

# Sand Creek Massacre

Sand Creek Massacre  
National Historic Site  
Colorado

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



*It was hard to see little children . . . their brains beat out by men professing to be civilized.*

Capt. Silas Soule to Maj. Edward W. Wynkoop, December 1864

Eagle Robe (Eugene J. Ridgely Sr.) painted this elk hide in 1994, from Arapaho oral tradition. His great-grandfather, Lame Man, escaped the massacre.

COURTESY RIDGELY FAMILY, NORTHERN ARAPAHO

## ATTACK AT DAWN

A column of riders moves up Big Sandy Creek as the village awakens on November 29, 1864. This is no ordinary village; it is a chiefs' village, with over 750 people and at least 33 chiefs and headmen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho. All believe they are safe here, within the 1861 Fort Wise Treaty Lands.

Women think they hear buffalo approaching. The "buffalo" are US Army soldiers—well-trained troops of the 1st Regiment Cavalry (Colorado US Volunteer) and raw recruits of the 3rd Regiment Cavalry. The soldiers have guns and howitzers. A US flag and a white flag of truce flutter from a lodgepole at Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle's tipi, but the soldiers are undeterred. Startled men reach for their weapons. White Antelope and other chiefs walk toward the mounted soldiers.

The cavalry open fire. Women, children, and elderly flee. Black Kettle survives unscathed, but White Antelope and Left Hand are hit; both will die from their wounds.

Col. John Chivington arrives. He orders the 1st Regiment to fire into the fleeing villagers. Mayhem ensues as his soldiers massacre Cheyenne and Arapaho people.

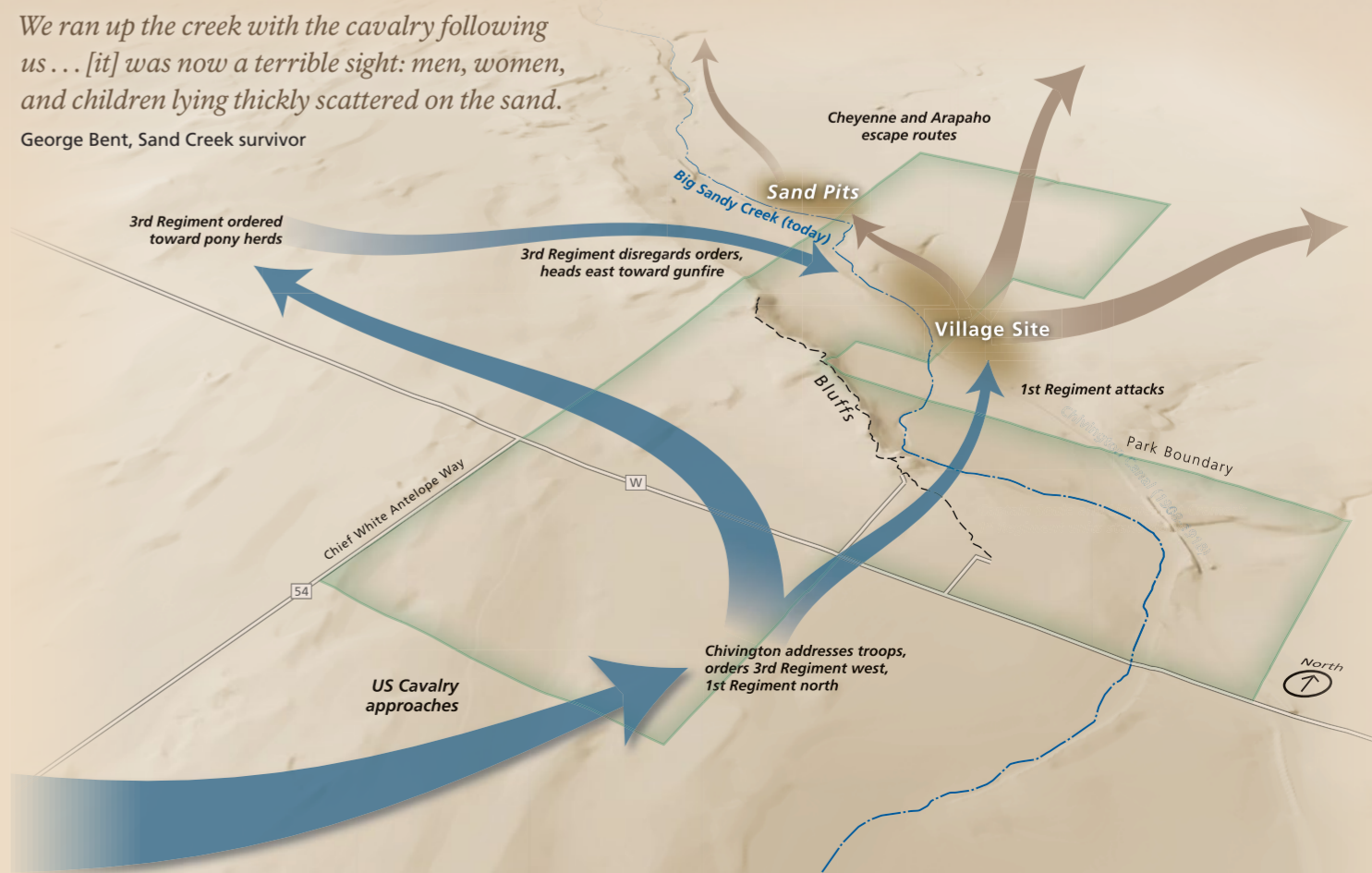
Capt. Silas Soule and Lt. Joseph Cramer defy Chivington and order their companies (D and K of the 1st Regiment) to stand down. They witness the executions of those who surrender and others who try to escape along the sandy creek bed.

