



The Sand Creek Massacre

On November 29, 1864, U.S. Colonel John Chivington and 700 volunteer troops attacked an encampment of Cheyenne and Arapaho along Sand Creek. The thunderous approach of horses galloping toward camp at dawn sent hundreds fleeing from their tipis. Many were shot and killed as they ran. While warriors fought back, escapees frantically dug pits to hide in along the banks of Sand Creek - cannonballs later bombarded them.

In the bloody aftermath, some of the soldiers mutilated dead bodies and looted the camp. Later, most of the village and its contents were burned or destroyed.

Among the slain were chiefs War Bonnet, White Antelope, Lone Bear, Yellow Wolf, Big Man, Bear Man, Spotted Crow, Bear Robe, and Left Hand - some who had worked diligently to negotiate peace.

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site commemorates all who perished and survived this horrific event, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Colorado soldiers. This site also symbolizes the struggle of Native Americans to maintain their way of life on traditional lands.

Cheyenne Chief War Bonnet, pictured during a visit to President Abraham Lincoln, was slain at Sand Creek in 1864.





Why?

For years, Cheyenne and Arapaho traveled and hunted the Great Plains in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. But in 1858, gold fever struck in Colorado Territory. Miners rushed in and tens of thousands of settlers followed. Competition for land became great. Conflict was inevitable.

Skirmishes and raids erupted along overland routes, and at Indian camps and isolated ranches. When U.S. soldiers killed Cheyenne Chief Lean Bear, warriors clamored for revenge. The murder of rancher Nathan Hungate and his family sparked widespread fear and panic in Denver and throughout the Territory.

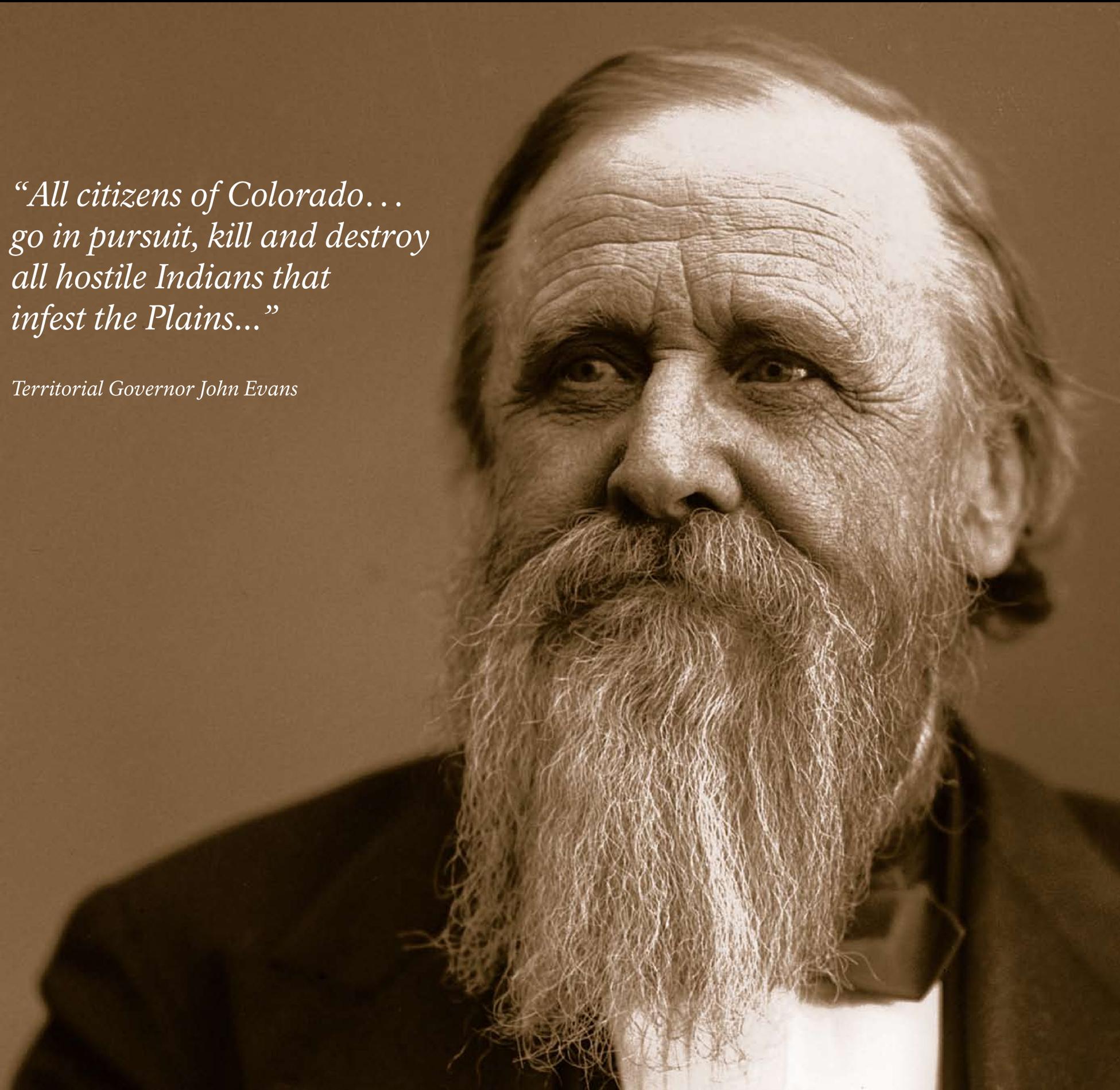
Governor Evans envisioned statehood for Colorado Territory and promised protection for its citizens. He directed friendly Arapaho and Cheyenne to go to the U.S. Indian Agent at Fort Lyon, “who will show them a place of safety.” But for hostile Indians, he issued a call for all Colorado citizens to “pursue, kill, and destroy” them. Only then, he proclaimed, “can we secure a permanent and lasting peace.”



