

# Sand Creek Massacre

## Fort Laramie

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site  
Fort Laramie National Historic Site



## A Tale of Two Treaties

### Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 and the Fort Wise Treaty of 1860-61

#### Unchecked Migration Across Indian Lands

European-American fur traders, mountain men, missionaries, and others ventured across the Great Plains for decades. With the opening of Oregon and Washington, the Mormon migration and the California Gold Rush of 1848, traffic continued to increase. White emigrants and their families crossed lands used by the Arapaho, Arikara, Assiniboin, Cheyenne, Crow, Gros Ventre, Hidatsa, Lakota, Mandan, Shoshoni, and other Plains tribes. The growing flow of west-bound emigrants competed with the tribes for resources like forage for livestock, firewood, water, and wild game. Without accommodation, conflict between Plains Indians and emigrants was likely.

#### A Need for Council and Treaty

In 1851, in order to avoid conflict, the US Government authorized negotiations with the Plains tribes living between the Arkansas and Missouri Rivers with the goal of ending tribal warfare and ensuring peaceful relations along routes of travel through the Great Plains.



Indian delegation to Washington DC, 1851.  
Image courtesy Jesuit Archives and Research Center, St. Louis, MO.

Fort Laramie (in present-day Wyoming) was chosen as the meeting place and tribes were invited to the council. A few hundred were expected, but more than 10,000 Plains Indians gathered, forcing the treaty negotiations to move in

order to find adequate forage for the thousands of animals brought by the tribes. By the time the treaty was ready for signing, tribal camps had relocated 30 miles downriver to the mouth of Horse Creek -hence the popular name Horse Creek Treaty.

#### Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 (Horse Creek Treaty)

On September 17, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 was signed. The treaty determined boundaries between Indian lands and recognized those lands as being Indian territory. In addition, the tribes guaranteed safe passage for emigrants and consented to the construction of roads and forts through their territories in return for promises of protection and annuities (provisions). Twenty-one chiefs, representing nine Plains tribes and two US Indian Department officials signed the treaty.



Though Congress made amendments to the treaty, which most of the tribes agreed to, it was never published as ratified in the US Statutes at Large; consequently, debate concerning the treaty's validity continues to this day.

DeSmet 1851 Treaty Map.  
Image courtesy Library of Congress,  
Geography & Maps Division,  
Washington, DC.



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## Pike's Peak or Bust

In 1858, gold was discovered in the Pike's Peak region of the Rocky Mountains, which under the Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1851 was recognized as Cheyenne and Arapaho Territory. Thousands of Americans headed west to the new gold fields, and soon shanties, miners' camps, and even small towns sprung up throughout the region. Initially, the Cheyenne and Arapaho sought accommodation, but as more gold seekers encroached on their lands and the US Government did nothing about it, tribal leaders became increasingly alarmed.

