

Washita Battlefield



ILLUSTRATION—NPS / STEVEN LANG

To destroy their villages and ponies; to kill or hang all warriors, and bring back all women and children.

Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan, orders to Lt. Col. George A. Custer, September 1868

In the first few hours of November 27, 1868, four units of the 7th US Cavalry quietly take up positions at a bend in the **Hoóxe'eo'hé'e** (Lodge Pole River, known today as the Washita River). Before them is the winter camp of Cheyenne Peace Chief **Mo'óhtáveto'o** (Black Kettle).

The day before, the chief returned from Fort Cobb, 100 miles away, where the commanding officer rebuffed the chief's plea for peace and protection for his people. Black Kettle's wife, Medicine Woman Later, entreats him to move their small camp closer to the larger camps. Black Kettle decides to move tomorrow, but tomorrow is too late.

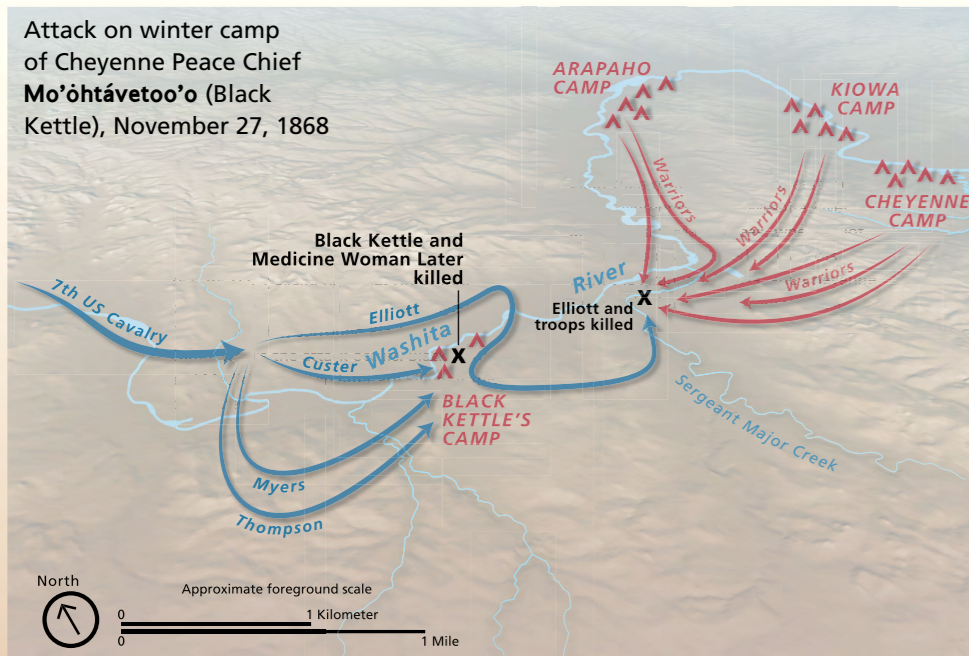
The attack comes at morning's first light (*map below*). A bugle sounds "Charge!" as a band plays "Garry Owen," the 7th Cavalry's marching song. In a moment all is tumult as about 700 troopers splash through the frigid water into the sleeping camp.

In the first implementation of the army's strategy of "total war" against the Tribes of the Southern Plains, Custer leads the largest battalion directly through the village. Three other units attempt to surround the camp and cut off escape routes. Custer then commands the assault from atop a nearby knoll as soldiers pursue Cheyenne in all directions.

Some Cheyenne fight and die in the camp, while others return fire from ravines and behind trees. Many escape. As Black Kettle crosses the river, sharpshooters on the north bank strike and kill him. The firing stops after about two hours. The bodies of 30 to 60 Cheyenne and 20 cavalry lie dead in the snow and mud.