When the firing stops, over 230 Cheyenne and Arapaho, including 13 Council and four Soldier chiefs, lie murdered. US Army casualties amount to about 18 dead and 70 wounded. Reports exaggerate the number of Indians killed at 500.

Soldiers loot, scalp, and mutilate the dead. They ransack and burn the village. They take human body parts as trophies along with 600 horses. Surviving Cheyenne and Arapaho, wounded and bleeding, escape north toward the Smoky Hill River.

*We ran up the creek with the cavalry following us . . . [it] was now a terrible sight: men, women, and children lying thickly scattered on the sand.*

George Bent, Sand Creek survivor



# PATH TO TRAGEDY

The Central Plains, which stretch from the Missouri River to the Rockies, were home to thousands of Plains Indians—Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, Lakota, and others. They adopted the horse for hunting buffalo—the main source for their material culture and food. In winter, certain locales along creeks and rivers offered firewood, shelter from bitter winds, and drinking water. Big Sandy Creek was one such place. People of many tribes paused here while traveling the Smoky Hill Lodgepole Trail.

In 1821 European Americans began to cross the Central Plains in greater numbers, first on the Santa Fe Trail, which followed the Arkansas River, and later along the Oregon Trail, which followed the Platte River. Some tribes saw the newcomers as trespassers in their hunting territories.

