

Site Location Study

*Source: Sand Creek Massacre Project,
National Park Service*

PROJECT SUMMARY

Introduction and Background

On November 29, 1864, soldiers from the US military attacked a peaceful encampment of Cheyenne and Arapaho along Big Sandy Creek in southeastern Colorado. Over 150 Indians were killed in the attack, most of whom were women, children, or elderly. The massacre profoundly influenced US-Indian relations and the structure of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. The exact location of the Sand Creek Massacre was obscured through time even to descendants of survivors. Indians were not able return to site to bury their dead following the massacre. In 1908, military veterans planned a reunion at the site but could not agree on its location. The site remained unattended and unmarked until 1950, when the Colorado Historical Society and local communities erected historical markers in the area. In the 1970s, tribal members returned to the area and evaluated the site through traditional tribal knowledge and oral histories.

Despite these activities, there were disagreements over the location and little physical evidence of the Cheyenne and Arapaho encampment or military activity had been found. Arrowhead collecting was a popular activity in southeastern Colorado in the 1930s when “dust bowl” winds blew off layers of soil to reveal artifacts. Records of collecting activities are vague and conflicting and it was unclear if collected artifacts were associated with the massacre. Surveys of the area in the mid-1990s did not conclusively identify the site.

The Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site Study Act of 1998 directed the National Park Service to “identify the location and extent of the massacre area and the suitability and feasibility of designating the site as a unit of the National Park Service system” and prepare alternatives for management, administration, and protection of the area. The National Park Service worked with the State of Colorado, the Northern and Southern Cheyenne tribes, Northern and Southern Arapaho tribes to locate the massacre site. The National Park Service Sand Creek Massacre project team used an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach to identify all potential locations of the massacre.

The site location study was completed in 1999 with the coop-



COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In 1950, the Colorado Historical Society placed a marker near the site in Chivington, Colorado. The marker is no longer present.

eration of property owners, Cheyenne and Arapaho descendants, local residents, and scientists. Key features of the massacre lie within the site’s mapped boundary: the encampment, sandpit area where the fiercest fighting occurred, and the paths of the military’s approach and Indian’s flight.

Methods and Discussion

Historical Research

Research included an examination and analysis of all available information regarding the massacre. Documentation included first-hand stories accounts to narratives from people who were at the site before or after the massacre, and interviews with local residents and collectors. Research assistance was provided by the Colorado Historical Society, the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, tribally recognized Sand Creek descendent organizations, the Boulder History Museum, and local landowners. Extensive searches of archival resources included maps, manuscripts, diaries, soldier testimonies, newspaper accounts, General Land Office and US Geological Survey surveys and maps, homestead records, military scouting reports, accounts of the massacre by Cheyenne and Arapaho participants, historic photos, and other sources.

Research focused on references to the location and extent of the massacre site and all related military and Indian actions. Participant accounts of the massacre are generally specific with the notable exception of the precise location along the creek. The locations indicated by historical research were con-

firmed and adjusted to the results of the archeological survey.

Oral Histories

Oral history was approached as the transmission of knowledge of a social group or family's history through the repetition of stories from one generation to the next. The study focused on Cheyenne and Arapaho family stories about the massacre, or stories about specific members of an individual family passed through generations, with an emphasis on traditional knowledge of the massacre site location. Previous research conducted by private citizens and tribal members provided a foundation for the oral histories. The study recognized the limitations of writing stories that were meant to be handed down by spoken word and the difficulty of conveying the significance of those stories to tribal history, the people who told them, and their descendants.

Tribes had the opportunity to conduct their own oral history project and use culturally appropriate methods for locating the massacre site. The Northern Arapaho, Northern Cheyenne, and Southern Arapaho tribes conducted their own oral history projects and used traditional methods for site location; the Southern Cheyenne worked with the National Park Service. Tribal investigations were conducted by descendants of massacre survivors and tribal leaders. The most mentioned method of site location was sensing a spiritual presence or hearing the voices of women, children, horses or other animals on the site.

Archeological Survey

The archeological survey, conducted after other research was completed, focused on areas most likely to have physical evidence of the massacre. The survey was intended to provide information not available in sometimes conflicting and culturally biased historical records. The historical and archeological evidence validated the site as the location of the massacre. Local tradition and historical documentation indicate the site was subject to relic collecting over many years, including one episode immediately after the massacre. In 1868, a visiting military party reported collecting human remains and relics. Surveys in the mid-1990s located a small quantity of 1864 artifacts.

Artifacts can be separated into three clusters: prehistoric, circa 1864, and late 1800s to present. The major assemblage consistently dates to 1864. Metal detectors found evidence of the encampment such as shattered plates, utensils, hide scrapers, awls, trade items, and weapons. Artifacts also included military equipment, arrowheads, and personal items such as suspender grips, buttons, utensils, pots and pans, tools, horse tack, and trade silver ornaments, thimbles, and tinkling cones or common ornamental items on Native American dress. The



Metal detector in use during the archeology survey, 1999.

majority of the artifacts are comparable to goods given to or acquired by the Cheyenne and Arapaho around 1864. The arms and ammunition are evidence of the one-sided attack on the encampment and are consistent with those carried by the military units that participated in the massacre.

The location of the Cheyenne and Arapaho encampment was further confirmed by the condition of artifacts—every spoon, fork, tin cup, plate, bowl, bucket, pot, and kettle was crushed and flattened. Cast iron pieces were broken. These crushing and breakage patterns indicate methodical, intentional destruction supported by historical and archeological records. This pattern is also duplicated at the 1867 Pawnee Fork, Kansas, Cheyenne and Lakota camp assemblage.

Conclusions

The location and extent of the Sand Creek Massacre was conclusively identified by the site location study. The boundary extends approximately 11 square miles and corresponds to first-hand descriptions given by participants in the massacre. Approximately 400 massacre-related artifacts provide conclusive evidence. The study brought together the most comprehensive research regarding the massacre's location as of 2000, including numerous recordings of Cheyenne and Arapaho oral histories. While the study preparers supported the massacre site boundary presented in report, each group has a varying interpretation of the evidence regarding the location of some of the massacre's elements within that boundary. The identified boundary served as a basis for management alternatives, administration, protection, and designation as a National Park Service unit in 2007.

Literature Cited

National Park Service. 2000. Sand Creek Massacre project, volume 1: Site location study. Denver, CO: National Park Service, Intermountain Region.