

## **Battle vs. Massacre: The History and Memory of Sand Creek and Washita**

The events of November 29, 1864 at Sand Creek and November 27, 1868 at Washita have striking similarities. Both included surprise dawn attacks on peaceful Native American villages where numerous Cheyenne and Arapaho were slaughtered, including significant numbers of noncombatant women and children. Academic and public histories have used contrasting language to remember the attacks and the contrasts were reinforced further by the National Park Service in the late 1990s. Congress established the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site in Oklahoma in 1996. Four years later, Congress authorized the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site in Colorado. The stark difference in nomenclature is compelling because it implies that the nature of the confrontations was dissimilar. To understand how the NPS arrived at its respective commemorative language it is necessary to analyze how the histories of Sand Creek and Washita were constructed and remembered over time. This research seeks to understand how the history and memory of two similar incidents came to be represented differently by the Park Service. The comparison is useful for analyzing how space, time, politics, economics, and historians influence the way similar attacks are remembered differently over time.

Although both events happened only four years apart spatial and temporal components played a significant role in constructing memory. If both events happened in a vacuum, it would be difficult to describe Sand Creek or Washita as simply “battles” given the evidence of indiscriminate slaughter and elements of surprise surrounding the respective attacks. This study is not equating the level or type of violence present at Sand Creek and Washita. Sand Creek was much more violent and brutal and included many more casualties. These two military engagements were selected for this study because they represent government officials carrying

out extermination and removal policies against peaceful Indian bands that were seeking guidance and solutions to their disappearing land, resources, and way of life. Sand Creek and Washita were sites of violence and, arguably, both contain elements of shame for the American government due to the nature of the attacks and the simultaneous betrayal of government officials. Both sites were recently designated by the federal government as national historic sites and they demonstrate the conflict of history and memory and a country that has difficulty coming to terms with its violent past.

In her work, *The Name of War*, historian Jill Lepore asserts that “wounds and words—the injuries and their interpretation—cannot be separated, that acts of war generate acts of narration, and that both types of acts are often joined in a common purpose.”<sup>1</sup> She defines the common purpose as geographical, political, cultural, and sometimes racial boundaries between people. The winners can determine “treachery” in the short-term but that success may be temporary because future historians might be able to uncover a “massacre” later. This happened with Sand Creek and Washita. Lepore contends that “waging, writing, and remembering a war all shape its legacy, all draw boundaries.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Native Americans did not determine any of the words that went into the 19<sup>th</sup> century history books, but that did not mean that historic interpretations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were finished. *The Name of War* asserts that all wars have, at a minimum, two names. As Native memories of Sand Creek and Washita were uncovered and documented over time, it was clear that the term “battle” was not the universal choice among definitions for either event.<sup>3</sup> In addition, cultural shifts and the sharpening of a “big picture” allowed historians and the public to remember the events much differently than in the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), x-xi.

<sup>2</sup> Lepore, *The Name of War*, x-xi.

<sup>3</sup> For diverse interpretations see: Richard G. Hardorff, ed., *Washita Memories: Eyewitness Views of Custer’s Attack on Black Kettle’s Village* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2006).

century. Despite that shift, the terms “massacre” and “battle” sometimes endured and at other times were reinterpreted and rewritten with the benefit of space and time, but also with the benefit of incorporating Native American perspectives.

A puzzling aspect of Sand Creek and Washita is how one of America’s preeminent public history institutions became intertwined with controversial historical events and contentious interpretative language. Even though the term “massacre” goes against a positivist national narrative promoted by the early historical branch of the National Park Service, in modern times the word is almost universally accepted as historically accurate for the incident at Sand Creek. “Battlefield” next to Washita, however, does not conform to universal interpretations of that incident. Surprisingly, both designations run contrary to the conventional wisdom that public historical representations use deliberately ambiguous language to appease competing factions.<sup>4</sup> Until relatively recent times, the NPS ignored or avoided historic sites that did not fit into nationalist themes that emphasized a common interpretation of the past. When the federal government got into historical interpretation in the 1930s via the NPS, it sought to promote a common heritage with common values.<sup>5</sup> Washita defined as a battle within the so-called “Indian Wars” struggle is compatible with the 1930s agenda, however, commemorating a massacre committed by government troops did not advance the interests of the state. In the 1960s and 1970s the NPS adopted broader guidelines to incorporate more diverse histories about the nation. Their recent report: *Rethinking National Parks for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* made it possible to commemorate sites of cultural collision and not that long after, Sand Creek was dedicated as a

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<sup>4</sup>David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>5</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 175-179.

