

Washita Battlefield

150th Commemoration 1868–2018

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site
Oklahoma

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



ILLUSTRATION BY 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 Washita River. Before them is the winter camp of Cheyenne Peace Chief 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.

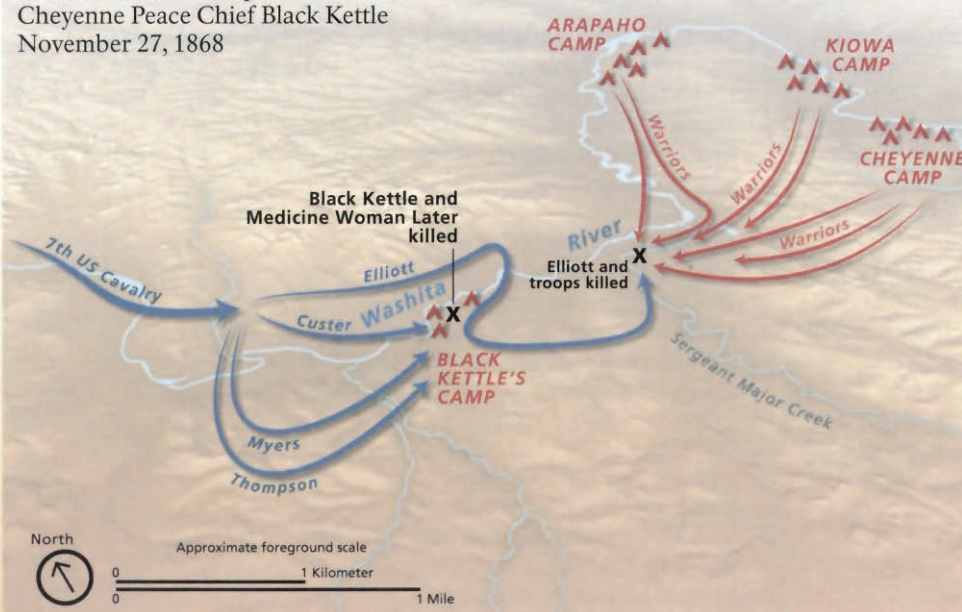
The attack comes at morning's first light. A bugle sounds "Charge!" as a band plays "Garry Owen." In a moment all is tumult as about 700 troopers splash through the frigid water into the sleeping camp.

In the first implementation of the Army's strategy of "total war" against the Indians 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 the 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 sprawl in the snow and mud.

To cripple resistance, soldiers slaughter the Indians' 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 women and children they have taken as prisoners of war, retreat north to Camp Supply.

Attack on winter camp of Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle November 27, 1868



Right A ledger art drawing by Cheyenne Chief Whirlwind. Plains Indians used ledger paper to depict significant oral histories. 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."



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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 Indian tribes. The US Congress ratified less than 400 treaties. Few were observed for long.

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

Some Indians 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 people by the Colorado US Volunteer Cavalry at Sand Creek, Colorado Territory, in 1864.



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Peace Chief Black Kettle forgave the federal 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 Black Kettle’s efforts, both he and 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 women and children to Camp Supply and then to Fort Hays, Kansas. One officer recalled that Custer invited his officers “to avail themselves of the services of a captured squaw.” Cheyenne oral tradition confirms this through mentions of ‘comfort’ women for soldiers, including Custer. 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 impact continues to be felt today by the Southern Cheyenne and Southern Arapaho tribes who are spread out over a seven-county area in the western part of Oklahoma, with headquarters in Concho.

BACKGROUND—NPS

In the Little Arkansas Treaty of 1865 the 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 the whole tribe accountable. He planned a campaign for the winter of 1868–69, when the Indians would be most vulnerable and least able to resist.

