

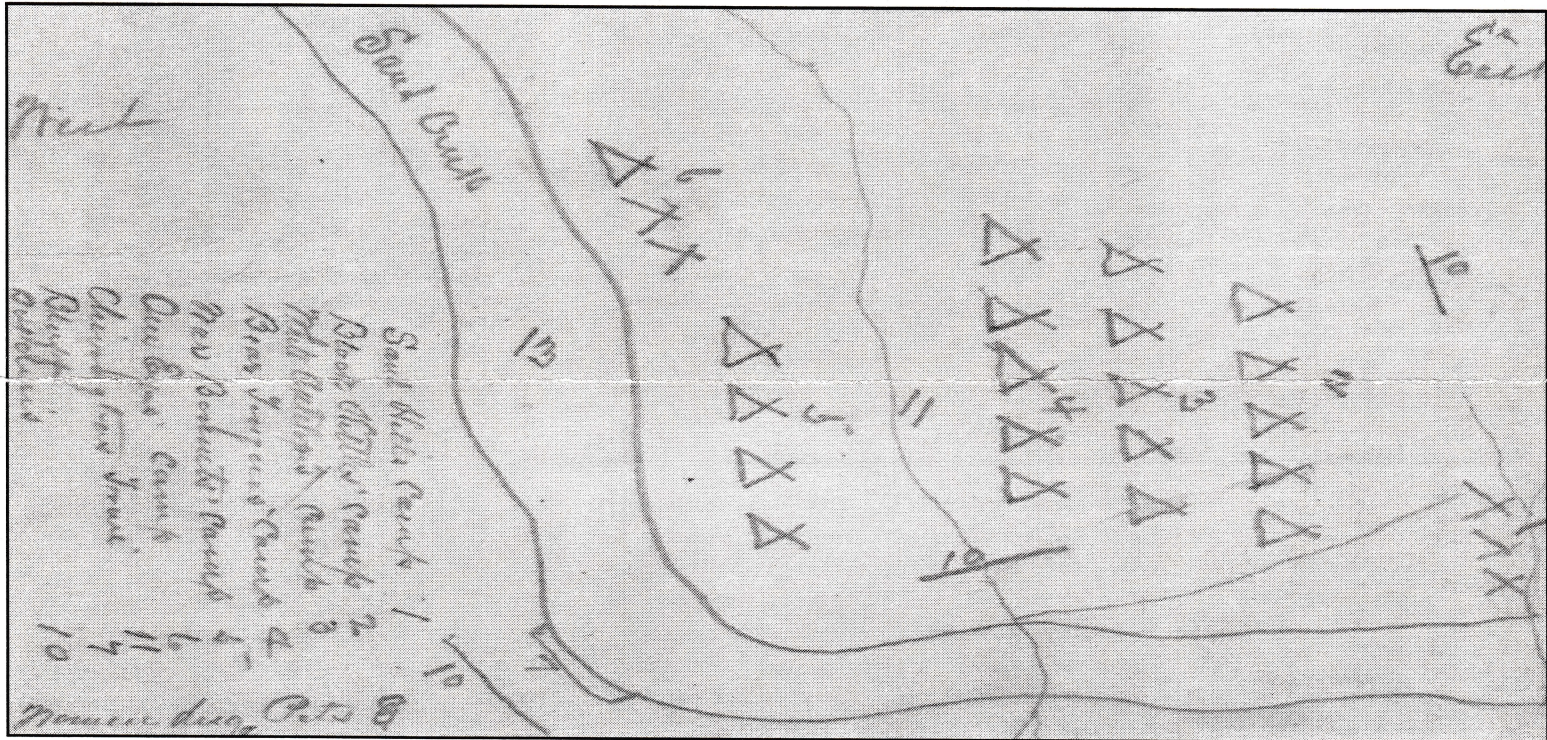
# Sand Creek Massacre

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Sand Creek Massacre  
National Historic Site

## The Legacy of November 29, 1864



Map of the Sand Creek Massacre made by eyewitness George Bent

Map courtesy of Oklahoma Historical Society

The Sand Creek Massacre is one of our nation's most controversial historic events. Many of its causes and its consequences are as relevant today as they were in 1864. For the Cheyenne, kinships changed and clans disappeared with the deaths of dozens of women and children. Ceremonial traditions were lost with the deaths of Chiefs. Cheyenne and Arapaho survivors were displaced, forced to migrate from ancestral lands.



The consequences of Sand Creek were far-reaching. Official investigations, outspoken critics, and staunch defenders – the mustering out of a Colonel and the resignation of a Governor. Sand Creek gave rise to a new generation of federal Indian policy, new treaties at The Little Arkansas and Medicine Lodge – and the next generation of fighters and fights. Beecher Island. Summit Springs. Sappa Creek. The Little Big Horn. Now, the story of Sand Creek provides an opportunity for education and commemoration with the establishment of Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site.

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## **Seeds of Conflict**

As the Colorado Territory grew, so too did the tension between settlers and native tribes. The settlers' desire for land was confronted by nations who lived, hunted, and traveled across the same. Negotiations between leaders – governors, agents, and officers on one side, chiefs and headmen on the other – failed. The 1861 reservation was insufficient for the nomadic Cheyenne and Arapaho. The area set aside was a fraction of what had been promised ten years earlier. The seeds of conflict began in 1864 with the murder of Cheyenne Chief Lean Bear. The burning of Cheyenne camps by Colorado cavalymen near the South Platte and claims that troops had initiated conflict at Fremont's Orchard foreshadowed war.

