

Indian Memorial

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Little Bighorn Battlefield
National Monument
Montana



Participating Tribes

Arikara	—	Sahnish	Cheyenne	—	Tsé tsêhésthêse
Crow	—	Apsaalooke			Só'taa'eo'e
Arapaho	—	Hinono'eino'	Oyate	—	Dakota
					Lakota
					Nakota

Significance

The Indian Memorial commemorates the sacrifices of the Arikara, Apsaalooke, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Oyate tribes in the Battle of the Little Bighorn as they fought to protect their diverse values and traditional way of life. The theme of the memorial, “Peace Through Unity”, carries the commemoration further by acknowledging the need for cooperation both among Indian tribes and between tribal governments and the federal government. The relevancy and significance is further highlighted when one considers it is the only memorial to the Native American experience mandated by Congress and constructed with federal funds.

Background

On June 25, 1988, in response to lack of recognition of Native American participation in the Battle of the Little Bighorn, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) protested at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument by placing a metal plaque on the 7th Cavalry mass grave at Last Stand Hill. During this time, organizations such as the National Congress for American Indians (NCIA) and AIM pressured the National Park Service to equally recognize the participation of Native Americans and have a more balanced approach in their interpretation strategies. This action garnered national attention and prompted Congress to pass legislation authorizing the construction of a memorial, which President George H. W. Bush signed into law on December 10, 1991.

Public Law 102-201 redesignated Custer Battlefield National Monument as Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, and approved the establishment of a memorial to recognize the Native American participants during the battle. In 1994, an eleven-member Indian Memorial Advisory Committee was appointed by the Secretary of the Interior to oversee the Memorial design competition. In 1997 the winning design, by John Collins and Allison Towers, was selected from hundreds of entries to highlight different aspects of Plains Indian cultures. The ground breaking for the approved design occurred in 1999 to much fanfare, with the dedication of the structure occurring four years later in 2003. Temporary aluminum panels were installed over the granite as decisions were made on what the final wording should be. In the fall of 2013, the granite walls were permanently engraved with the words and images you see today.

Design Features

The overall design of the memorial was intended to mimic the natural landscape and blend in with the surrounding topography. The retaining walls, entryways, and interior walls are all constructed from native sandstone. The interior circular floor of the Memorial is covered in granular red gravel and edged by flat stonework that extends away from the interior walls approximately one foot. The interior floor was purposely composed of multiple surfaces to respect the belief that spirits need to move through the space. There are also openings to each of the four cardinal directions, which are significant in many Great Plains tribes' spiritual beliefs.

Spirit Warrior Sculpture

The bronze sculpture of three Native American Spirit Warriors riding off to battle was designed by Oglala artist Colleen Cutschall. The Spirit Warriors (Oyate, Cheyenne, and Arapaho) and the woman handing off a shield are silhouetted against the constant yet ever changing Great Plains sky—the proverbial home of the Spirit. Cutschall hoped to capture the Plains women's perspective of a significant turning point in tribal history using ledger art in the form of sculpture.

Spirit Gate and 7th Cavalry

One of the most significant features of the Indian Memorial is the Spirit Gate. This narrow opening orients the memorial toward Last Stand Hill and the 7th Cavalry Memorial. The 7th Cavalry Memorial was erected in 1881 to commemorate the 263 members of the 7th Cavalry that fell in battle under the command of Lt. Col. George A. Custer. The Spirit Gate acts as a passage for the cavalry dead into the Memorial's sacred central circle where they can then proceed on to the afterlife. Though many of the tribes represented in the memorial were adversaries of the U.S. Army at the time of the battle, the Spirit Gate is meant to signify the mutual respect and admiration that has since formed between the two parties, and further advocate the "Peace Through Unity" philosophy.

Engraved Granite Panels

The engraved granite panels provide space for each tribe that participated in the battle to commemorate their warriors and the battle as they see fit. The draft list of warrior names to be inscribed was developed in consultation with tribal representatives in 2003 and underwent multiple reviews by tribal representatives and descendants between 2011 and 2013. The overall content and layout of the panels was chosen by 17 consulting tribes and two descendent families. These groups in turn appointed official representatives to serve as points of contact with the National Park Service.

The decision on how to list battle participants was made independently by each tribe. The Crow and Arikara tribes, who served as scouts for the United States in this particular battle, use slightly different wording in remembering their ancestors since only the Arikara suffered casualties. The Oyate, Cheyenne, and Arapaho were allied together in opposition to the United States government. While the Oyate and Cheyenne suffered casualties and thus chose to honor those who had fallen; the Arapaho focused commemoration on those who fought, as there were no casualties.