National Historic Site.<sup>6</sup> Just several years before Washita won designation as a “Battlefield,” the Park Service fought extensively with many groups over interpretative language that culminated in Custer’s Battlefield being rebranded into a more balanced Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. It is surprising that the NPS and Washita’s Congressional sponsor, Frank Lucas, did not learn the lessons of Custer National Battlefield before moving forward with the legislation containing the name “Battlefield.” Depending on the elusive and fickle definition of “massacre,” perhaps it can be argued that the term “Little Bighorn Battlefield” does not accurately depict the complete route of Custer’s Seventh Cavalry.

### **Constructing Language of Memory: Media, Government, Historians**

Historical interpretations and memories of Sand Creek were heavily influenced by media and politics in the immediate aftermath of the attack. William Byers, one of the most influential newspaper publishers in Colorado, used the pages of his *Rocky Mountain News* to laud Colonel John M. Chivington and the Colorado volunteers while disdaining those calling for an investigation.<sup>7</sup> In December of 1864, Eastern reports in the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* were matter-of-fact about the Indian Wars and did not immediately report barbarity as the exigencies of the Civil War took precedent.<sup>8</sup> As was common, the victors wrote the history, but the competition for the winning narrative included a more complex set of factors than whites versus Indians. The perpetrators of the attack, Chivington and Colorado Territorial Governor John Evans, were seeking glory in the Indian Wars after the mission of Colorado volunteers had

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald A. Foresta, *America’s National Parks and Their Keepers* (Washington, D.C.: Resources for the Future, 1984) 136-139. “Rethinking National Parks for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Report of the National Park System Advisory Board,” July, 2001, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, accessed December 29, 2012, <http://www.nps.gov/policy/report.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> “The Sand Creek Battle-‘High Officials’ Checkmated,” *Rocky Mountain News*, January 4, 1865, 4.

<sup>8</sup> “The Hostile Indians on the Plains,” *New York Times*, December 23, 1864, 1; “Battle with Hostile Indians in Colorado-Their Defeat by Our Cavalry,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 9, 1864.

been questioned by the War Department in the East who was in desperate need of enlistments for the Civil War. Indian depredations against settlers in Colorado, in the view and self interest of several Colorado territorial leaders, were causing a calamity that had the potential to destroy settlements and the territorial government. Furthermore, there were rumors of collusion between the Confederates and certain tribes which contributed to an atmosphere of trepidation.

Chivington and Evans used the politics of fear to get approval for their mission and the *Rocky Mountain News* perpetuated the fear in its circulation.<sup>9</sup> Both Chivington and Evans had ambitious political plans that included Congressional and Senate aspirations should Colorado achieve its anticipated statehood in the near future. Political rivalries also existed within the military and political structures of the territory. After the attack at Sand Creek, the Colorado volunteers marched back to Denver and reported the route of the hostile Indians and were celebrated. Chivington's report of the attack inflated the number of Indian fatalities and downplayed the nature of the warfare.<sup>10</sup> His version of history was short-lived. Once evidence started leaking about the brutality, a Congressional investigation became necessary. However, it must be noted that the Congressional investigation itself was borne out of other factors than just the rumors of a massacre. Native retaliations against settlers and trains in the aftermath of Sand Creek put a strain on commerce and nearly castrated Denver from the rest of the country.

