In the 1850s and 1860s, Cheyenne and Arapaho had moved from Great Lakes to western Minnesota, then North Dakota. Pressure from Lakota pushed them further west into South Dakota and Wyoming. They adopted the horse and began moving south into the Great Plains. The 1852 Friendship-Treaty formalized relations between Cheyenne and U.S. government.

1851: Treaty of Fort Laramie assigns to tribes a large swath of the Great Plains and promises annuities. Tribes guarantee free passage for settlers along Oregon Trail.


1858: Discovery of gold in Colorado.

Cheyenne and Arapaho today remember the sufferings of their ancestors.

**Capt. Silas Soule’s condemnation of the attack**

Nate Americans across the plains grew resentful as white settlement of the West disrupted their nomadic ways. Economic developments and increasingly busy overland and river routes cut across Indian lands and interests. Travelers and settlers competed for grass, water, fuel, and game. To dampen growing tensions the U.S. government signed a treaty with the tribes at Fort Laramie in 1851. In exchange for allowing safe passage for whites, much of the Great Plains was promised to the tribes, with the Cheyenne-Arapaho portion stretching between the North Platte and Arkansas rivers (see map below).

In a few years this arrangement was no longer convenient. After gold was discovered in the Pike’s Peak area in 1858, it drew Western interests, and homesteaders began using the Smoky Hill Trail through the 1851 Cheyenne-Arapaho reserve. They wanted protection. Then in early 1861, with seven southern states having already seceded and civil war looming, the federal government decided to organize a new territory to secure the gold fields for the Union. To pave the way for the Colorado Territory and protect the routes through it, politicians called for a reduction of the treaty lands. A fraction of the Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs, including Black Kettle, were called in to negotiate the Treaty of Fort Wixas in September 1860. Only six of the Cheyenne Council of Forty-Four and a few Arapaho leaders agreed to a greatly reduced reserve—the northern border of which was the “Big Sandy,” now called Sand Creek. Most Cheyenne headmen did not acknowledge or may not have been aware of the new treaty; many still hunted and lived on their old grounds.

Further complicating the situation, Colorado Territory politicians and business interests, including those of ranchers, began to agitate for the lands. To improve prospects they lobbied to protect trade along the Santa Fe Trail, bring a rail line to Denver, and create a South Platte River spur off the Oregon Trail. Troubles with tribes in the territory were an obstacle. Anxieties deepened after Confederates invaded New Mexico in a failed attempt to gain access to the Colorado gold fields and transportation routes. Many regular soldiers were committed to the war elsewhere; some settlers and commercial interests felt vulnerable.

In early 1864 Native American raids on ranches and stage stations followed by punitive and preemptive Army expeditions dimmed prospects for peace. Throughout that spring and summer hysteria and fear increased on both sides: From some quarters the cry went up to solve the “Indian problem.” Many southern Cheyenne and Arapaho, led by chiefs like Black Kettle, were still dedicated to peaceful talks, but warrior societies like the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers stiffened resistance to further white incursion, raiding along the Platte and Arkansas rivers. Events accelerated toward a tragic culmination at Sand Creek.

**Sand Creek Massacre**

Sand Creek is a tragic story of how the U.S. government promised to protect Native American lands and rights, but then undertook policies that ultimately led to war. The Sand Creek Massacre, also known as the Sand Creek Massacre, occurred on November 29, 1864, in what is now southeastern Colorado near present-day Julesburg.

In 1864, the U.S. government had organized the Colorado Territory to gain access to the area’s gold deposits. However, the U.S. military was under pressure to secure the gold fields for the Union and protect the routes through it. The U.S. Army was ordered to bring order to the region.

On November 29, 1864, a military expedition led by Col. John Chivington entered the Cheyenne River Valley in search of a Cheyenne-Arapaho camp. The expedition included 730 soldiers and 177 civilians, including soldiers, scouts, and civilian volunteers.

The Cheyenne-Arapaho camp was located near Sand Creek, Colorado. At the time of the attack, the camp was occupied by about 700 people, including women, children, and elderly men.

The Cheyenne-Arapaho were surprised and outnumbered by the U.S. soldiers, who opened fire on the camp. The attack lasted for several hours and resulted in the deaths of about 200 Cheyenne-Arapaho, including many women and children.

The Sand Creek Massacre was a tragic event that resulted from a complex mix of factors, including the U.S. government’s push to open the region for white settlement, the Cheyenne-Arapaho’s resistance to this encroachment, and the growing tensions between the two groups.

The Sand Creek Massacre is one of the most tragic moments in American history and serves as a reminder of the ongoing conflict between Native Americans and the U.S. government. It is a testament to the importance of understanding the history of these events and the ongoing challenges faced by Native American tribes today.

**Park Contact Station and Some Paths Are Accessible to Wheelchairs**

The park contact station and some paths are accessible to wheelchairs. Service animals are welcome.

**More Information**

Sand Creek Massacre
National Historic Site
910 Wadsworth Blvd.
Eldorado Springs, CO 80106
Site office: 719-729-3003
E-mail: parkhome@nationalparks.gov
Website: www.nps.gov/sand

**Accessibility**

The park contact station and some paths are accessible to wheelchair. Service animals are welcome.

The park hosts special programs associated with the events at Sand Creek, including tours and talks. Please stay on the walking trail at all times. Caution large vehicles and motorcyclists. Eight miles of dirt and sand roads lead to the site.

**Regulations**

All pets must be on a leash. Camping is not allowed at the site. See the park website for firearms regulations.

**Setting for a Tragedy**

The effects of the attack reverberated for years, profoundly unsettling the Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples and their cultures. Many villages were essentially destroyed. Losses left many families without providers and children without parents. Thirteen Cheyenne chiefs and one Arapaho chief were killed along with any chances for peace, damaging the traditional governing council for generations.

The treachery of the attack damaged the credibility of remaining Peace Chiefs like Black Kettle, gaining recruits to the warrior societies. Across the plains, Cheyenne warriors declared all-out war.

Some Denver citizens cheered the returning soldiers, who displayed their human trophies on stage. But it was too little, too late. Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders, in包括Black Kettle, were still dedicated to peace talks, but warrior societies like the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers stiffened resistance to further white incursion, raiding along the Platte and Arkansas rivers. Events accelerated toward a tragic culmination at Sand Creek.

**Aftermath of the Massacre**

In response to the growing conflict, territorial governor John Evans called for volunteers (left), promising them “plunder taken from the Indians.” Black Kettle asked for a meeting “to make peace” (farther above). Their conference in Denver did nothing to resolve the attack.

The events at Sand Creek, while setting off a new round of conflict, eventually helped fuel a reappraisal of the treatment of Native Americans. The glaring contradiction between America’s ideals and events like Sand Creek, Washita, and Wounded Knee would increasingly trouble citizens. Emphasis gradually shifted from military, economic, and cultural subjugation of native peoples to their “assimilation” into American society in the 1900s. The goal was to turn them into settled farmers and end hostilities to tribes and—kill the Indian; save the man.” This attempt to end the Plains Indians’ way of life would only partly succeed due to the resilience of the Cheyenne and Arapaho people.