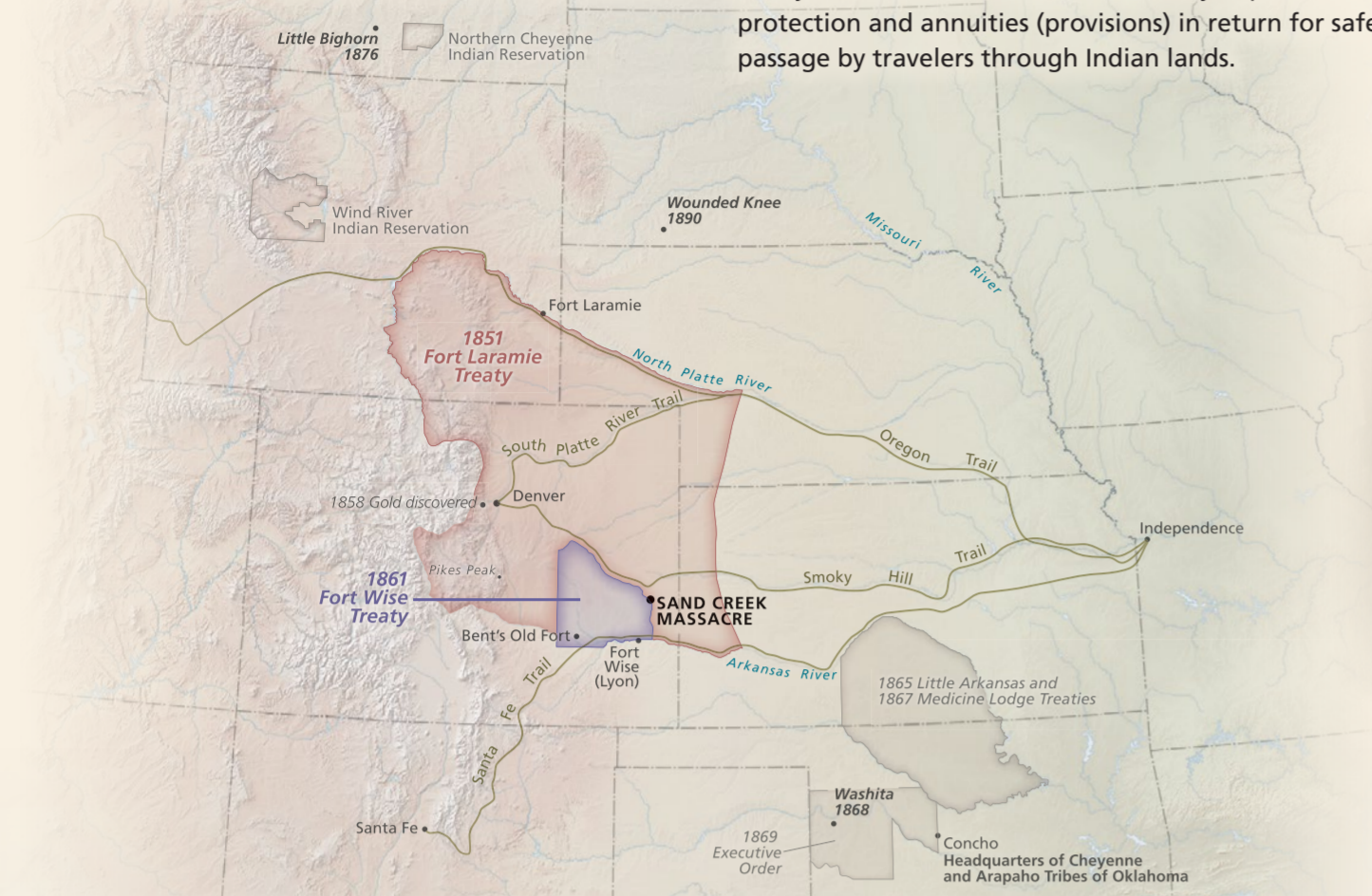
Tension and violence resulted. The US government sought peace through treaties that acknowledged the tribes as “dependent, domestic nations.” The 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty defined the Plains tribes’ territory. It promised them protection and annuities (provisions) in return for safe passage by travelers through Indian lands.

The treaty did not achieve lasting peace. In the late 1850s prospectors struck gold in the Rocky Mountains. Realizing that Indian lands might include rich mineral resources, the US government reneged on the 1851 treaty. A new Fort Wise Treaty (1861) required the Cheyenne and Arapaho to cede all their previously agreed territory except a small reservation. Six Cheyenne and four Arapaho chiefs signed. Many more refused. Despite the discord, Congress created Colorado Territory in 1861.

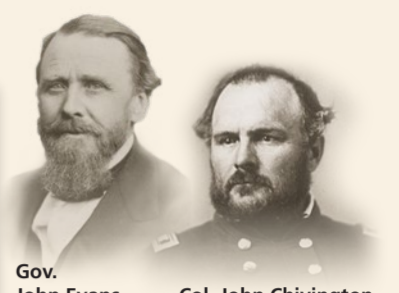
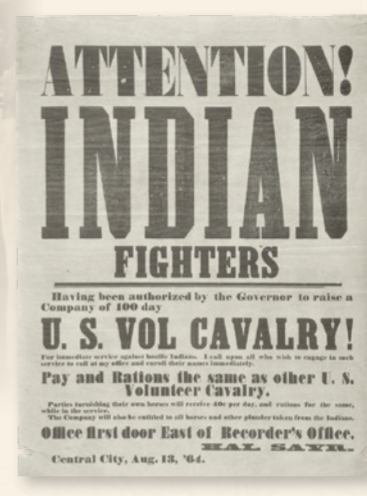
Only a few months later, the Civil War began. The US Army withdrew most of its regulars from the frontier for service back east. In 1862 Congress passed the Homestead and Pacific Railway Acts, which eventually led to more westward migration.

Col. John Chivington, a Civil War hero, commanded the troops of the Colorado Military District. Chivington, who had political aspirations, reportedly said, “It is right or honorable to use any means under God’s heaven to kill Indians....” In spring 1864 he ordered attacks on four Cheyenne villages. When his regiment killed Peace Chief Lean Bear, Plains warriors retaliated. Some Indian leaders appealed for peace in a conference at Camp Weld, near Denver, with Territorial Governor John Evans and Chivington. Those Indians desiring peace were told to report to Fort Lyon. Many did, and then encamped at Sand Creek.

On November 29, 1864, Chivington led the attack at Sand Creek. Although an Army judge condemned the “cowardly cold-blooded slaughter,” the colonel was never formally charged nor tried. Evans was forced to resign in 1865.