Although Evans and Chivington defeated Indians at Sand Creek, the retaliations created a larger economic problem and Congress got involved. Many local Coloradans disagreed with the Joint Committee on the Conduct of War's report, but it is that report and two other federal investigations that defined the incident at Sand Creek as a "massacre" and effectively ended political aspirations of Governor Evans (who was removed) and Colonel Chivington (whose

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<sup>9</sup> Hugh J. Reilly, *The Frontier Newspapers and the Coverage of the Plains Indian Wars* (Denver: Praeger, 2010), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Stan Hoig, *The Sand Creek Massacre* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 186-187.

military term had expired but was beyond the reach of indictment).<sup>11</sup> Over the next fifty years, some of Chivington's men would fervently defend his honor and his actions in their memoirs and published accounts of Sand Creek.<sup>12</sup> Regionally, Coloradans erected monuments to the Colorado volunteers and even named a town after Chivington in 1887.<sup>13</sup> All the political complexities are not spelled out here; rather, the objective is to show that immediate interpretations and construction of memory were dependent on the context of the Civil War, fear of conquest, fear of violence, political ambitions, and media influence. Time has benefited the ability to see a larger context, but time has also rendered many voices and memories obsolete. In addition, it has allowed other obscured perspectives to finally be considered and incorporated into the historical record.

The immediate construction of memory following Washita was also complex but has a markedly different context that conceals some of the similarities with Sand Creek. Custer's attack on Black Kettle's village at Washita happened in 1868 when the attention and resources of the country were focused on settling the West, in contrast with 1864, when sending resources to the West was a burden in the midst of the Civil War. Another important consideration is the lack of local media to influence local memory. Denver had grown into a regional commercial center by the time of Sand Creek due to the gold rush of the late 1850s. With the population came multiple media outlets helping to form collective memory. Custer, like Chivington, carefully crafted a report to General Philip Sheridan that detailed his victory.<sup>14</sup> The report was published in newspapers and justified the actions in language agreeable to the public. Custer's conduct at Washita did not go completely without controversy but he was backed by military brass

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<sup>11</sup> *Massacre of Cheyenne Indians*. Report on the Conduct of the War, 38th Cong. 2 sess., (1865).

<sup>12</sup> For defense of Chivington see Irving Howbert, *Memories of a Lifetime in the Pike's Peak Region* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1925).

<sup>13</sup> Alvin M. Josephy, *The Civil War in the American West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 298-316.

<sup>14</sup> *New York Times*, "Custer Report," 1868.

including Civil War heroes Sheridan and William Tecumseh Sherman (who was also sitting on the Indian Peace Commission).<sup>15</sup> Defenders of Custer's attack and the "battle" language use several justifications including broken treaty obligations, military orders and the depredations caused by Natives throughout the Plains in the summer and fall leading up to Washita.<sup>16</sup> In addition, they claimed that the killing was not indiscriminate like it was at Sand Creek, despite testimony to the contrary by Natives and some of Custer's own troops.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the language that found its way into the public record via government investigations and reports referred to Washita as a battle whereas Sand Creek was defined as a massacre. There is evidence suggesting the investigations that eventually vilified those associated with Sand Creek impacted how Custer, Sheridan, and Sherman constructed their reports regarding the Washita engagement, including egregious exaggerations of Cheyenne depredations against whites.<sup>18</sup> This government labeling is significant to the historical account because many of those government documents are primary sources for the historians who write about Sand Creek and Washita. Custer, himself, worked diligently to clear his own name and justified the Washita attack in his book *My Life on the Plains*.<sup>19</sup> As stated earlier, Lepore warned that the victors would write the history of war and that future historians might reinterpret the past. With Custer that is exactly what happened after Washita, but strangely his defeat at Little Bighorn betrayed Lepore's argument about the victors until recently.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert G. Athearn, *William Tecumseh Sherman and the Settlement of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 271-275.

<sup>16</sup> Jerome A. Greene, *Washita: The U.S. Army and the Southern Cheyennes, 1867-1869* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004) 183-190.

<sup>17</sup> Dennis Lynch, "Dennis Lynch, Seventh Calvary," in *Washita Memories*, ed. Richard G. Hardorff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), 186-188. Athearn, *Sherman and the Settlement of the West*, 273-274

<sup>18</sup> Athearn, *Sherman*, 273-274. Greene, *Washita*, 184-185.

<sup>19</sup> George A. Custer, *My Life on the Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1952), 305-352.

