



November 29, 1864

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site

SEEDS OF CONFLICT

The Cheyenne and Arapaho entered what would become Colorado in the early 1800s. They had traveled from Minnesota to the Black Hills of South Dakota, then into Montana and Wyoming. Later, southern bands ventured into Colorado and western Kansas.

With the discovery of gold in 1858, “Pike’s Peak or Bust” became the rallying cry for thousands of prospectors, speculators, businessmen, and settlers. Towns sprang up by the dozens seemingly overnight. This explosive growth spurred Congress to create the new Territory of Colorado in 1861.

As the territory grew, tensions escalated between the new settlers and the Cheyenne and Arapaho. Competition for resources increased dramatically. Intense economic, political, and social pressures

further divided cultures already struggling with different languages and lifestyles.

A reservation established in eastern Colorado in 1861 was insufficient for the nomadic southern bands of the Cheyenne and Arapaho. This barren ground between Sand Creek and the Arkansas River was only a fraction of what the United States had promised the tribes just ten years earlier.

Conflict escalated to confrontation by 1864. In the spring, US troops killed the Cheyenne Chief Lean Bear. Cavalrymen burned the Cheyenne camps of Crow Chief and Raccoon, and fired on the peaceful Arapaho Chief Left Hand. That summer, the Hungate family was killed on a ranch only 25 miles from Denver. When their mutilated remains were displayed in public, many Colorado officials and citi-

zens saw their worst fears realized. Official proclamations to ‘kill and destroy’ hostiles were issued alongside assurances of amnesty for ‘friendly’ tribesmen. The territorial government unfortunately provided no instructions on how to tell the difference.

In August, the War Department authorized Territorial Governor John Evans to raise a new volunteer regiment, the Third Colorado, for service against the Indians. Over a thousand men responded to the call for recruits. A September meeting between Arapaho and Cheyenne chiefs, Governor Evans, and Colonel John Chivington accomplished little. The Cheyenne and Arapaho were directed to make their way toward Fort Lyon near the reservation, while Colonel Chivington made plans for a winter campaign on the Colorado plains.



L-R: Chief Lean Bear; Chief Whirlwind, a Sand Creek survivor who later led his people to a reservation in Indian Territory.



L-R: Ordained minister Colonel John Chivington, commanded the troops at Sand Creek; Colonel George Shoup, commanded the Third Regiment, and later became Idaho’s first Governor.

Thank you for your interest in Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site!

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The dawn silence was shattered by musket and artillery fire, and the rumble of nearly 700 cavalry horses cantering toward the village. Volleys were fired into the camps from the southeast, then the southwest.

Some Cheyenne and Arapaho ran toward the banks of Sand Creek; others made a dash for horses and weapons. An American flag was raised by Chief Black Kettle. Chief White Antelope sang his journey song – “Only the Earth and Mountains Live Forever.”

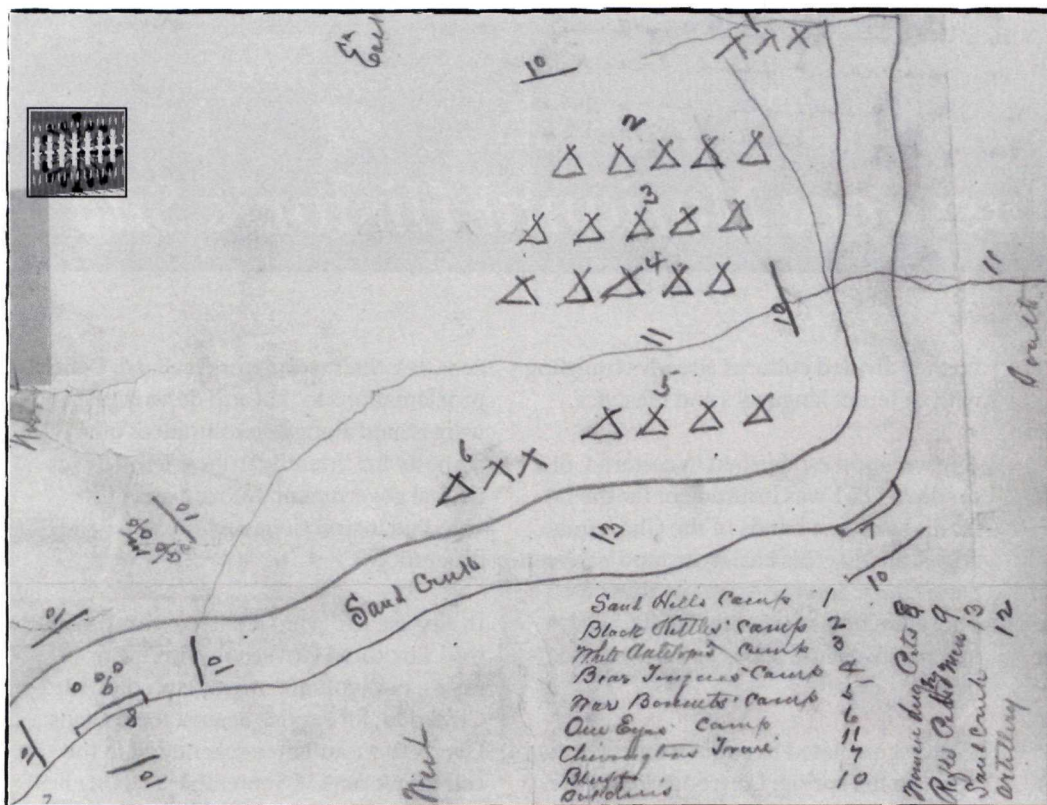
Companies came forward, crossing Sand Creek while several dozen warriors,