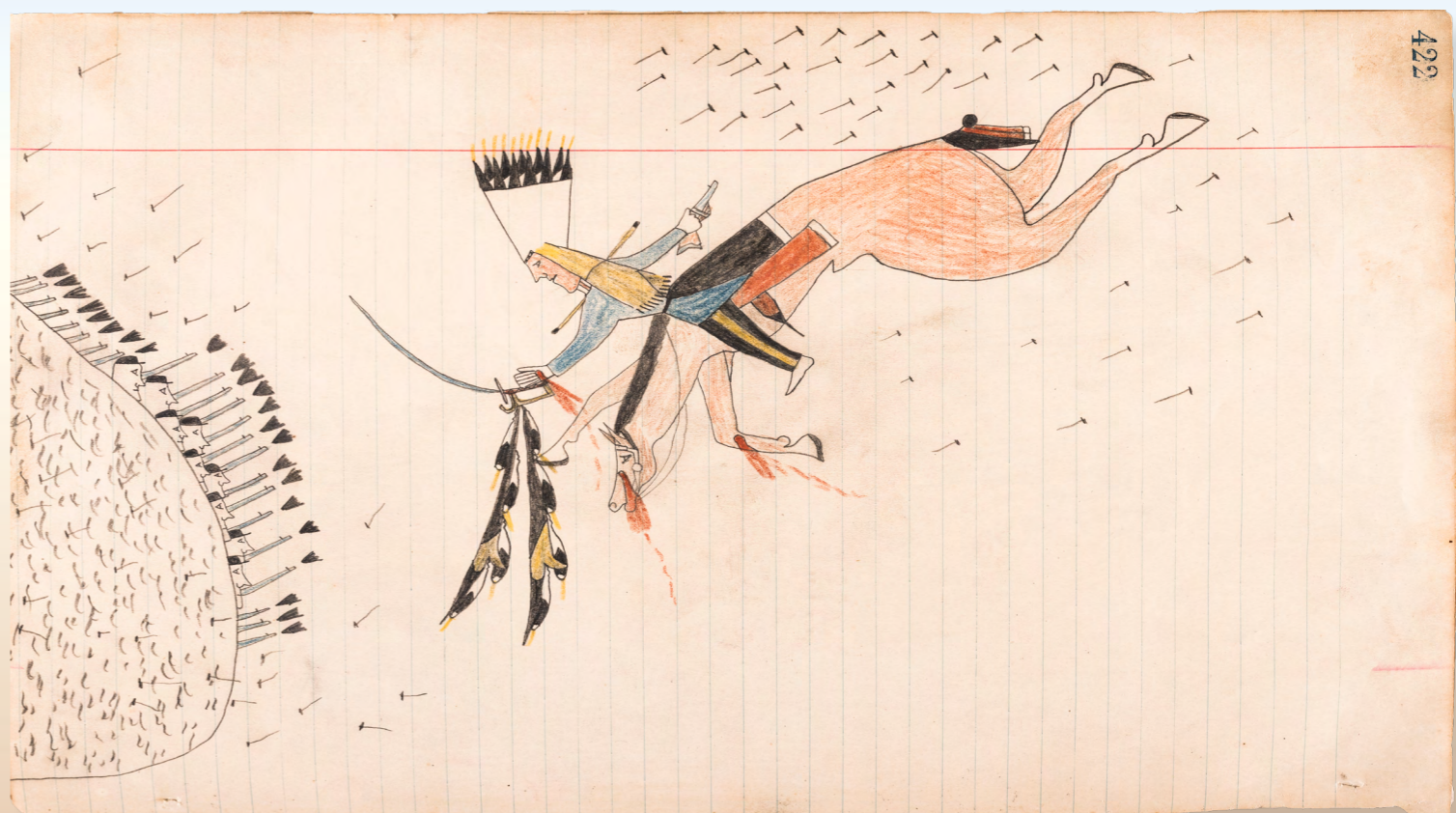
To cripple resistance, soldiers slaughter the Tribe's 650 ponies. They light a bonfire, destroying buffalo robes, clothes, tipis, saddles, weapons, and provisions. Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Kiowa warriors arrive from other camps to the east. Custer and his troops, with 53 women and children they have taken as prisoners of war, withdraw north to Camp Supply.

