

FIRST DRAFT



The meadow to the north beyond the his plaque is where the Cheyenne and Arapaho camp was when Col. John Chivington's troops attacked. (Bob Silbernagel photo)

SAND CREEK MASSACRE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Sand Creek an ugly stain on Colorado's history and a resounding horror for Natives

SAND CREEK MASSACRE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE — An icy breeze blows up the Sand Creek Valley 180 miles southeast of Denver, rustling short grass on the barren plain and rattling branches on the few cottonwood trees along the creek. It is cold this late November morning, much as it was on Nov. 29, 1864.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

At dawn 160 years ago, Col. John Chivington led 700 cavalry troops in a surprise attack on peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians along Sand Creek.

Even though Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle raised an American flag and a white flag to signal peace, Chivington and his men galloped into the camp and killed 230 Indians, two-thirds of them women, children and elderly.

That attack has been described as “an atrocious massacre” and an “act of barbarity.” One writer said it was impossible to believe men could “butcher and mutilate human beings as they did.”

These aren't 21st century denunciations. Public condemnation of Chivington and his men came from newspapers of the time, from an 1865 congressional report, a military tribunal and from a few soldiers who were with Chivington.

Furthermore, this occurred in the closing months of the Civil War, after the nation had endured four years of battlefield butchery. Yet people across the country were appalled by the actions of Chivington and his troops in isolated Colorado territory.

It's not hard to understand why. Even participants painted a grim picture of the attack.

“The Indians attempted to escape, the women and children, and our artillery opened up on them while they were running,” said Major Scott Anthony, who joined Chivington's raid.

Captain Silas Soule, part of the attacking force, refused to let his company to fire on the Indians. Later, he said, “Hundreds of women and children were coming toward us and getting on their knees for mercy. [Major] Anthony shouted, ‘kill the sons of bitches.’”

In a letter to a fellow officer, Soule said, “It was hard to see little children on their knees have their brains beat out by men professing to be

civilized.” Soule also gave some of the most graphic descriptions of the atrocities at Sand Creek, including men and women having their genitals cut off, babies torn from their mothers' arms and killed, and one pregnant woman who “was cut open and a child taken out of her.”

However, Chivington was a hero to many people who believed he had meted out exactly the sort of punishment the Indians needed.

Chivington, a former Methodist minister and hero of the 1862 Battle of Glorieta Pass in New Mexico against Confederate forces, was dubbed “the Fighting Preacher.” He was called “a tower to his friends and a terror to his enemies.”

Chivington always maintained there were hostile Indians in Black Kettle's camp. As proof, he reported his soldiers had found a white man's scalp, not more than three days old, in the camp.

The Sand Creek Massacre was committed following years of deteriorating relations between Plains Indians and white settlers. Despite treaties that gave lands to the Cheyenne and Arapaho, settlers and travelers began to overwhelm these lands, especially after gold was discovered in Colorado in 1858.

Many whites believed the Indians were savages who should be exterminated or removed. Lots of Natives refused to accept the treaty terms, including the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers, angry young warriors who rejected peace.

When four members of a ranch family were killed 25 miles east of Denver in June 1864, and their bodies displayed in Denver, Colorado citizens were enraged.

Colorado's territorial governor, John Evans, who was also Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the territory,

issued a proclamation to all Indians who sought peace.

He directed them to go to nearby military forts, where he said they

would be safe. For the Cheyenne and Arapaho who lived between the Platte and Arkansas rivers, that meant going to Fort Lyon, east of Pueblo.

NATIVE COMMENTS:

“The lies and the deceit, that's the thing you have to think about ... They were told to stay here [at Sand Creek] ... This is where it was safe ... [so] that when they heard the military approaching, they went out to watch ... We have to be ready to tell them, to educate them of who the Arapaho people are and who we still are today.”

— Fred Mosqueda, tribal historian for the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, Arapaho descendant of Sand Creek survivors, 2022.

He [Chivington] “didn't want to go to, up north to fight the real warriors. Instead he picks on women and children, elders that couldn't fight back. And it was it was actually a killing field ... and then they did the massacre, the mutilations and paraded them through downtown Denver.” — Chester Whiteman, Cheyenne historian and descendant of Sand Creek survivors, 2023.

In August, Black Kettle sent word to Major Edward Wynkoop, then commander of Fort Lyon, saying he and his people desired peace. To prove it, they had white prisoners obtained from other Indians whom they wanted to release.

Wynkoop met Black Kettle near the Kansas border. He obtained the release of the white prisoners and arranged to take Black Kettle, Left Hand of the Arapahos and other Native leaders to meet Gov. Evans and Chivington, then military commander of Colorado.

Evans and Chivington said they had no authority to make peace with the Indians. Chivington told them to return to Fort Lyon and remain under Wynkoop's protection.

They did so, but with limited rations at the fort, Wynkoop suggested they go to Sand Creek, where they could hunt buffalo and still be protected.

There was peace, briefly. From the time of Wynkoop's meeting with Black Kettle until the massacre at Sand Creek, “not one single depredation had been committed by the Cheyenne or Arapaho Indians,” Wynkoop reported.

Unfortunately, Wynkoop was ordered to Kansas in early November, and replaced by Major Anthony, who had little of Wynkoop's empathy for the Natives.

Meanwhile, Chivington was eager to build on his Glorieta Pass celebrity to run for Congress, according to rumors at the time. His troops, nearing the end of their enlistments, were also eager for Indian-fighting glory.

They rode out from Denver in mid-November and trekked through cold and snow to Fort Lyon. There, Chivington ordered all communications with the outside world halted to ensure surprise.

Multiple sources reported that Chivington was told the Indians camped at Sand Creek had been promised protection by the Army.

He ignored the concerns.

Chivington's troops, with two cannons, were accompanied by Anthony's 125 men when they left Fort Lyon the evening of Nov. 28. They launched their offensive on the unsuspecting Indians at Sand Creek at dawn the next morning.

Despite the surprise, some Native men and women fought back, and chaotic small battles continued for seven hours. Indians hid in sandpits north of the camp. Many were killed when Chivington's artillery fired on them. Others managed to escape, including Black Kettle and his wife. Cheyenne Chief White Antelope and Arapaho Chief Left Hand were among those killed.

Afterward, peace evaporated. Julesburg, Colorado, was raided. Sioux Indians in the north and Comanches and Kiowas to the south joined the Cheyenne and Arapaho in attacking white travelers and settlers.

Black Kettle and other survivors headed south. He was killed, along with his wife and 50 Indians, in 1868 during another surprise attack led by Col. George Custer along the Washita River in today's Oklahoma.

The congressional committee completed its Sand Creek investigation in May 1865. It recommended dismissing from service all those involved with the massacre, and criminal punishment for “those who have been guilty of these brutal and cowardly acts.”

Chivington relinquished his Army commission but was never charged with a crime for Sand Creek, despite abundant testimony that he was aware of the atrocities and did nothing to stop them. He was still considered a hero by many people when he died in Denver in 1894.

Major Wynkoop testified against Chivington to both the congressional committee and a military tribunal. As a result, he became “the most hated man in Colorado Territory,” according to one author. He died of kidney disease in New Mexico in 1891.

Silas Soule was murdered in Denver six months after the massacre. His killers were never brought to justice.

Trauma from the Sand Creek Massacre has stayed with the Native families and their descendants into modern times.

Sources: Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site; “The Sand Creek Massacre, The Official 1865 Congressional Report;” History Colorado; old newspapers at www.newspapers.com.

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Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle



Col. John Chivington