

## PROJECT SUMMARY

## Special Resource Study

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

## 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 location of the Sand Creek Massacre site was obscured through time even to descendants of massacre survivors. The Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site Study Act of 1998 directed the National Park Service (NPS) 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 site location study, completed in 1999, conclusively identified the location and extent of the massacre. The special resource study and Environmental Assessment was completed in 2000 and prepared in close consultation with the Northern and Southern Cheyenne, Northern and Southern Arapaho tribes, the State of Colorado, and affected landowners.

## Suitability and Feasibility of Designation as a National Park Service System Unit

The special resource study found the Sand Creek Massacre site to be nationally significant because the profound influence the massacre had on structure of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes and US-Indian relations. The site is an outstanding opportunity for interpreting a cultural theme of US heritage that is not already adequately represented in the National Park Service system, is exceptionally valuable for public use and scientific study opportunities, and retains a true, accurate, and relatively



Site marker placed in the 1950s, 2005.



Visitors attend an interpretive program, 2007.

unspoiled example of the resource. The Sand Creek Massacre is still of great importance to the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes and the site is a sacred place. The massacre had long-ranging influences on Cheyenne and Arapaho society, in addition to the immediate impacts from material losses by the destruction of the Cheyenne encampment.

In a single event, nearly all of the Cheyenne chiefs who favored peace were eliminated and surviving leaders became advocates of resistance. News of the massacre spread among tribes and the repercussions from the massacre affected intercultural relationships that have continued to the present. The event escalated warfare throughout much of the central Plains and created a pervasive, nervous distrust between the federal government and the Plains tribes which complicated future negotiations. Other Indian-military conflicts of the 1860s and 1870s can be traced, at least in part, to the massacre and its long-term unsettling effects among the Plains tribes. Though Sand Creek was one of several massacre events during the mid-1800s to 1900, it provoked national outrage and became an important symbol in the movement for reform of US Indian policy. More recently, the massacre has been suggested as proof of the genocidal intent the US Indian policy.

The Sand Creek Massacre site provides a broad context for understanding US-Indian conflicts and is an opportunity to interpret the history and impact of those conflicts on American Indian societies. The site offers visitors a greater understanding of Plains Indian societies and disruption by the expansion of Euro-American settlement. The site's gently undulating

landscape has changed little since 1864 and allows contemplation on the complexities of the tragedy. A National Park unit at Sand Creek provides an opportunity to understand the massacre's significance, contributing cultural differences, devastating repercussions to the Cheyenne and Arapaho people, ensures long-term protection, and accommodate public use.

## Alternatives for Management

Each management alternative considered addressed impacts on land use, visitor experience, the socioeconomic environment, cultural and natural resources, as well as development costs. Interpretation and education would focus on four primary stories: (1) significance of the massacre and site, (2) remembrance of the victims, (3) present-day culture of associated tribes, (4) and the historical and cultural context of the massacre. The action alternatives provide opportunities to visitors for a cross-cultural and spiritual experience, understanding of present-day tribal people relationships with the site, interaction with massacre descendants, and access to tribal oral histories of the massacre.

A no action alternative, *Alternative 1*, was the basis for comparing the impacts of the action alternatives. The site would be un-staffed and have little interpretation. Local landowners would provide voluntary protection or public access.

Under *Alternative 2*, approximately 1,500 acres would be acquired from a local landowner to create Sand Creek Massacre Memorial commemorating Cheyenne and Arapaho casualties. The site would allow public access to an overlook and a visitor contact station would offer interpretive and educational opportunities. The memorial could be managed by the tribes, State of Colorado, Kiowa County, or the NPS. The site could be commemorated as a national memorial under NPS management. This alternative would provide minimal protection, the majority of site would continue to be privately owned and subject to artifact collecting and future development.

Under *Alternative 3* (the selected alternative), Sand Creek Massacre Historic Site would be established, providing the greatest possible protection for all critical resources of the massacre while providing visitor access and a more thorough interpretation of the event. The site would include 12,480 acres and could be managed by the NPS or the State of Colorado or by the NPS in collaboration with tribal governments and the State of Colorado. This alternative would provide visitors with a more comprehensive understanding of the event and would include a variety of visitor services.

Tribes preferred Alternative 3 followed by Alternative 2. Representatives emphasized the desire to be involved in site planning, for special access and use rights for ceremonial and religious purposes, that the area be respected as a massacre site



A park ranger presents an interpretive program to visitors, 2007.

and a sacred place, and to keep the site largely undeveloped. The tribes expressed the desire that land be held in trust for the tribes by the federal government. Landowners also wanted to continue existing land uses, including grazing and existing oil facilities. Tribes, local landowners, and local officials also recommended that the land be acquired from willing sellers.

### Alternatives Considered, but Rejected

An alternative to acquire 640 acres to provide public access to reach a small existing memorial on the bluff overlooking the site was considered, but rejected. Local landowners strongly objected because this alternative was similar to a previous public access arrangement that had problematic trespassing, vandalism, and privacy issues. Local landowners were willing to sell all of their holdings within the massacre site boundary and relocate. Alternative 2 evolved based on these discussions.

Under the final alternative, the site would be protected as a historic site, though the boundary would exclude privately owned land to address local landowner concerns. However, numerous concerns were raised regarding the establishment of a site that omitted integral portions of the massacre. As a result, this alternative to establish a historic site that did not fully protect the critical resources of the massacre was rejected. This alternative was also rejected because alternative 2 did not include the private property.

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic site was established in 2007 as an NPS unit.

## Literature Cited

National Park Service. 2000. Sand Creek Massacre project, volume 2: Special resource study and environmental assessment. Denver, CO: National Park Service, Intermountain Region.