Fort Lyon

*“All citizens of Colorado...
go in pursuit, kill and destroy
all hostile Indians that
infest the Plains...”*

Territorial Governor John Evans





Pleas for Peace



“All we ask is that we may have peace with the whites. . . We want to take good tidings home to our people, that they may sleep in peace.”

Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle

As tensions mounted, Chiefs Black Kettle and Left Hand pled for peace. They wrote to Major Wynkoop at Fort Lyon, expressing their desire to end violence. Wynkoop and 125 men marched apprehensively to the Smoky Hill River to meet with them. Negotiations followed. With renewed hope, Wynkoop and the chiefs headed for a peace counsel in Denver.

They met with Governor John Evans, Colonel John Chivington, and other officials on September 28, 1864 at Camp Weld. Chivington made his position clear: “My rule of fighting white men or Indians is to fight until they lay down their arms and submit to military authority. You are nearer to Major Wynkoop than anyone else, and you can go to him [at Fort Lyon] when you get ready to do that.”

Of twelve-hundred Cheyenne and Arapaho camped near Sand Creek in the autumn of 1864, about 650 Arapaho moved to Fort Lyon. “Prisoner rations” were not enough to sustain them, so they moved further east. A small Arapaho village under chief Left Hand chose instead to join the 500 or more Cheyenne still camped at Sand Creek.

Camp Weld Council - Major Wynkoop and Captain Soule kneel in front, Black Kettle sits behind them, third from left.



Testimony

In the aftermath of Sand Creek, federal investigations and military inquiry took place. Dozens of eyewitness' provided testimony. Taken in Washington D.C., Denver City, Fort Lyon, and other locations, officers, soldiers, and civilians came forth. Shortly, details portraying a bloodthirsty and repulsive massacre, or well deserved victory both began to emerge.

"...As the Indian survivors straggled into the Smoky Hills camps, everyone was crying, even the warriors... women and children were screaming and wailing... many in their grief were gashing themselves..."

George Bent, Son of William Bent and Owl Woman

"I saw the American flag waving and heard Black Kettle tell the Indians to stand around the flag. I also saw a white flag raised. These...were in so conspicuous a position, they could not have been missed."

Robert Bent, Son of William Bent and Owl Woman

"In going over the battleground the next day, I did not see a body of a man, woman, or child but what was scalped, and, in many instances, their bodies were mutilated in a most horrible manner..."

Lieutenant James Cannon, First New Mexico Infantry

"I received so very galling a fire from the Indians under the bank and from the ditches dug out just above the bank that I ordered my company to advance, to prepare to dismount and fight on foot. At the command to fight on foot I was shot...from the rifle of a chief known by the name of One-Eye."

Captain Presley Talbot, Third Colorado Regiment

"I would...most respectfully demand, as an act of justice to...the brave men whom I have had the honor to command in one of the hardest campaigns ever made...we be allowed that right guaranteed to every American citizen, of introducing evidence... to sustain us in what we believe to have been an act of duty to ourselves and to civilization."

Colonel John Chivington

"Not content with killing women and children, the soldiers indulged in acts of barbarity of the most revolting character. It is hoped that the authority of this government will never again be disgraced by [such] acts..."

Report from the Thirty-Eighth Congress, by the Joint Committee on the Conduct of War





Healing

Though the Sand Creek Massacre has long passed, memories live on. Many Cheyenne and Arapaho return here to pray and pay tribute to ancestors who both perished and survived that dreadful day.

Ever resilient, the Cheyenne and Arapaho nations of today number in the thousands. Many reside in communities in western Oklahoma and on reservations lands near Ethete, Wyoming and Lama Deer, Montana.

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site reminds us not only of the atrocities that occurred here, but those that continue to be inflicted on cultures throughout the world. It is a place to rest torments of the past, but moreover, to inspire us to keep them from happening again.