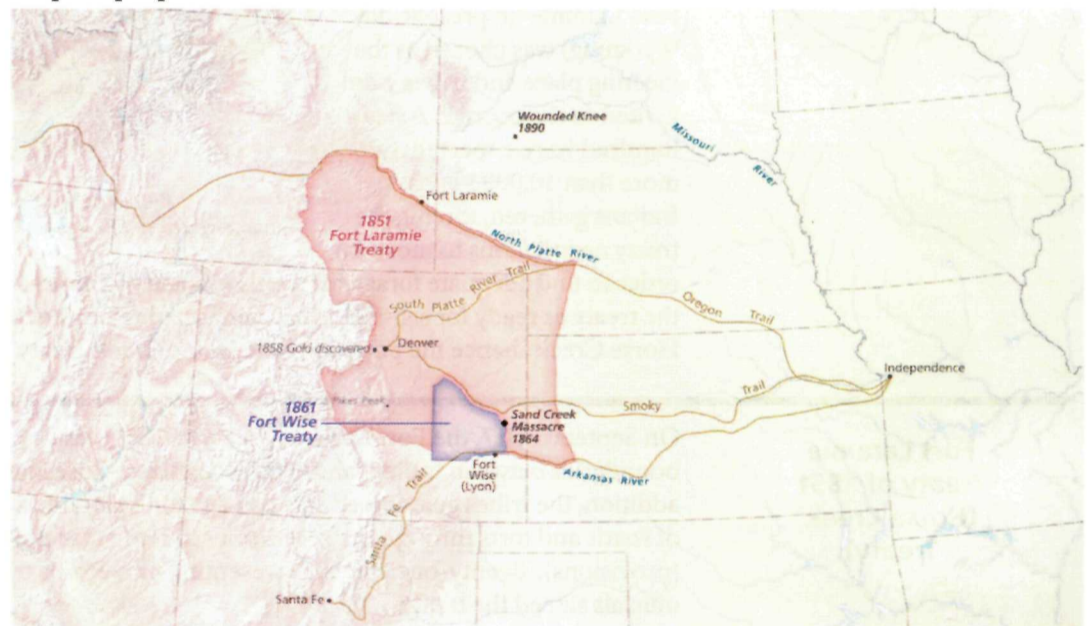
By 1859, with the country embroiled over the slavery issue, attention to Western Indian affairs was inconsequential. Tribal leaders complained to their US-assigned agents about the encroachment on their lands, while miners demanded settlement of the land ownership question. With the goal of extinguishing title to Indian Lands from the South Platte to the Arkansas Rivers, Congress approved negotiations with the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes in July 1860.

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## Fort Wise Treaty of 1860-61 (The Boone Treaty)

When Commissioner of Indian Affairs Alfred B. Greenwood arrived in Kansas Territory, which included the Pike's Peak region, in September 1860, only a few bands of Cheyenne and Arapaho were on hand for council at Bent's New Fort (in present-day southeast Colorado). In exchange for a protected reservation where each tribal male would be taught to farm, and an increase to the tribes' annuities, the treaty proposal required that Cheyenne and Arapaho relinquish most of the territory assigned to them under the Treaty of Fort Laramie. While some of the chiefs agreed to this proposal and the peace it promised, they adamantly stated that its terms only bound those who signed and not the chiefs who were not present. Later, when the new treaty proposal was discussed in tribal council with other Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs, the majority of them rejected it.

In February 1861, Indian Agent Albert G. Boone arrived at Fort Wise (now encompassing Bent's New Fort) with orders to conclude the treaty. On February 18, 6 Cheyenne and 4 Arapaho chiefs touched pen to paper and committed their bands to the Treaty of Fort Wise. While the chiefs felt confident they had acted in the best interest of their bands, from the viewpoint of the Indian Department, the signatures were binding on all the Cheyenne and Arapaho people.



Cheyenne and Arapaho lands under the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty (Red)  
and the Cheyenne and Arapaho reservation boundaries under the Fort Wise Treaty 1860-61 (Blue).  
*Image courtesy Harpers Ferry Center*

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## Legacy of the Fort Laramie Treaty

Life was difficult for the Cheyenne and Arapaho bands which relocated to the new reservation provided under the Fort Wise Treaty. Most of the promised infrastructure had scarcely been developed and promised annuities were delivered late, or not at all. Game and water were scarce. In time, the Cheyenne and Arapaho, who were initially in favor of the treaty, repudiated it and moved their bands back to their former hunting lands - land that Americans now believed was theirs under the Treaty of Fort Wise.

With more Americans settling on lands claimed by the Cheyenne and Arapaho, it was not long before violence ensued. By 1864, conflicts between the Americans, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and the Lakota became so numerous that a state of undeclared war existed on the Great Plains. The massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho at Sand Creek (Colorado) in November 1864 shattered any real hope for peace and brought about even more strife, which continued through the massacre of Lakota at Wounded Knee (South Dakota) in 1890.

Nearly 185 years since the signing of the 1851 Fort Laramie Treaty, through times fraught with hardship and strife, tribal nations in the Great Plains States continue to maintain government-to-government relationships with the United States.