



The Sand Creek Massacre

The Sand Creek Massacre occurred on November 29, 1864 and was one of the most infamous incidents of the Indian Wars. Initially reported in the press as a victory against a bravely fought defense by the Cheyenne, later eyewitness testimony conflicted with these reports, resulting in one military and two Congressional investigations into the events.

Starting in the 1850's, the gold and silver rush in the Rocky Mountains brought thousands of white settlers into the mountains and the surrounding foothills. The 1858 Pike's Peak Gold Rush dislocated and angered the Cheyenne and Arapaho who lived there and brought tensions to a boiling point. The Indians began to attack wagon trains, mining camps and stagecoach lines. The attacks increased during the Civil War when the number of soldiers in the area was greatly decreased. This led to what became known as the Colorado War of 1864-1865.

As the violence between the Native Americans and the miners increased, territorial governor John Evans sent a Voluntary Militia under the command of Colonel John Chivington to quiet the Indians. Chivington was celebrated as the hero of the 1862 Battle of Glorieta Pass (New Mexico Campaign), where he captured and destroyed a Confederate supply train. Although the Confederate forces won the battle, they had to retreat because all of their supplies had been destroyed. Interestingly, Chivington had turned a tactical defeat into a strategic victory without killing a single Confederate soldier.

Though once a member of the clergy, Chivington's compassion did not extend to the Indians, and his desires to extinguish them were well known. In the spring of 1864, while the Civil War raged in the east, Chivington launched a campaign of violence against the Cheyenne and their allies. His troops attacked any and all Indians and razed their villages. The Cheyenne, joined by neighboring Arapaho, Sioux, Comanche, and Kiowa from Colorado and Kansas, went on the warpath.

Governor Evans and Chivington reinforced their militia by raising the Third Colorado Cavalry of short-term volunteers who referred to themselves as the "Hundred Dazers." After a summer of scattered small raids and clashes, the Cheyenne and Arapaho were ready for peace. Indian representatives met with Evans and Chivington at Camp Weld outside of Denver on September 28, 1864. Though no treaties were signed, the Indians believed that by reporting and camping near army posts, they would be declaring peace and accepting sanctuary.



Black Kettle (seated center) and other Cheyenne chiefs conclude successful peace talks with Major Edward W. Wynkoop (kneeling with hat) at Fort Weld, Colorado, in September 1864. Based on the promises made at this meeting, Black Kettle led his band back to the Sand Creek reservation, where they were massacred in late November. Photo courtesy National Archives.

On the day of the peace talks, Chivington received a telegram from General Samuel Curtis (his superior officer) informing him that "I want no peace till the Indians suffer more...No peace must be made without my directions."

Unaware of Curtis's telegram, Black Kettle and some 550 Cheyenne and Arapaho thought that they had made their peace. They traveled south to set up camp on Sand Creek, under the promised protection of Fort Lyon. Those who opposed the agreement headed north, to join the Sioux.

Knowing that the Indians had surrendered, Chivington led his 700 troops, many of them drinking heavily, to Sand Creek and positioned them, along with their four howitzers, around the Indian village. The ever trusting Black Kettle raised both an American and a white flag of peace over his tepee.

However, Chivington ignored the symbol of peace and surrender, and raised his arm for attack. An easy victory was at hand. Cannons and rifles began to pound the camp as the Indians scattered in panic. The frenzied soldiers began to charge, hunting down men, women, and children, and shooting them unmercifully. A few warriors managed to fight back allowing some members of the camp to escape across the stream. One officer and Massachusetts abolitionist, Captain Silas Soule, refused to follow Colonel Chivington's orders. He did not allow his cavalry company to fire into the crowd.



Colonel John Chivington



Captain Silas Soule

The troops kept up their indiscriminate assault for most of the day and numerous atrocities were committed. One lieutenant was said to have killed and scalped three women and five children who had surrendered and were screaming for mercy. Finally breaking off their attack, they returned to the camp and killed all the wounded that they could find. Then they began mutilating and scalping the dead. The soldiers plundered the teepees and divided up the Indians' horse herd before leaving.



Painting of the attack on Sand Creek, courtesy the Colorado Historical Society

When the attack was over, as many as 150 Indians lay dead, mostly old men, women and children. In the meantime, the cavalry lost only nine or ten men, with about three dozen wounded. These casualties were largely due to friendly fire. Black Kettle and his wife followed the others up the stream bed. His wife has been shot in the back and left for dead.

Although shot nine times, Black Kettle's wife somehow managed to survive the attack. Many of the wounded survivors sought refuge in the camp of the Cheyenne Dog Warriors (who opposed the peace treaty) at Smokey Hill River. Many joined the Dog Soldiers, deciding there could be no successful negotiations with the white man. The Sand Creek Massacre is cited as a critical cause of the Battle Little Big Horn, as many Cheyenne warriors simply devoted their lives to war against the US.

The Colorado volunteers returned to Denver, exhibiting their scalps, and received a hero's welcome. Initially the battle was reported in the press as a victory against a bravely-fought defense by the Cheyenne. Within weeks, however, eyewitnesses came forward offering conflicting testimony. This led to one military and two Congressional investigations. Silas Soule was eager to testify against Chivington. However, after he testified, Soule was murdered by Charles W. Squires. The murder was widely believed to have been ordered by Chivington.

As the details came out, the US public was shocked by the brutality of the massacre. The congressional investigation subsequently determined the crime to be a "sedulously and carefully planned massacre." When asked at the military inquiry why children had been killed, one of the soldiers quoted Chivington as saying, "nits make lice." Though Chivington was denounced in the investigation and forced to resign, neither he nor anyone else was ever brought to justice for the massacre.

While the Sand Creek Massacre outraged easterners, it seemed to please many people in the Colorado Territory. Chivington later appeared on a Denver stage where he regaled delighted audiences with his war stories and displayed 100 Indian scalps.

As word of the massacre spread among the Indians of the southern and northern plains, their resolve to resist white encroachment stiffened. An avenging wildfire swept the land and peace returned only after a quarter of a century.

Through the years, the area of the Sand Creek Massacre has continued to be visited and commemorated. An aging John Chivington returned to the area in 1887, and in 1908 Veterans of the Colorado Regiments planned a reunion at the site. In August of 1950 the Colorado Historical Society assisted local residents and the Eads and Lamar Chambers of Commerce in placing a marker atop the bluff at the Dawson South Bend. Sand Creek descendants remain active in tribal communities in Montana, Oklahoma, and Wyoming and Council Representatives continue to work alongside the National Park Service.

The massacre site was authorized as a National Historic Site in 2000, and was dedicated as the 391st unit of the nation's National Park system April 28, 2007



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