Attack on winter camp of Cheyenne Peace Chief **Mo'óhtáveto'o** (Black Kettle), November 27, 1868



Right: A ledger art drawing by Whirlwind, a Cheyenne warrior and Chief. Here, Cheyenne warrior Roman Nose Thunder charges through a hail of bullets toward Maj. Joel Elliott (Custer's second in command) and his men, who fire at him from the tall grass where they lie. Elliott and all 17 of his soldiers were killed. Years later Roman Nose Thunder recalled, "The fight did not last longer than it would take a man to smoke a pipe four times."

The Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Sioux Tribes used ledger paper to depict actual historical accounts of their battles and encounters with enemies.



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From Peace Treaties to War on the Great Plains

The US Constitution states that “all Treaties made, or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States, shall be the supreme law of the land.” From 1778 to 1871 the United States negotiated about 800 treaties with Native American Tribes. The US Congress ratified less than 400 treaties. Few were observed for long.

Two-thirds of all treaties required Native Americans to cede their traditional lands, promised them annuities (provisions), and offered them smaller tracts where they would keep their status as sovereign nations. Some accepted life on the reservations. Many succumbed to disease and starvation. The US

government did not deliver on many of its promises, which sowed distrust. By all measures, the treaties failed to achieve peace.

Some Plains Tribes continued to hunt and live as they had for centuries, into the 1860s. Then gold seekers and emigrants arrived in force on the Great Plains. They built forts, roads, railways, towns, and homesteads. The resulting clash of cultures ignited fighting across the region. Warrior bands attacked wagon trains, mining camps, stagecoaches, and settlements. The violence led to the massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho by the Colorado US Volunteer Cavalry at Sand Creek, Colorado Territory, in 1864.

In the Little Arkansas Treaty of 1865 the US government took responsibility for the massacre and promised reparations to survivors. That promise has not been fulfilled. The Medicine Lodge Treaties of 1867 also failed to bring peace to the Great Plains. In 1868 settlers still encroached on Tribal lands and decimated bison herds. Warriors raided settlements, stealing 619 horses and killing 117 men, women, and children.

Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan announced a new policy: “Punishment must follow crime.” For the sins of a few, Sheridan held many Plains Tribes accountable. He planned a campaign for the

winter of 1868–69, when Plains Tribes would be most vulnerable and least able to resist.

To launch his winter campaign, Sheridan chose the young Lt. Col. George A. Custer, known for his aggression in battle. At Camp Supply, Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), Custer assembled his 7th US Cavalry troops and Osage scouts and prepared to enter the Washita River valley. He expected to find about 6,000 Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, and Plains Apache there, in their winter camps.

I am of the belief that these Indians require to be soundly whipped.

Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan, 1864

If I were an Indian . . . I would greatly prefer to cast my lot among those of my people adhered to the free open plains rather than submit to the confined limits of a reservation.

Lt. Col. George A. Custer, 1872



WESTERN HISTORY COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

Peace Chief Mo'oh'távetoo'o (Black Kettle) forgave the US government for the Sand Creek massacre, declaring “Although wrongs have been done to me I live in hope.” After making his mark on the second of three peace treaties, he tried to lead his people to safety. Despite his efforts, both he and the hope for peace died at Washita.

All we ask is that we may have peace with the whites.

Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle, 1864

After the Attack

Following the attack, the US Army forcibly led 53 Cheyenne and Arapaho women and children to Camp Supply and then to Fort Hays, Kansas. Seven months later the army released its prisoners. Shocked by the brutality of the attack and its timing, during winter, many Cheyenne submitted to reservation life.

The story of the attack lives on in Cheyenne and Arapaho oral tradition and memory. Its effects continue to be felt today by the Southern Cheyenne and Southern Arapaho who are spread out over a seven-county area in the western part of Oklahoma, with headquarters in Concho.

