to do anything to save them. During the attack, fighting-age Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors fought back, but they were too few and were overwhelmed by the hundreds of cavalry troops intent on killing all the Indians they could find.

Robert later testified about the brutal treatment of women and children at the hands of the soldiers. He saw his halfbrother Charley surrender with Jack Smith, another mixed-blood. Only the efforts of the (New) Mexican scouts and Capt. Silas S. Soule saved Charley from the same mob that murdered Jack the very next day. Twenty-one year old George Bent resisted the soldiers, suffering a gunshot wound to the hip and surviving what he later described as the "*worse night of my entire life.*" The Bent family lost many Cheyenne relatives and life-long friends during the Sand Creek Massacre.

The Bent Children after Sand Creek

Robert Bent testified during a Congressional investigation into the Sand Creek Massacre in 1865, seeking justice and risking retaliation. Upon his father's death in 1869, Robert packed up what remained of the trading business and moved to Indian Territory (Oklahoma). There, he worked as a Cheyenne interpreter and trader until his death in 1889.

Mary Bent Moore, George, Julia, and Charley were each awarded 640 acres on the Arkansas River for property lost at Sand Creek. Mary continued her life with her husband Robison Moore, working their ranch in what would become Bent County, Colorado. She cared for her father, William, until his death. She never returned to the Cheyenne people, choosing to adopt her father's and husband's culture instead. She wore Victorian clothing and sent her six children to American schools. She died in 1878.

Julia Bent married Edmond Guerrier, another "halfbreed" and Sand Creek survivor. Having sold their land in Colorado, they moved to Indian Territory, where Ed worked as a scout and interpreter for the U.S. Army. Their lives became quiet as the Plains Indian Wars faded. Julia passed away in 1932, the last of William Bent's children.

Charley Bent never forgave the United States for its attack at Sand Creek. Surviving the massacre, Charley joined the Dog Soldiers and participated in numerous retaliatory attacks on ranches and outposts. In 1866, Charley vowed to kill William, accusing his father of betraying the Cheyenne. Continuing to fight, Charley died of infection as a result of a gunshot wound in late 1867.

George Bent rode north with the Dog Soldiers seeking retaliation following the Sand Creek Massacre. His hip wound healing, George participated in the sacking of Julesburg in early 1865. Later that same year, disillusioned by the fighting, he left the Dog Soldiers and began working with federal agents as a translator. In 1867, he assisted in negotiating peace between the Cheyenne and the United States. His communications with George Hyde and George Bird Grinnell proved an important legacy, as George related Cheyenne traditions, stories, and experiences. George passed away in 1918 in Oklahoma, but his life and letters proved important for all the peoples of the United States.



George Bent with his wife Magpie Woman, c. 1867
Image courtesy History Colorado