teenagers to old men, defended their people’s retreat.

For five miles or more the Cheyenne and Arapaho beat a bloody path northward. Along the way, many dug hiding pits in the sand only to be bombarded with howitzer shells. At least 165 Cheyenne and Arapaho perished. The survivors, many of whom were wounded, fled north toward safety in the Dog Soldier camps 100 miles away.

Their ammunition nearly spent, the men of the Third Colorado and other units broke off the attack by nightfall. With 12 dead and dozens more wounded, men and

horses exhausted, and their supply train nearly 20 miles south of the massacre site, Chivington abandoned his plan to continue the expedition northward. He instead led his column down the Arkansas Valley in a listless pursuit of an Arapaho band before returning to Denver. There he proclaimed a smashing victory over what one of his officers described as “the only peaceable Indians in the country.” The war that Colorado citizens had feared now became a reality as allied Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Sioux warriors rampaged across the plains in revenge for Sand Creek.



AN EYEWITNESS MAP

The map (left) was drawn in the early 1900’s by Sand Creek participant George Bent. Bent shows the bending streambed, Chiefs’ camps, Chivington’s trail, artillery positions, rifle pits, bluffs, and other information. After fleeing the village, Bent was wounded in the hip. With others, he survived by defending himself in a pit dug along Sand Creek several miles above the village.



George Bent, 1843-1918, and his wife Magpie.



Captain Silas Soule, Company D, Fort Lyon Battalion, First Cavalry of Colorado.



Sergeant Stephen Decatur, Company C, Third Colorado Regiment.

THE AFTERMATH

Questions about the attack and claims of atrocities led to investigations and inquiry. Controversy arose as some, like Captain Silas Soule, condemned the attack. Soule wrote, “I refused to fire and swore that none but a coward would, for by this time hundreds of women and children were coming towards us and getting on their knees for mercy...” Soule was later murdered on the streets of Denver.

Volunteers anxious to defend the attack called themselves the “Vindicators.” Sergeant Stephen Decatur wrote, “We are not violators of flags of truce! We are not the

cowards who would massacre disarmed prisoners of war! Nor the vain braggarts to bring home trophies of a battle with defenseless and already subjugated enemies... We are men who proved our manhood by going out in defense of all we hold dear.”

The conflicts that followed the Sand Creek Massacre raged for another 12 years at places like Beecher’s Island, Washita, Summit Springs, Palo Duro Canyon, and the Little Big Horn. The massacre also led to new treaties, reforms in federal Indian policy, and generated movements for Native American assimilation and education.

Contact Information

Mailing address

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Park Website

<http://www.nps.gov/sand>

Park Headquarters

719-729-3003 or 719-438-5916

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site is located in Colorado’s southeastern corner. Enter the park from State Highway 96 at Kiowa County Roads 54 or 59. Travel north to Kiowa County Road W and follow signs to the site.

Stop at the ranger station and bookstore for brochures, schedules and information. Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, established in 2007, is one of 391 units in the national park system.

<http://www.nps.gov>

Open Daily 9am – 4pm

Please check with park for winter schedule (December – March)