The construction of the Custer legend and myth following his annihilation at Little Big Horn in 1876 impacted popular American memory of Washita. Instead of the victor's writing the history of the battle, like Custer did after Washita, Americans caught up in the country's own centennial fervor transformed Custer's ignominious defeat into a glorious martyrdom. In his essay "From Little Bighorn to Little Big Man," historian Paul Andrew Hutton follows the meteoric rise of Custer mythology in the aftermath of his death. Walt Whitman, Henry Wordsworth Longfellow, Buffalo Bill Cody, D.W. Griffith, Cassily Adams and Frederick Whittaker, among others, spent the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century constructing a larger-than-life hero through poetry, art, fiction, and film.<sup>20</sup> The nearly century-long love affair with Custer's heroism and sacrifice constructed an icon that was not easily criticized because to do so was to attack a patriot. The relatively recent struggle over a more accurate interpretation of Custer National Battlefield demonstrated how sacred Custer's name was in the non-Native culture.<sup>21</sup> It is difficult to measure how much the construction of the Custer legend concealed memories of Washita but it is surely significant. In *A Century of Dishonor*, originally published in 1881, Helen Hunt Jackson famously wrote a condemnation of federal Indian policy and demonstrated several examples of injustice including Sand Creek. Surprisingly, there was no mention of Washita. It is probably impossible to know if the cultural elevation of Custer had an influence on what—in hindsight—seems a surprising omission.<sup>22</sup>

Why does the term "battle" endure in the description of Washita despite being controversial? It was defined as such in the immediate aftermath of the attack and then perpetuated throughout history. After the end of the Indian Wars and the "close of the frontier,"

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Andrew Hutton, "From Little Bighorn to Little Big Man: The Changing Image of A Western Hero in Popular Culture," in *The Custer Reader*, ed. Paul Andrew Hutton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 395-420.

<sup>21</sup> Robert M. Utley, *Custer and Me: A Historian's Memoir* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 210-213.

<sup>22</sup> Helen Hunt Jackson, *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).



events like Washita and Sand Creek disappeared from the collective memory for several decades. Assimilation policies and mandatory boarding schools dictated that Native Americans let go of their past and focus on being a part of the American system culturally and economically. The early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw white America neglect the history of Sand Creek and Washita. On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sand Creek, memory of the event was absent from Colorado's largest circulating newspaper.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, despite Custer's continuing popularity, Oklahoma's largest newspaper also ignored any mention of the alleged military victory.<sup>24</sup> In fairness to the newspapers, 1914 and 1918 were consumed by news of the Great War in Europe.

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, George Bird Grinnell's work in anthropology and ethnology in the West and historical documenting of the Cheyenne tribe became the basis of many histories on Sand Creek and Washita. Many scholarly publications on the tribe and associated historical events started trending in the 1960s and continued into the next century. Any scholarship that covers the Cheyenne tribe, Sand Creek, and Washita consults Grinnell as an authority because he lived among them and wrote much about their history. Besides some testimony given by interpreters and mixed blood English-speaking Indians in the aftermath of Sand Creek and Washita, much of the Cheyenne side of the story was ignored until Grinnell published his work.<sup>25</sup> Grinnell's *The Fighting Cheyennes*, originally published in 1915, recounted a more balanced interpretation of Sand Creek and Washita. Grinnell's chapters on those respective incidents defers to the language used in the government reports: "The Sand Creek Massacre" and "The Battle of Washita." Grinnell did not delve into interpretation semantics but uses subtle hints to demonstrate he does not agree with how the historical record of

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<sup>23</sup> *Rocky Mountain News*, November 29, 1914.

<sup>24</sup> *Daily Oklahoman*, November 27, 1918.

<sup>25</sup> Testimony of interpreters in Hoig, *Sand Creek*, 178, 192. Affidavit of half-Cheyenne Edmund Guerrier in Hardorff *Washita Memories*, 52-53.

that period remembers Washita.<sup>26</sup> Grinnell, a prominent scientist and ethnographer of the time, was with Custer during his famous expedition into the Black Hills preceding the latter's downfall at Little Big Horn. In his memoirs, he used cautious language to criticize Custer's personality and behavior but never uses different language to discuss Washita. Grinnell alluded to Custer boasting about Washita exploits that were unknown but does not disclose what Custer actually revealed.<sup>27</sup> Because Grinnell's research benefitted from the resources of the US Army it seems he had no incentive to invoke controversy on issues like Washita. He clearly was not as impressed as everyone else with Custer, but he does not attempt to completely rebrand Washita. Grinnell's influence on historiography is significant for many reasons, one of them being that his words reinforce the names associated with the attacks.