Among the participants at the Camp Weld Conference: Cheyenne Peace Chiefs Black Kettle (survived Sand Creek, died at Washita) and White Antelope (died at Sand Creek); Capt. Soule (died in Denver from a gunshot to the head soon after he testified against Col. Chivington); Maj. Wynkoop, commanding officer, Fort Lyon, CO Territory.



Gov. John Evans Col. John Chivington  
Col. Chivington, although a Methodist minister, asked for a “fighting” post in the US Army.  
EVANS, COLORADO STATE ARCHIVES  
CHIVINGTON, DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY  
Gov. Evans issued this poster in 1864 to recruit volunteers for the 3rd Regiment.  
HISTORY COLORADO

*All we ask is that we have peace with the whites*  
Peace Chief Black Kettle, September 28, 1864, Camp Weld Conference

# A SACRED PLACE, A SPIRITUAL PEOPLE

The Sand Creek Massacre is not only a tragic historical event—its legacy is alive and present in the memories, lineages, and stories, and in the trauma and healing, of its Cheyenne and Arapaho descendants. Memorialization of the massacre has significance too for many descendants of its US military participants as well as those who come to pay respects.

Today, Cheyenne and Arapaho return to their homeland to repatriate remains of the massacre found in museums and private collections. The tribes provide respectful, traditionally appropriate burials to assure the victims can be at rest and never forgotten.

The Cheyenne and Arapaho have always had a sacred and spiritual way of life. They believe that all of creation has a spiritual connection—the land, plants, animals, wind, water, and people. The tribes believe even speaking of the massacre is sacred; they consider the massacre site forever hallowed, because the spirits and blood of the victims are intermingled with the earth.

Cheyenne and Arapaho representatives, descendants, ceremonial leaders, and youth conduct an annual Sand Creek Massacre Spiritual Healing Run from the massacre site to the steps of the Colorado State Capitol. Prayers and offerings by tribal and non-tribal participants are given for the land, for the spirits of those who perished, for living generations, and for those to come—all to put to rest the torment of the past. Through these acts of remembrance and healing, the landscape of the Sand Creek Massacre remains a living, sacred place—the past forever interconnected with the present and the future.



# THE MASSACRE REVERBERATES

The massacre devastated generations of Cheyenne and Arapaho people. The deaths of so many Cheyenne chiefs disrupted tribal governance, and surviving chiefs like Black Kettle lost credibility. Tribes lost much traditional knowledge. Families lost providers. Children lost parents.

vided written accounts that shocked national and military leaders. Col. John Chivington gave a different account, which the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the Civil War rejected. In the 1865 Little Arkansas Treaty, the US government took responsibility for the massacre and promised reparations to survivors. The promised reparations have never been fulfilled.

enne and Arapaho tribes reside in Montana, Wyoming, and Oklahoma where they continue to maintain their cultures and try to preserve their traditional knowledge.

The massacre polarized the American public. In Denver, crowds cheered when returning soldiers displayed human trophies. The brutality appalled others. The US Army ordered an immediate investigation; Congress would order two more. Company commanders Capt. Silas Soule and Lt. Joseph Cramer, who ordered their men to stand down, pro-

The US policy toward Native peoples shifted from removal and concentration to assimilation. Although it seemed more humane, assimilation denied people their culture, language, and traditional way of life. Yet the identities of the tribes, though weakened, are intact. Today the Chey-

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, established in 2007, reminds us of “the tragic extremes sometimes reached in the 500 years of conflict between Native Americans and peoples of European or other origins.” Here people work to enhance understanding across diverse cultures. The story of the Sand Creek Massacre raises awareness of basic human rights, transcending park boundaries. The American people, through the intent of Congress, join Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders and chiefs in the hope that this story will prevent similar tragedies in the future.

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

Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, 1865



## Visit Sand Creek

Park hours are posted on the website: [www.nps.gov/sand](http://www.nps.gov/sand). Contact the park for updated seasonal hours, upcoming events, or for 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 designated walking trails. **Caution, large vehicles and motorcyclists:** Eight miles of dirt and sand roads lead to the site.

**Regulations** All pets must be leashed. Camping is not allowed at the site. For firearms regulations check the park website.

**Accessibility** We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check our website.

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

**More Information**  
Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site  
PO Box 249  
1301 Maine St.  
Eads, CO 81036  
Site office: 719-729-3003  
Eads office: 719-438-5916  
[www.nps.gov/sand](http://www.nps.gov/sand)

Sand Creek Massacre is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks, visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

**National Park Foundation.**  
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