

# Sand Creek Massacre

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historic Site  
Colorado



## Seeds of Conflict

As Colorado Territory grew, so to did tensions between settlers and tribes. Settler's desire for land was confronted by nations who lived and traveled across the same areas. A reservation established in eastern Colorado in 1861 was insufficient for the nomadic southern bands of the Cheyenne and Arapaho.

The seeds of conflict began with the murder of Cheyenne Chief Lean Bear, shot by soldiers in the spring of 1864. War seemed certain after cavalrymen burned the Cheyenne camps of Crow Chief and Raccoon, and fired on the Arapaho Chief Left Hand. The murder of the Hungate family and the display of their mutilated remains ignited the

fears and passions of Colorado officials and pioneers. By summer, war erupted across the plains. A September meeting between Chiefs, Colorado Governor Evans and Colonel Chivington accomplished little. Soon, the recruitment of more volunteers began - over a thousand men would answer the call.



L-R: Chief Lean Bear; Dog Soldier leader White Horse, his men participated in raids before and after Sand Creek; Starving Elk, when this photo was taken in 1904 he was among the oldest living Cheyenne survivors of the Sand Creek Massacre.



L-R: Ordained minister Colonel John Chivington, commanded the troops at Sand Creek; Colonel George Shoup, commanded the Third Regiment, and later became Idaho's first Governor; Lieutenant Luther Wilson, wounded in action, his Company H of the First Regiment opened the attack at Sand Creek.

# Sand Creek Massacre

**November 29, 1864**

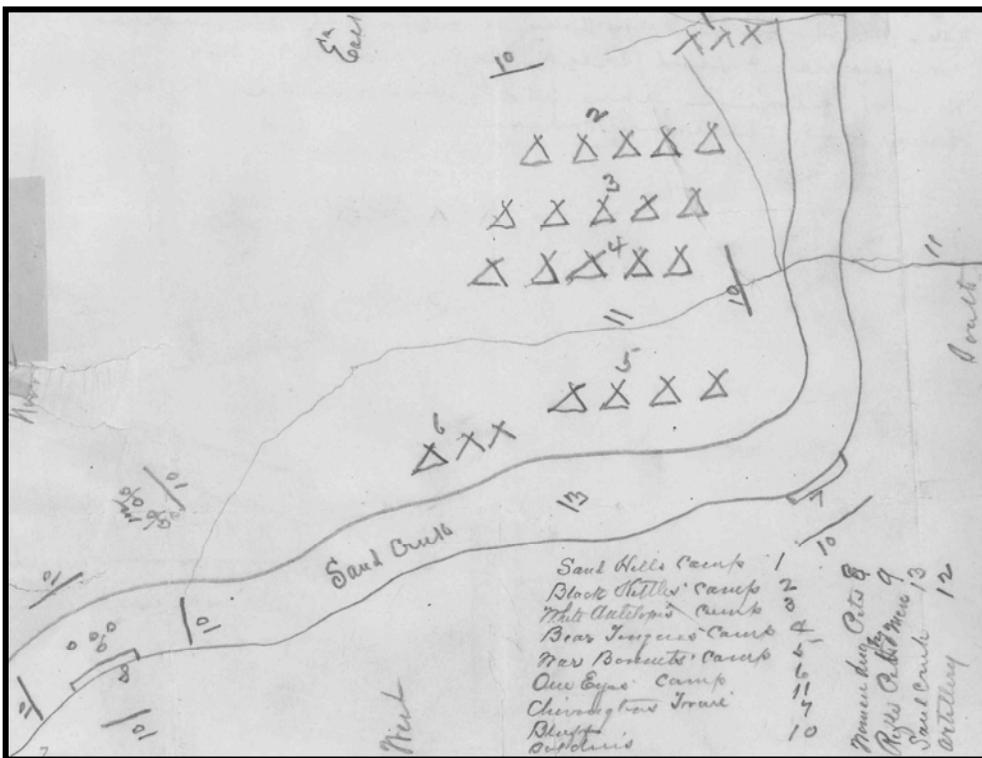
The silence of dawn, eerily quiet just moments before, was shattered by the clanging of muskets, artillery, and the canter of over 650 mounted troopers. Soon, volleys were fired into the camps from the southeast, then the southwest.