Another important work that contributed to a more balanced perspective of Sand Creek and Washita was the published letters written by George Bent, a half-Cheyenne who was present at Sand Creek. He exchanged correspondence with George Hyde and described the atrocities at Sand Creek and Washita. However, the chapter that was published on the latter incident was referred to as "Battle of the Washita," which was a decision most likely made by Hyde.<sup>28</sup> The practice of writing about Washita and describing the massacre-like details while labeling it "battle" continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another oft-cited Cheyenne historian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is tribal member John Stands in Timber. Although he passed away in 1967, he was a contemporary of Grinnell and his life work *Cheyenne Memories* was published after his death. Grinnell and Stands in Timber did important work in documenting Cheyenne history, but surprisingly, Stands in Timber failed to cover Washita in his book. Margot Liberty, who helped

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<sup>26</sup> George Bird Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 298-300.

<sup>27</sup> John F. Reiger, *The Passing of the Great West: Selected Papers of George Bird Grinnell* (New York: Winchester Press, 1972), 103.

<sup>28</sup> George E. Hyde, *A Life of George Bent: Written from His Letters*, ed. Savoie Lottinville (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 313-327.

author *Cheyenne Memories*, pointed out the surprising omission.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, one of the most prominent 20<sup>th</sup> Century historians of Cheyenne history had no impact on Washita language or interpretation.

The authoritative, non-Native latter-20<sup>th</sup> century historian of Sand Creek and Washita was Stan Hoig. Hoig used the first page of his introduction to make clear that Washita was a massacre but that he was deferring to the long-standing use of “battle” because that is how it became known to history. The title of Hoig’s book is *The Battle of the Washita*.<sup>30</sup> Besides Hoig, there are other modern historians that have perpetuated the language of “battle” in more recent times, the most influential being Robert M. Utley. Utley has published at least eighteen books on the American West and most of his publications emphasize military history for both academic and popular history audiences.<sup>31</sup> Utley is active in the National Park Service and in academia and continues to serve on advisory boards for the NPS.<sup>32</sup> In 2004, Utley released his memoir titled *Custer and Me*. He made no attempt to hide Custer’s impact on his life and shared an anecdote about a disagreement he had with an advisory board member when it was suggested that Washita was a massacre.<sup>33</sup> In many of his publications, he defined Sand Creek as a battle, long after most professional historians had ceased using that depiction.<sup>34</sup> Utley’s presence in Plains Indians history is ubiquitous as he is often cited as a contributor or consultant to work (he assisted Liberty in publishing *Cheyenne Memories* among others). In 2003, Utley finally shifted

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<sup>29</sup> John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty, *Cheyenne Memories* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 180.

<sup>30</sup> Stan Hoig, *The Battle of the Washita: The Sheridan-Custer Indian Campaign of 1867-1869* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), xiii.

<sup>31</sup> He was a founder of the Western History Association and under his leadership they launched the *Western Historical Quarterly*. Also, not insignificantly, Utley served as Chief Historian for the NPS in the 1960s and 1970s.

<sup>32</sup> “Robert M. Utley,” accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.robertutley.net/bio.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Utley, *Custer and Me*, 98.

<sup>34</sup> Robert M. Utley, *The American History of the Indian Wars* (New York: American Heritage Publishing, 1982). *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

his interpretation of Sand Creek to “massacre,” citing the influence “New Western History” on the field but also warned historians of “presentism.” He echoed this sentiment in his memoir when he discusses his initial reluctance to rename Custer National Battlefield.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, Utley’s influence on American Western history and the language related to it cannot be understated when attempting to understand how interpretations endure in the face of controversy.

