

Sand Creek Massacre NHS

9:00 am – 4:00 pm daily, April 1 – December 1

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sand Creek Massacre
National Historic Site



The Sand Creek Massacre

November 29, 1864

Its victims numbered in the hundreds. Its aftermath included investigations, bitter critics, staunch defenders, reprisal, and revenge.

For Cheyenne and Arapaho, life would soon change – treaties at the Little Arkansas and Medicine Lodge would force most into Indian Territory. However, from those surviving Sand Creek would come Chiefs, U.S. Army scouts, Native American Church leaders, farmers, wild west entertainers, artists, a newspaper writer, and an Episcopal Saint.

Now, nearly 145 years later, generations after it's chaos, mayhem, and bloodshed, the Sand Creek Massacre remains a profound, symbolic, and to many, sacred place.

Seeds of Conflict

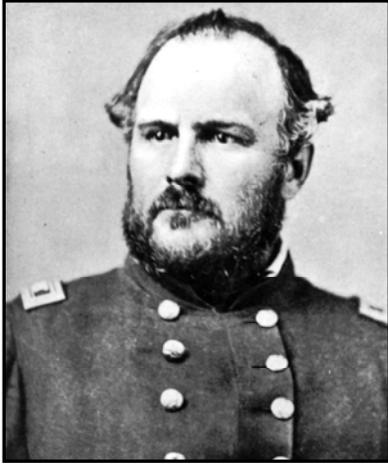


Cheyenne Chief Lean Bear

As Colorado Territory grew, so to did tensions between settlers and native tribes. The settlers' desire for land and prosperity was confronted by nations who lived, hunted, and traveled across the same areas. A reservation established in southeastern Colorado in 1861 was insufficient for the nomadic Cheyenne and Arapaho. The area was but a fraction of what had been promised to them ten years earlier.

The seeds of conflict began with the murder of Cheyenne Chief Lean Bear; shot by soldiers in western Kansas in the spring of 1864. In addition, the burning of several Cheyenne camps by Colorado cavalymen near the South Platte, and claims that troops initiated conflict near a place called Fremont's Orchard foreshadowed war. By summer, the murders of the Hungate family near Denver, the subsequent display of their remains, as well as lingering fears of Indian attacks like those at New Ulm, Minnesota which had claimed hundreds of lives, increased tension among pioneers and Colorado officials. By summer, war erupted across the plains. A September meeting between Chiefs, Colorado Governor Evans, and Colonel Chivington accomplished little. Soon, the recruitment of additional volunteers began – farmers, printers, miners, clerks, politicians, gamblers, and even an actor heeded the call.

The Indian Expedition



John Chivington. A native of Ohio, he commanded the Colorado Volunteers at Sand Creek.

Photo courtesy Denver Public Library Western History Collections

Dawn was broken by the clanging of muskets, artillery, and the booming voice of John Chivington – a harangue to his troops.

Volleys were fired and artillery hurried forward. In the camp, people 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*” – knowing that death was seconds away.

Companies came forward; crisscrossing Sand creek. Companies soon split. Warriors desperately defended their people’s retreat.

For five miles, for eight hours, the Cheyenne and Arapaho beat a bloody path up Sand Creek. Along the way, many dug hiding pits in the valley’s soft sand – here; they were bombarded with gunfire and howitzer shells. Sand Creek, the scene of suffering and sacrifice became sacred ground. November 29, 1864 would never be forgotten.

By nightfall, ammunition had run low for the volunteers. With about 11 of their dead, and dozens of their wounded comrades loaded in wagons, the remaining troops spent the next two nights near the abandoned village, sleep interrupted by anxiety and nerves. November 29, 1864 would never be forgotten.

The Aftermath



Captain Silas Soule, Company D First Colorado Cavalry.

Photo courtesy Denver Public Library X-22202

Questions about the attack and claims of atrocities led to Congressional investigations and military inquiry. Controversy arose as some, like Captain Silas Soule, bitterly condemned the attack. On December 14th, 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...My company was the only one that kept their formation, and we did not fire a shot.*” Soule was later murdered on the streets of Denver.

Volunteers anxious to defend the attack and restore reputations, referred to themselves as 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. We are Americans, who love the flag of freedom.*”

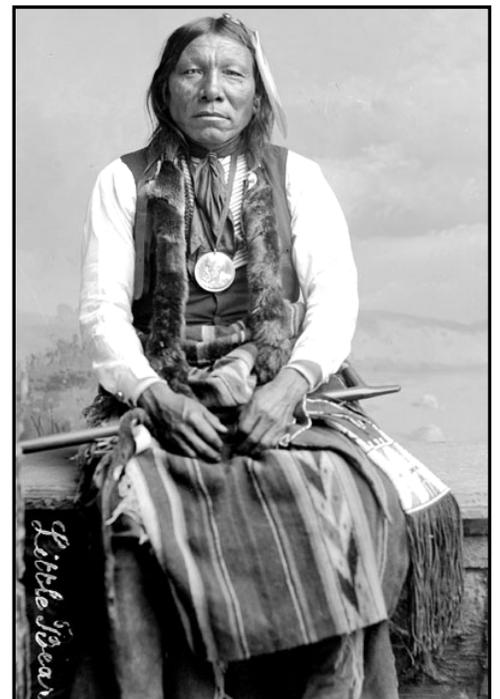
The Legacy



Standing Water, Southern Cheyenne

“*As I ran by Black Kettle’s lodge he had flag tied to lodge pole and was holding it...bullets were hitting all around me and bullets were hitting the lodges like hard storm...Indians were running north of the camp. Soldiers came due south of the village...It was about 2 miles where men, women, and children threw up breastworks on bed of the Sand Creek. On way up, the feathers of my war bonnet were shot away and my shield was shot several times, but I did not get hit. As I was running by I seen lots of women and children that had been killed....*” Little Bear, Cheyenne.

White Antelope and Yellow Wolf were two of many venerated leaders to perish at Sand Creek. Others included Standing Water, War Bonnet, One Eye, and Bear Robe. A list of 112 Sand Creek Heads of Families was translated and compiled by the United States in 1865.



Little Bear, the Sand Creek eyewitness, photo circa 1891. Little Bear passed away in Oklahoma, 1917.

Photo: National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institute

For More Information

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