Cheyenne and Arapaho scurried towards the banks of Sand Creek; others made a dash for horses and weapons. An American flag was raised by Chief Black Kettle. Chief White Antelope sang his journey song – “*Only the Earth and Mountains Live Forever.*”

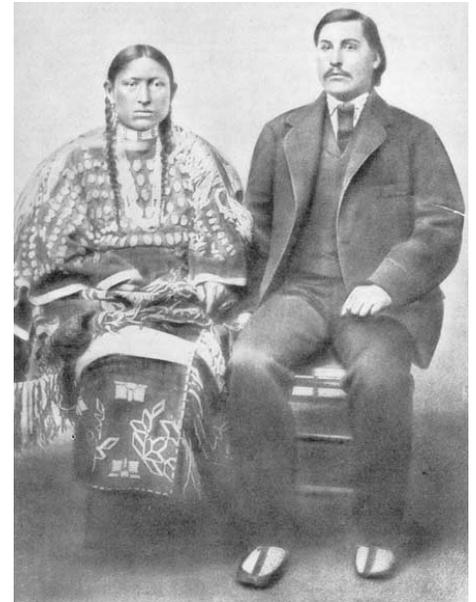
Companies came forward; crossing Sand creek while several dozen warriors, teenagers to old men, defended their people’s retreat.

For five miles or more the Cheyenne and Arapaho beat a bloody path northwards up the valley. Along the way, many dug pits in the sand and along the banks of the stream – here they were bombarded with gunfire and howitzer shells. Sand Creek, the scene of suffering and sacrifice, became sacred ground.

## An eyewitness Map



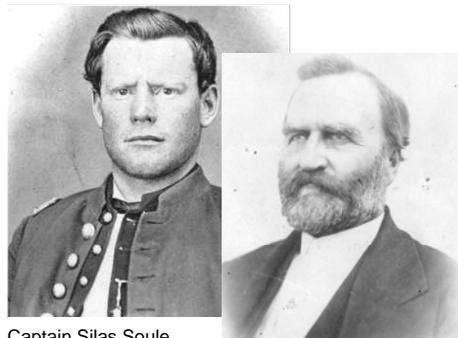
By nightfall, ammunition had nearly run out for the volunteers. With the supply train still 15 miles away, dying and wounded men were “quartered” in abandoned tipis. Remaining troops spent the next two nights near the village, sleep interrupted by nerves and exhaustion.



George Bent, 1843-1918, and his wife Maggie.

The map (left) was drawn in the early 1900's by Sand Creek participant George Bent. Bent shows the bending streambed, Chief's camps, Chivington's trail, artillery positions, soldiers, rifle pits, bluffs, and other information. After fleeing the village, Bent was wounded in the hip. With others, he survived by defending himself in a large pit dug along Sand Creek several miles above the village.

## The Aftermath



Captain Silas Soule,  
Company D, Fort Lyon  
Battalion, First Cavalry  
of Colorado.

Sergeant Stephen Decatur,  
Company C, Third Colorado  
Regiment.

Questions about the attack and claims of atrocities led to investigations and inquiry. Controversy arose as some, like Captain Silas Soule, condemned the attack. Soule wrote, “*I refused to fire and swore that none but a coward would, for by this time hundreds of women and children were coming towards us and getting on their knees for mercy...*” Soule was later murdered on the streets of Denver.

Volunteers anxious to defend the attack called themselves the ‘Vindicators.’ Sergeant Stephen Decatur penned. “*We are not violators of flags of truce! We are not the cowards who would massacre disarmed prisoners of war! Nor the vain braggarts to bring home trophies of a battle with defenseless and already subjugated enemies... We are men who proved our manhood by going out in defense of all we hold dear.*”

The Sand Creek Massacre site is one of our Nation’s most profound historic areas. The site is viewed by many as hallowed ground. In its wake came reprisal, revenge, condemnation, investigations, defenders, and critics.

Sand Creek gave rise to reforms in federal Indian policy – a rallying cry for more treaties, Christianization and education. Its aftermath also fueled another generation of confrontation: Beecher Island, Washita, Summit Springs, Palo Duro Canyon and the Little Big Horn.

## OPEN DAILY 9am – 4pm

**Please check with park for Winter Schedule (December – March)**

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site is located in Colorado’s southeastern corner. Enter the park from State Highway 96 at Kiowa County Roads 54 or 59. Travel north to Kiowa County Road W and follow signs to the site.

**Ranger Station and Bookstore:** Stop here for brochures, schedules, and information.

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, established in 2007, is one of nearly 400 parks in the National Park System.

[www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov)

### More Information:

Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site  
P.O. Box 249

Eads, CO 81036

719-729-3003 or 719-438-5916

[www.nps.gov/sand](http://www.nps.gov/sand)