

Sand Creek Massacre

Pea Ridge

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site
Pea Ridge National Military Park



George Bent

Confederate Soldier and Massacre Survivor

A Man of Many Worlds



George Bent (c. 1867). Photo courtesy the Denver Public Library.

Pea Ridge, Arkansas, and Sand Creek, Colorado, are places which seemly have nothing in common. In fact, both are linked historically by a unique individual: George Bent.

George Bent was born in 1843, to frontier businessman William Bent and Owl Woman, daughter of White Thunder - the Cheyenne Tribe's Keeper of the Sacred Arrows. Raised at Bent's Old Fort, in Colorado Territory, George was surrounded by Plains Indians, Mexicans, Americans, African-Americans, French trappers and traders, and a host of other diverse peoples.

In 1854, George was sent to be educated in St. Louis. When the Civil War began in 1861, George, caught up by the pageantry and patriotism, enlisted with the Missouri State Guard. Trained as a Confederate artilleryman, George fought in several of the early battles of the war, including Pea Ridge.

With the Confederacy in Arkansas

In February 1862, Confederate General Sterling Price's troops were pursued by Union General Samuel Curtis's army into Arkansas. General Earl Van Dorn, sent to command Confederate forces in the area, pushed his own troops, including George, into Arkansas. If Van Dorn could crush Curtis's army, then St. Louis, Missouri would be vulnerable.

Both armies clashed on Arkansas's Pea Ridge Plateau on March 7, 1862. At the hamlet of Leetown Confederate troops nearly routed the Union Army, but the death of two Confederate generals and the breakdown in command prevented them from winning. Meanwhile George's unit fought at Elkhorn Tavern, where the Confederates achieved success. After three determined attacks along the Huntsville Road, George and his fellow Missouri Confederates captured the tavern, a strategic portion of the Union line.



Elkhorn Tavern seized by Confederate Troops. Painting courtesy Andy Thomas

A Battle Lost and Return to the West

On March 8, General Curtis launched a counter-attack and a devastating artillery barrage. Van Dorn, low on ammunition and unable to respond, withdrew. By 11:00 am, the Battle of Pea Ridge was over. The battle was costly, with over 3,400 casualties. Missouri and Arkansas remained in Union hands for the rest of the war. Van Dorn's army was ordered into the state of Mississippi, where George was later captured near Corinth in August 1862. In September he was paroled and released to his brother Robert.

Upon returning to eastern Colorado, George found his homeland much changed from when he left in 1854. Thousands of white settlers had populated the region during and after the 1859 Pikes Peak Gold Rush. Tensions between Cheyenne, Arapaho and white settlers continued to deteriorate. As a former Confederate soldier and half-Cheyenne, George was not welcome in the new white settlements. Branded a "Red Rebel" by some George was unsafe among the settlers. He turned to his mother's people, the Cheyenne.

Tension Turns to Tragedy

In the spring of 1863, Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle called on George, wishing to learn more about the Civil War. The tribes received overtures of friendship from the Confederacy, who wanted them to attack US Army forts along the frontier. George spoke of his experiences in the war and urged the Cheyenne to avoid the conflict.

When tensions between the tribes and settlers boiled over in 1864 Chief Black Kettle called on George once more. In September 1864 George was asked to write a letter in English to Samuel Colley, the Indian Agent at Fort Lyon. This letter resulted in a meeting between Cheyenne leadership and Major Edward Wynkoop on September 9, during which George served as a translator. Afterward, seven chiefs of the Cheyenne and Arapaho left with Wynkoop for a meeting with the territorial governor in Denver.

When Chief Black Kettle returned in early October, he led his people to the Fort Lyon Reservation. Camped on the Big Sandy Creek, his people were supposed to be safe. George joined the village on November 26, convinced that peace was at hand. At dawn three days later, November 29, the 750 Cheyenne and Arapaho present were attacked by the US Army in what became known as the Sand Creek Massacre.



The Sand Creek Massacre - Painting by Robert Lindneaux. Image courtesy Denver Public Library.

Survival, Revenge, and Later Life



George Bent in Colony, Oklahoma, c. 1905. Image courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society.

George Bent barely survived the massacre. As soldiers approached the camps and opened fire, George grabbed his weapons and tried to reach the pony herd on the bluffs west of the village. Soldiers, however, had already cut off the Cheyenne and Arapaho from their horses, so he ran back to the relative safety of the creek bed. Moving north along the creek, George was shot in the hip, but managed to find shelter in one of the natural sand pits in the creek bed. Here, he sought cover until the massacre ended. He escaped with other Cheyenne and Arapaho survivors during the night.

George later described this experience as the worst night of his entire life. Wounded too badly to help, he could only watch as fellow survivors desperately worked to keep others from freezing to death. Reaching friendly villages a few days later, George recovered from his wound and later joined retaliatory raids against the town of Julesburg, CO.

George tired of the fighting and eventually became a translator for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He proved instrumental in the negotiations of the 1867 Medicine Lodge Treaty between the Cheyenne, Arapaho and the United States. In 1869, he joined his people on the Cheyenne Reservation in Oklahoma, where in 1901 he began the work of preserving Cheyenne history. Toward that goal, George worked with two cultural anthropologists, George E. Hyde and George Bird Grinnell. Several works were produced from these efforts including Grinnell's *Fighting Cheyennes* (1915) and *Cheyenne Indians Volumes 1 and 2* (1923), Hyde's *Life of George Bent* (1967), and *Halfbreed* by David Halaas and Andrew Masich (2005). George Bent died in Colony, OK, a victim of the 1918 influenza epidemic.