



# Foundation Document Overview

## Washita Battlefield National Historic Site

### Oklahoma



#### Contact Information

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## Purpose



*The purpose of WASHITA BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE is to preserve and protect the site of the “Battle of the Washita” including the natural, cultural, topographic, and scenic resources; and to promote public understanding of the attack and importance of the diverse perspectives related to the struggles that transpired between the Southern Great Plains tribes and the U.S. government.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why Washita Battlefield National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

1. The attack of the Cheyenne encampment along the Washita River was the first implementation of a strategy adopted by the U.S. Army, resulting from the failures of the treaty system, to strike encampments of Plains Indians during the winter months when they were most vulnerable.
2. The attack at Washita was a pivotal point for the Cheyenne and other Southern Great Plains tribes in that it symbolized their struggles to maintain the freedom of their traditional way of life and their realization that their lives were changing.
3. The events at Washita greatly impacted two prominent leaders: Chief Black Kettle, widely known for his pursuit of peaceful coexistence with whites, was killed; Lt. Col. George Custer, already known for his exploits during the Civil War, acquired a reputation as an aggressive Indian fighter.
4. Washita is a deeply meaningful place and has spiritual significance to the Cheyenne and Arapaho people. It is a place to show respect for all lives that were lost and offers opportunities for education, healing, and reconciliation.
5. The natural and physical resources of the Washita site, including the topography, scenic views, and vegetation, retain the character of the landscape at the time of the attack, enabling visitors to visualize the event.



## Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Battlefield Landscape**
- **Landscape Setting**
- **Sense of Place**
- **Tribal Relationships**



## Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The attack at Washita was the first implementation of a strategic decision by the U.S. Army, which had been unsuccessful in engaging Indian combatants, to launch a “total war” campaign against Southern Plains Indians by striking winter encampments and destroying their property when Indian communities were most vulnerable.
- Many people labeled the attack at Washita a massacre, unprovoked and unjust, while the U.S. Army and others hailed it as a great victory in the struggle to reduce Indian raids on the frontier.
- Chief Black Kettle’s life was filled with irony: he was a major proponent for peace, signing three treaties between 1861 and 1867, yet he was attacked twice, at Sand Creek and Washita.
- Gen. Philip Sheridan felt that Lt. Col. George Custer’s aggressiveness was the key to the successful implementation of the U.S. Army’s new strategy against the tribes of the Southern Plains. The reports of Custer’s victory catapulted him into the public imagination as a great Indian fighter and, ironically, encouraged the headstrong behavior that led to his demise at Little Bighorn.
- The attack at Washita and the resulting death of Black Kettle were pivotal events in the evolving relationships between the Cheyenne people, white settlers, and the U.S. government.
- The sacred ground of Washita provides opportunities to understand the resiliency of the human spirit and the struggle of societies to maintain cultural identity.
- Washita Battlefield National Historic Site is one of more than 400 National Park Service sites that protect this nation’s natural and cultural heritage.



## Description

Located in Roger Mills County in western Oklahoma, Washita Battlefield National Historic Site protects and interprets the site of the Southern Cheyenne village of Peace Chief Black Kettle. The village was attacked by the 7th U.S. Cavalry under Lt. Col. George A. Custer just before dawn on November 27, 1868. At the end of the incident, approximately 60 individuals, including American Indian men, women, and children as well as U.S. Cavalry soldiers, lay dead. Seen as an important military victory by U.S. forces, the terminology of the event has been debated. Some view the event as a battle, while others see it as a massacre.

Since 1868, several commemorative markers have been placed on the battlefield, although the exact location of Black Kettle's village has yet to be confirmed. In 1965 a 12-square-mile portion of the battlefield was designated as a national historic landmark. In 1966, the site was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. On November 12, 1996, Congress passed legislation that established the landmark as Washita Battlefield National Historic Site (Public Law 104-333). In 1997, land was formally transferred to the National Park Service from the Oklahoma Historical Society. Today, the National Park Service owns 315.2 acres in what scholars believed to be the core area of Custer's attack.

The region's dominant physical features include the Washita River, its river valley, and its floodplain—where many contend the village was located. Over time the Washita River carved a 1.5- to 2-mile-wide valley. Elms, cottonwoods, and willows line the river shoreline, transitioning to grass, sage, and shinnery (oak) on the valley walls. The valley walls rise 250 to 400 feet above the valley floor to craggy red shale cliffs of Permian age.

This physiography played a major role in the success of the military campaign. Custer and his subordinate commanders used the various ridgelines and elevated heights as a shelter to encircle the camp and effectively reduce any chance of escape. Black Kettle's people were thereby trapped within the narrow river valley.

Today, the park is surrounded by farmland. Several roads and highways cut across the greater battlefield. The abandoned Panhandle and Santa Fe Railroad Line cuts across a portion of the site believed to be Black Kettle's camp. Despite these intrusions and the introduction of agriculture, the battlefield retains a rural and relatively undeveloped character. Views from the park out to the larger national historic landmark-designated battlefield are for the most part unobstructed. Overall, the integrity of the battlefield remains high.

On August 25, 2007, Washita Battlefield National Historic Site staff opened the doors to the new visitor center. Located one-half mile from the designated historic site, the park headquarters and visitor center are in facilities shared with the U.S. Forest Service's Black Kettle National Grasslands District Office (part of Cibola National Forest and Grasslands). Through exhibits, media, and a self-guided trail and overlook, the visitor center and battlefield offer a contemplative and sacred surrounding where visitors can come to recognize the importance of the Battle of Washita as part of U.S. frontier military history and the struggles of the Southern Great Plains tribes to maintain control of their traditional lifeways and culture.

