

Sand Creek Massacre Washita Battlefield

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site
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Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle

Warrior, diplomat and martyr, there is no other figure among 19th Century Plains Indian leaders whose life is more tragic, yet symbolic and honored, as that of Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle. His legacy will always be one of peace.

Leader to His People

Born along the valley of the North Platte (Nebraska) into the Suhtai band, Black Kettle was a young man when the Cheyenne split into northern and southern tribes. Black Kettle joined camps moving south toward the Arkansas River. His rise to prominence occurred during the era of Cheyenne wars against Pawnee, Crow, and Ute, and American expansion along the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails. As he approached his fiftieth winter, Black Kettle was appointed a position of leadership in the Cheyenne Council of Chiefs.



Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle
Drawing courtesy History Colorado

Change Comes to the Plains

By the early 1860s Cheyenne land was dotted with a series of towns, forts, stage stations and ranches. Once a place of solitude, the prairies became crowded as more settlers and miners moved in, creating competition for the land, water and food resources. Favored routes to Denver City included the South Platte and Smoky Hill Rivers, valleys well-known to the Cheyenne and long-used by them as areas to camp, hunt, and perform sacred rituals. Black Kettle and others watched as the land they knew changed.

Controversial Treaty

Black Kettle was among a handful of Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders who put their marks on the Treaty of Fort Wise (1860-61). The treaty required them to relinquish territory assigned to them by the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie and settle on a reservation on the Upper Arkansas, where they would be allotted land and taught how to subsist by farming. Broken promises by the government and the inadequacy of the reservation led to its rejection by the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

1864 and the Sand Creek Massacre



Chief Black Kettle, seated second from left, holding chief's pipe, during the Camp Weld Council, Denver, September 28, 1864.

Image courtesy History Colorado

Black Kettle played a prominent role in attempts to maintain peace. On September 28, Black Kettle and other chiefs met with Territorial Governor John Evans and Colonel John Chivington at Camp Weld in Denver to negotiate peace terms. This council resulted in Black Kettle and other Cheyenne and Arapaho bands coming into the reservation assigned them under the Treaty of Fort Wise and establishing their camp on Sand Creek.

At dawn on November 29, Black Kettle and his people awakened to the sound of gunfire. As chaos and terror filled the camp, Black Kettle raised an American flag and white flag of truce, in a desperate, but unsuccessful attempt to avert more bloodshed. Hundreds of Cheyenne and Arapaho fled north, pursued by 675 Colorado (U.S.) Volunteer Cavalry. While other Cheyenne

and Arapaho chiefs and headmen lay dead or dying, Black Kettle and his wife Medicine Woman Later were among the last to abandon the village. While escaping, Medicine Woman Later fell. Convinced she was dead, Black Kettle continued to retreat north along the creek bed, seeking refuge in one of the sand pits that dotted the creek bed - here Black Kettle survived the attack.

During the night, Black Kettle emerged from the sand pit to search for his wife; finding her alive, though wounded nine times, he carried her across the plains to safety.

After the Massacre

Black Kettle took no part in avenging the carnage at Sand Creek. The chief chose instead to meet with U.S. peace negotiators to prevent future hostilities between the Cheyenne and the U.S. Army. These meetings resulted in the Treaties of the Little Arkansas in 1865 and Medicine Lodge in 1867. Both of these treaties promised thousands of dollars in annuities, and authorized construction of agency buildings, roads, and military posts on reservation lands. The treaties also forced the tribes to live on progressively smaller, often arid reserves away from their traditional lands.

Despite government condemnation of Sand Creek and promises of reparations, rage and bitterness continued unabated across Cheyenne and Arapaho country. Amid increasing pressure from opposing Cheyenne factions, and facing a perilous future in Colorado and Kansas, Black Kettle chose to move his camp farther south, seemingly away from the fighting.

1868 and the Battle of Washita

Fighting followed Black Kettle's band. In 1868, the Cheyenne were declared hostile by General Phillip Sheridan, whose forces were marching against the tribes at the very moment Black Kettle and his band sought a winter sanctuary along the banks of the Washita River in Indian Territory (Oklahoma). Near the Antelope Hills in the western part of the territory, Lt. Col. George A. Custer and soldiers of the 7th Cavalry followed a fresh Indian trail. On the evening of November 26, 1868, barking dogs and the sound of crying babies alerted the Army expedition to the presence of an Indian camp. Unknown to the soldiers, the camp belonged to Black Kettle's clan. The soldiers settled in and waited for morning.

At dawn on November 27, Custer and his troops attacked the encampment. Black Kettle rose early that morning eager to move downstream to be closer to other Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Arapaho camps. Instead, he fired an alarm shot to alert his camp of danger. Mounting his horse, Black Kettle pulled Medicine Woman Later up behind him and attempted to make for the river. Soldiers, scouts and their Indian allies fired at Black Kettle and his wife as they crossed the river. Both were hit. Bullets struck the chief in his stomach and back. Slumping over and sliding from his horse, Black Kettle toppled into the icy water of the Washita River. The lifeless bodies of both Black Kettle and Medicine Woman Later were recovered and taken away by relatives. A lifetime of working towards peace came to a tragic end.



The Attack on Black Kettle's Village on the Washita River, November 27, 1868.

Illustration courtesy Washita Battlefield National Historic Site/Steven Lang

Legacy

Throughout his life Black Kettle exhibited traits inherent in chiefs - patience, forgiveness, wisdom and generosity. His role as peace maker and his sacrifices and sufferings in the name of peace are examples that people worldwide respect and honor.

Black Kettle's history, culture and heritage are part of a proud tradition that continues to inspire his descendants, fellow Cheyenne, and Native peoples to this day. The life of Black Kettle stands as an epic American legacy; a man working tirelessly for the good of his people; a man who gave his life for causes greater than his own.