By June, the murders of the Hungate family near Denver and lingering fears of Indian attacks like those at New Ulm, Minnesota increased tension among pioneers and Colorado officials. Assurances of amnesty for “friendly” tribesmen were tempered by a proclamation to “kill and destroy” hostiles. By summer, war would erupt across the plains. A sojourn by Chiefs to meet with Colorado Governor Evans and Colonel Chivington accomplished little. Soon, the recruitment of volunteers began. In October, Cheyenne Chief Big Wolf was killed and his camped burned by these newly mustered Coloradoans.

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## **The Indian Expedition**

On November 24, 1864, a force of some 700 soldiers under the command of Colonel John Chivington, mostly volunteers who had been chided as the “Bloodless Third” Regiment, began a ride towards Fort Lyon, some 120 miles away. At Lyon, the expedition was augmented by an additional battalion.

“Boots and Saddles” was sounded around 8:00 p.m. on the evening of November 28. An all-night ride

brought the soldiers to a ridge above Sand Creek. Here, in the stillness before dawn, the troops got their first sight of the sleeping camps of Black Kettle, White Antelope, and other well-known leaders. Within moments, a barrage of small arms fire and howitzer bombardment was leveled against the Indians. The tribes used driftwood, clumps of sage, and underbrush as defense while women and children dug hiding pits along the banks of the stream.

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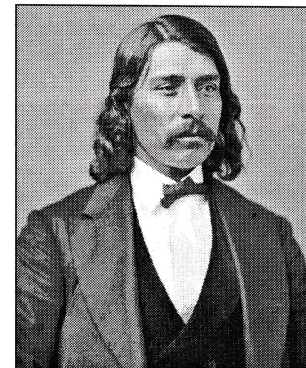


George Shoup, Commander, Third Colorado Regiment wrote, *"I am satisfied from my own observations that the historian will search in vain for braver deeds than were committed on that field of battle."*

Photo: Colorado Historical Society F3465

Throughout the day, volunteers, many in undisciplined groups, continued to pursue Indians up Sand Creek. By late afternoon, about 160 Cheyenne and Arapaho lay dead, the majority women and children. Before departing, the "Bloody Third" ransacked and burned the village. The surviving Indians, some 300 people, fled north.

About 60 wounded and dead troopers were taken to Fort Lyon. Here, protestations against the ferocity and unprovoked nature of the attack were lodged by some officers – sparking bitter indignation that would continue for years.



Ed Guerrier, son of a Cheyenne woman and French father, an eyewitness to Sand Creek. He testified, *"I am sure that the Indians were encamped at the place where they were attacked in full faith and assurance that they would be protected as friendly Indians."*

Photo: The National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institute 06109600

## The Aftermath



Captain Silas Soule, Company D, First Colorado Cavalry

Photo Courtesy of Denver Public Library X-22202

Although the returning Colorado Volunteers were hailed as heroes in Denver, questions about the attack and claims of atrocities led to Congressional investigations and inquiry by a military commission. These investigations took testimony from several dozen eyewitnesses and accepted depositions and affidavits from others. Controversy quickly arose as some veterans, like Captain Silas Soule, bitterly condemned the attack, citing its ghastly scene, horrors, and brutalities. On December 14<sup>th</sup>, the young Captain 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...My company was the only one that kept their formation, and we did not fire a shot."* Soule was assassinated on the streets of Denver, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1865.

Others, including Colonel Chivington and Major Jacob Downing, stoutly defended the attack. Volunteers anxious to restore honor and reputation, referred to themselves as "Vindicators." One, Sergeant Stephen Decatur, penned, *"We are not violators of flags of truce! We are not the cowards who would massacre disarmed prisoners of war! ... We are men who proved our manhood by going out in defense of all we hold dear."*

Within weeks of the attack, the events of November 29, 1864 were labeled the Sand Creek Massacre.



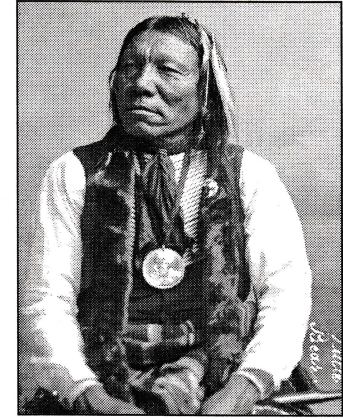
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## The Legacy

White Antelope, the venerated Cheyenne Chief, was one of many leaders to perish at Sand Creek. Others included One Eye, Warbonnet, Bear Man, Spotted Crow, Two Thighs, Standing Water, Heap of Crows, Black Wolf, Bear Robe, and the Arapaho Left Hand. A list of 112 Sand Creek Heads of Family was translated and compiled in 1865. The list includes the names of killed, injured, and uninjured. The names of additional victims, particularly babies, children, and women, are hard to ascertain – and the difficult task of identification continues.

*“As I ran by Black Kettle’s lodge he had flag tied to lodge pole and was holding it...bullets were hitting all around me and bullets were hitting the lodges like hard storm...Indians were running north of the camp. Soldiers came due south of the village...It was about 2 miles where men, women, and children threw up breastworks on bed of the Sand Creek. On way up, the feathers of my war bonnet were shot away and my shield was shot several times, but I did not get hit. As I was running by I seen lots of women and children that had been killed...”*

– Little Bear, Cheyenne



**Little Bear, Cheyenne eyewitness to Sand Creek.** Little Bear passed away in 1917, near Calumet, Oklahoma. He was survived by a son, White Faced Bull.

Photo: The National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institute 06647701

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## For More Information

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