### **Recent Memory and the National Park Service**

By the 1960s, Sand Creek was remembered almost universally as a massacre. The cultural turn in history and writers like Vine Deloria and Dee Brown had a profound impact on American history. Sand Creek’s centennial invoked a substantial amount of scholarship on the controversial event that favored “massacre” language. The Colorado Historical Society’s *Colorado Magazine* and the *Denver Post* offered large articles remembering the brutality. The *Rocky Mountain News*, which had long defended the outcome of Sand Creek in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, did not even mention it on the centennial.<sup>36</sup> By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, signs of characters associated with Sand Creek were removed and revised.<sup>37</sup> When Colorado elected Ben Nighthorse Campbell, a politician with Cheyenne ancestry to Congress, he pushed to establish Sand Creek as a National Historic Site and was eventually successful in 2000. The language of Sand Creek as a massacre triumphed over the last fifty years, but its legacy was not sealed until memories of the so-called Indian Wars faded. Even to this day, despite an overwhelming

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<sup>35</sup> Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier 1846-1890* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), XVIII. *Custer and Me*, 211-213.

<sup>36</sup> *Colorado Magazine* XLI, no. 4 (1964): 277-335. “Facts Still Being Sought about Sand Creek Massacre,” *Denver Post*, November 29, 1964, 36.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas J. Noel, “Rewriting the Past for the Present: Public Monuments and Political Correctness, the Colorado State Capitol and Sand Creek,” in *Preserving Western History*, ed. Andrew Gulliford (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 192-194.

consensus, using the term massacre to describe the attack at Sand Creek has its detractors.<sup>38</sup> The rancher who owned most of the land where Sand Creek occurred continually fought over the language placed on historic markers and was reluctant to negotiate with the Colorado Historical Society and the NPS while he disagreed with their massacre interpretations.<sup>39</sup> Eventually a casino owner stepped in and paid the man five times the appraised value of the land so that Native Americans and the Park Service could have access to the sacred space.<sup>40</sup> Still, names associated with Sand Creek continue to create debate over memory. The University of Colorado found itself in a heated debate when it proposed to name a residence hall after David Nichols, a celebrated 19<sup>th</sup> Century Coloradan of many achievements. The problem with Nichols, despite all he did to help Boulder land the flagship university, was that he was guilty of atrocities at Sand Creek. Historian Patricia Nelson Limerick argued that if the name was placed on the residence hall in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that perhaps it could remain, but to place the name on the building over a century later was a disservice to students of different backgrounds looking to call the residence hall home.<sup>41</sup> A Civil War soldier monument erected in 1909 stands directly in front of the Colorado Capitol building in Denver and on a plaque below it lists the Civil War battles of the Colorado volunteers. Among those listed is Sand Creek. In 1998, legislation was passed in the Colorado legislature to remove Sand Creek's name from the plaque. After some debate it was instead decided that a different plaque would be placed below the original marker describing a different interpretation of Sand Creek. The massacre plaque was placed on the Civil War soldier

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<sup>38</sup> In 2004 an author named Gregory Michno published a book called *Battle at Sand Creek: A Military Perspective*.

<sup>39</sup> "Sand Creek Landowner Battles Massacre Legacy; Rancher Whose Land History Hallowed in 1864 Says Conflict Closer to Clash than Slaughter," *Rocky Mountain News*, January 26, 1992, 30; "Sand Creek Site Parcel on Block; Quest for Better Price May Imperil Memorial," *Denver Post*, March 8, 2002, B-01.

<sup>40</sup> Kit Miniclier, "Site of Sand Creek Massacre Sold; Casino Firm to Give 1,465 Acres to Tribes," *Denver Post*, April 26, 2002, B-01.

<sup>41</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick, "What's in a Name? Nichols Hall: A Report," (Boulder: P. N. Limerick, 1987).

monument in 2002 and now the public can witness the shifting public history and memory of Sand Creek.<sup>42</sup>