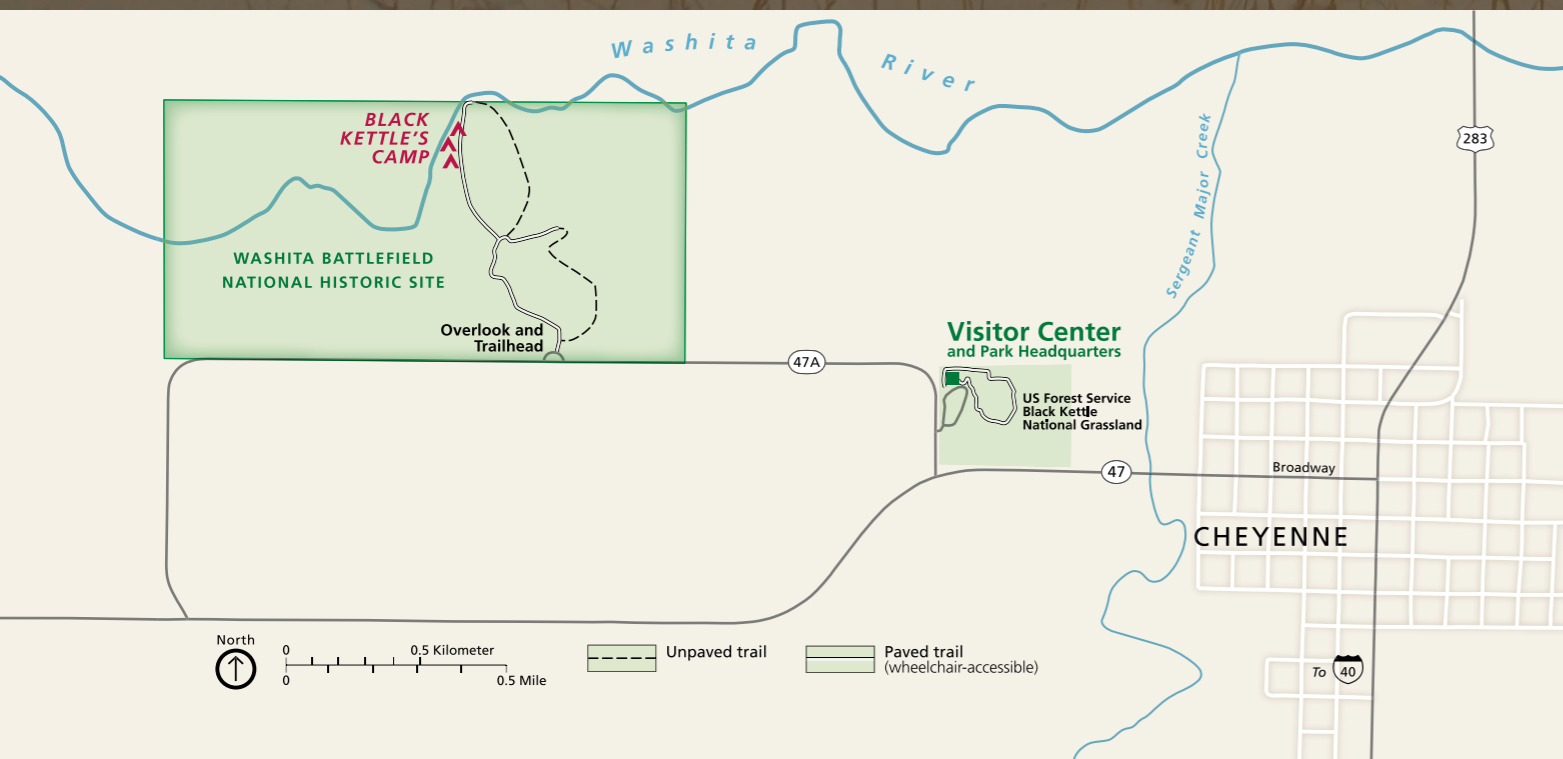
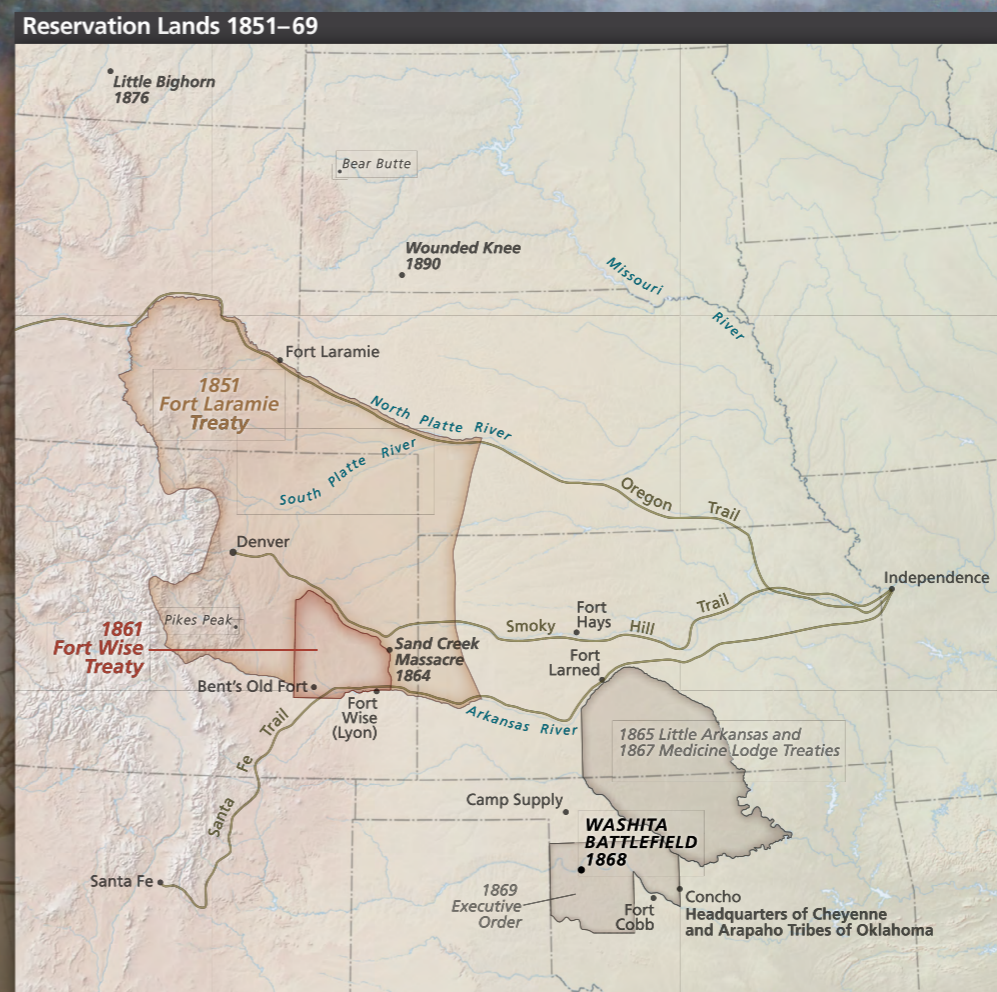


LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT

Lt. Col. George A. Custer (above) reported to Sheridan after the attack, “Our efforts were crowned by a most complete and gratifying success . . . the bodies of 103 of their warriors . . . [and] we destroyed everything of value to the Indians.”

Custer's victory at Washita catapulted him into the public's imagination as a great “Indian fighter” and encouraged his headstrong behavior. His recklessness is widely believed to have led to his death and defeat at the Little Bighorn in 1876.

BACKGROUND—NPS



Visit the Park

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site is on OK 47A, one mile west of Cheyenne, OK, in shared facilities with the Black Kettle National Grassland District Office of the US Forest Service.

Cheyenne, OK, is located on US 283, about 30 miles north of I-40 and about 20 miles east of the Texas border.

The visitor center is open daily except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1.

A self-guiding 1½-mile trail and overlook are open daily from sunrise to sunset.

Camping, fishing, and hiking trails are available in Black Kettle National Grassland.

Find limited visitor services (food, lodging, RV parks, and fuel) in Cheyenne, OK.

Regulations and Safety Please stay on the designated trail. It is designed for foot traffic only. No pets, bicycles, horses, or motorized vehicles. • Federal laws protect all natural and cultural features in the park. • For firearms regulations check the park website.

Emergencies call 911

Other Related National Parks Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Fort Laramie National Historic Site, Fort Larned National Historic Site.

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

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. Learn more at www.nps.gov.

More Information Washita Battlefield National Historic Site 18555 Hwy. 47A, Suite A Cheyenne, OK 73628 580-497-2742 www.nps.gov/waba

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