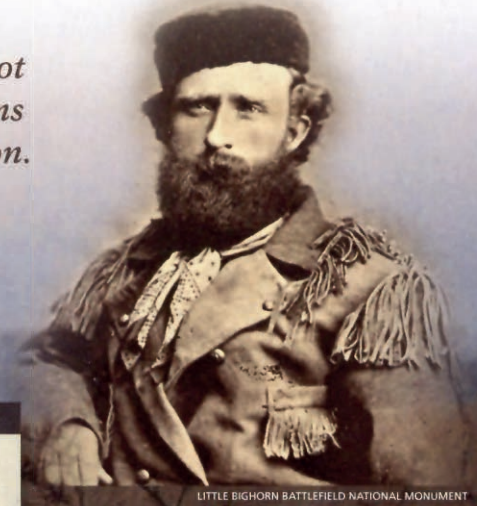
To launch his campaign, Sheridan chose the young Lt. Col. George A. Custer, known for his aggression in battle. At Camp Supply, Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), Custer assembled his 7th US Cavalry troops and Osage Indian scouts and prepared to enter the Washita River valley. He expected to find about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

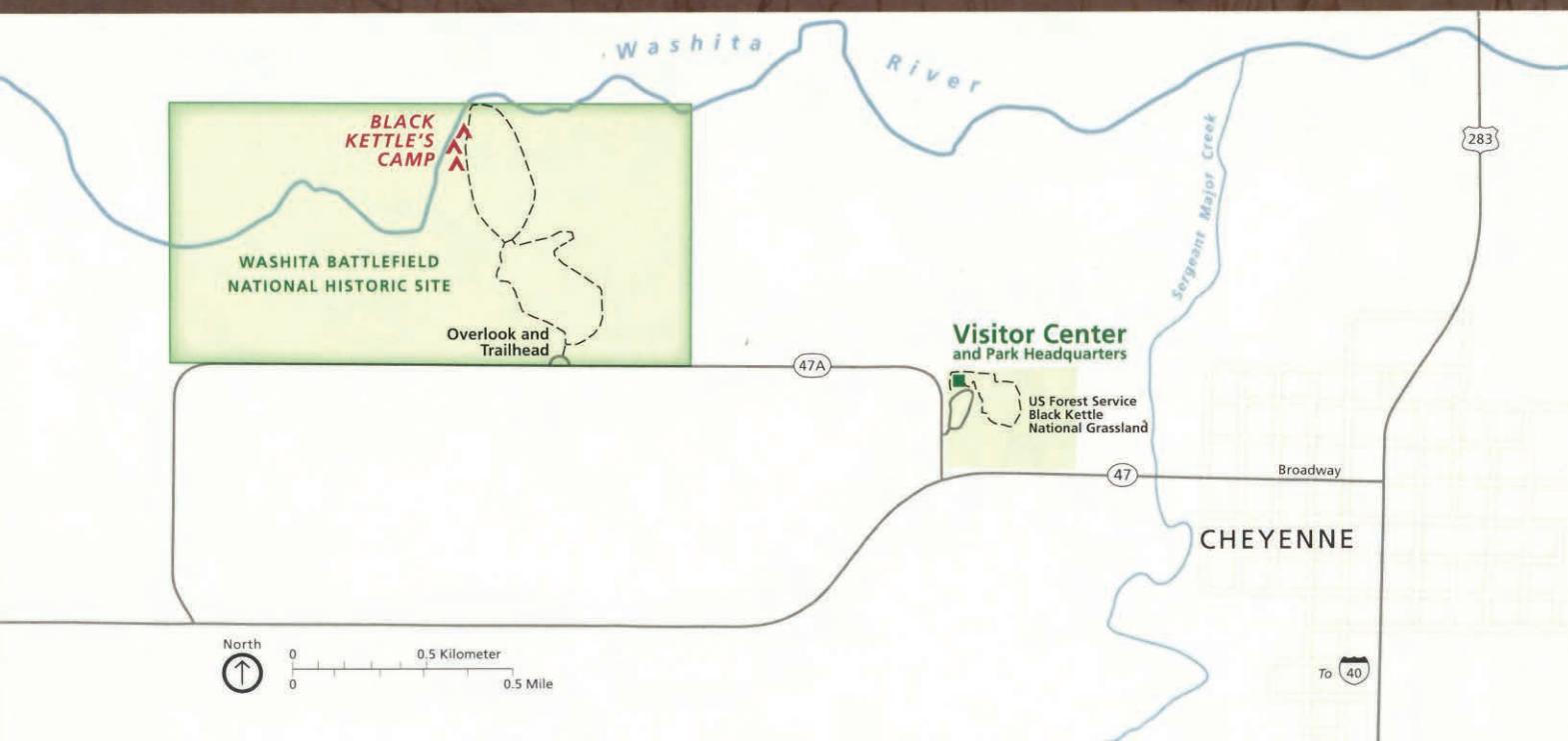
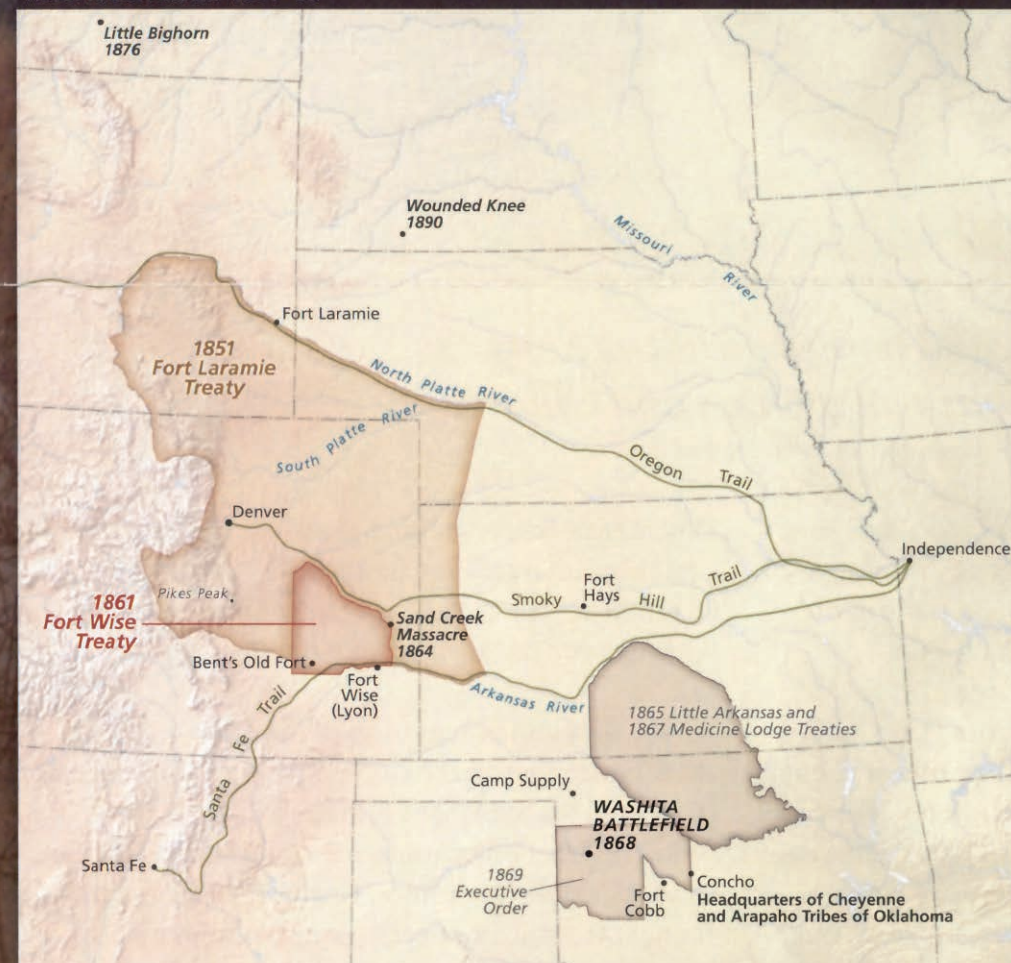


LITTLE BIGHORN BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL MONUMENT

Lt. Col. George A. Custer 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.”

After Washita, Custer became known as the nation’s preeminent Indian fighter. His recklessness is widely believed to have led to his death and defeat at the Little Bighorn in 1876.

Reservation Lands 1851–69



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 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. Closed Thanksgiving Day, 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, fuel) in Cheyenne.

Regulations and Safety Please stay on the designated trail. It is designed for foot traffic only. No pets, bicycles, horses, or motorized vehicles. Federal law prohibits removing plants, animals, rocks, or other natural or historic features. 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.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to a 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. To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs, visit 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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