The Cheyenne and Arapaho came from the north. In the 1600s they had farmed from the Great Lakes to western Minnesota. Pressured from the east by other tribes, they migrated west, eventually reaching the Black Hills. In less than 50 years the horse became a crucial part of their lives. Moving south onto the plains, they entered what is now Colorado by the 1820s. They gathered and traded wild horses and hunted buffalo and other animals that provided food, shelter, tools, and hides for trade.

By 1841, through trade along the Santa Fe and other trails, these tribes built far-ranging trade networks and alliances. Bent’s Fort (now Bent’s Old Fort National Historic Site), southwest of Sand Creek, was one trade center. As marriages between traders and Native American women solidified these ties, the deepening economic relations significantly altered the material lives of the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

By the dim light I could see the soldiers, charging down on the camp from each side ... at first the people stood huddled in the village, but as the soldiers came on they broke and fled . . .

—George Bent, son of trader William Bent and Owl Woman, a Cheyenne

Standing in Sand Creek

Two Cultures, One Land

The Sun rising at their backs, a long column of riders moved up dry Big Sandy Creek toward the tipis along its banks. The village’s 700 Cheyenne and Arapaho people were stirring, tending to chores. The temporary camp was along the northern border of the Fort Wise Treaty lands, where most felt protected. Hearing distant hoof beats, Indian women called out, “The buffalo are coming!” But on this cold November morning the “buffalo” were hundreds of blue-clad soldiers. The alarm went through the village. Peace Chief Black Kettle raised a U.S. flag and a white flag of truce, signals of peaceful intentions. Men gathered weapons and young herders moved the pony herds. Women, children, and elderly began their evacuation up the dry creek channel and onto the plains. Cheyenne chiefs Black Kettle, Standing In The Water, and White Antelope, with Arapaho chief Left Hand, walked toward the mounted soldiers to ask for a parley. Cavalrymen crossed the creek, firing into them and the village. All but Black Kettle were killed or mortally wounded.

Col. John Chivington arrived with the artillery at the edge of the village. He gave the order to fire, then ordered the howitzers upstream. As soldiers scattered over many square miles, command and control was soon lost, and soldiers died in their own crossfire. The Colorado 3rd Regiment, a group of 100-day U.S. Volunteers, lost all unit integrity. Soon individuals and small squads chased after Indians in all directions. The 1864 massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho people opened the last phase of a broader conflict between Native Americans and a rapidly expanding nation. At stake were two ways of using the land, of seeing the world. The massacre deepened Plains Indian resistance to American expansion, spurring a cycle of raids and reprisals. But the savagery at Sand Creek also helped awaken America to the plight of its Native peoples. This remains sacred ground—a place to honor the dead and dispossessed, a place where they are not forgotten.

By 1841, through trade along the Santa Fe and other trails, these tribes built far-ranging trade networks and alliances. Bent’s Fort (now Bent’s Old Fort National Historic Site), southwest of Sand Creek, was one trade center. As marriages between traders and Native American women solidified these ties, the deepening economic relations significantly altered the material lives of the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

The Cheyenne and Arapaho people were killed—two-thirds of them women, children, and elderly. Another 200 were wounded or maimed. Of the army’s 675 soldiers, about 16 were killed and 70 wounded.

Cohoe, Cheyenne survivor of Sand Creek, d. 1924

The Water

In the 1800s columns of U.S. Cavalry were a growing presence on the Great Plains. Immigrants from the United States poured onto the plains. Settlers, miners, and speculators crossed what was then called the “Great American Desert,” seeking wealth or simply a new start. By 1850, through treaty, annexation, and war, the United States and its territories spanned the continent. The discovery of gold in the Rockies brought more immigrants, more settlement. By 1864 land speculation became a major business interest in a Colorado Territory poised on the brink of statehood.

The stage was set. Here were two vastly different cultures, one a rapidly growing, expansionist nation employing industrial technology, intent on fulfilling its self-proclaimed “Manifest Destiny.” Directly in its path was a nomadic people dependent on the buffalo hide trade. The clash of these two cultures produced a great American tragedy.