The centennial of Washita was acknowledged in both the *Daily Oklahoman* and the *Lawton Constitution* with interpretation favoring the battle language, but a caveat was given in the *Oklahoman* saying that Washita had different meanings for groups.<sup>43</sup> On November 27, 1968 there was a reenactment ceremony and some Cheyenne representatives met there and agreed to put the past behind them in a burial ceremony.<sup>44</sup> Although Cheyenne were present participation did not represent the sentiments of the entire tribe. In 1996, as historians continued to come to terms with the meaning of Washita, Representative Frank Lucas introduced legislation designating Washita a National Historic Site. The language within the bill describes the attack on Washita in terms that are not favorable to Custer or a “battle” interpretation, nevertheless, the monument moved forward as the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site.<sup>45</sup> It is not certain why Lucas chose this wording but it is plausible that he proceeded with the status quo language. Beyond the construction of Washita as a battle as described before, Washita was established as a national historic landmark in 1965 with the name Battlefield attached. The 1983 National Register of Historic Places nomination form refers to it as “Washita Battlefield” and “Battle of the Washita.” Lucas represents a conservative political platform in Congress for a very conservative state which suggests that challenging the traditional, nationalistic historical narrative of the past was probably not a popular move or one that was much considered. A lot of the media coverage surrounding the debate of the new historic site in 1996 was not about its controversial interpretative title; rather, hunters were angry about land being taken over by the

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<sup>42</sup> Noel, “Rewriting the Past for the Present,” 192-194.

<sup>43</sup> Francis Thetford, “Students Watch History Repeat,” *Daily Oklahoman*, November 27, 1964.

<sup>44</sup> Thetford, “Cheyenne Gift Ends Enmity with Cavalry,” *Daily Oklahoman*, November 28, 1968, 22.

<sup>45</sup> *Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act of 1996*, HR 4236, 104th Cong., 1st sess.

federal government. Cheyenne Chief Lawrence Hart, who was instrumental in getting historic designation passed during the Washita bill hearings, disagreed with the language but was also interested in putting aside past disagreements and continuing a healing process.<sup>46</sup> In the end, what Lucas was able to accomplish was both political and economic. Lucas is from the town (Cheyenne, OK) that stood to benefit most from the economic boon created by a National Historic Site. At the time of the bill, the Oklahoma Historical Society estimated “200 new jobs and a \$12 million-a-year economic boost for the area” and also predicted 100,000 visitors each year.<sup>47</sup> Many local Native Americans were beneficiaries of objectives contained in the bill and have been given a large role in the National Park Service’s interpretation division. While the term “battle” lives on in the public memory of Washita represented by the NPS, debates about Washita continue. During a commemoration ceremony in 2007, the Cheyenne and Arapahoe Governor Darrell Flyingman stated that he would do everything in his power to change the name.<sup>48</sup> In March of 2012, Southwestern Oklahoma State University hosted a program called the “Cultural and Historic Perspective on the Massacre of the Washita,” demonstrating that despite the legacy of historical interpretations, there will never be consensus on the proper language associated with Washita, but that perhaps a different terminology should be considered.<sup>49</sup>

The designation of Sand Creek and Washita by the National Park Service was not inevitable. In fact, it seems that there is a good chance that neither site would be designated today if Nighthorse Campbell, a Cheyenne descendant, was not elected to Congress or if Oklahoma’s third Congressional district was represented by somebody outside of Cheyenne,

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<sup>46</sup> Chris Casteel, “Washita Battlefield Bill Praise,” *Daily Oklahoman*, July 26, 1996, 1.

<sup>47</sup> Chris Casteel, “Bill Could Transfer Custer Massacre Site into Park,” *Daily Oklahoman*, July 22, 1996, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Ron Jackson, “What Happened Here...Was a Massacre’-Washita Battlefield Center Marks Day in U.S. History,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> “Cultural and Historic Perspective of the Massacre at Washita Planned at SWOSU,” *Cheyenne Star*, March 8, 2012.

Oklahoma where the Washita site exists. Nevertheless, the historical commemoration of two places of violence between Native Americans and European Americans is a relatively new experience for government. In his work *Shadowed Ground*, Kenneth Foote argues that Americans sanctify, designate, rectify and/or obliterate sites of violence and tragedy:

With respect to many events of violence and tragedy, American society itself has yet to reach consensus. There seems to be, for example, little consistency in the marking of sites representing either the conflicts between Native Americans and whites or racial violence. These sites remain difficult to assimilate with heroic notions of the national past, and the sites themselves demonstrate a sort of collective equivocation over public meaning and social memory. Perhaps still more time must pass before the tensions raised by such events can be resolved. In Salem almost three hundred years had to pass before a public memorial was erected, that is, before Salem as a community could look back and find a lesson to be learned from the witchcraft episode. What will be the fate of other places of equally equivocal meaning? These are places that may long remain in limbo before American society comes to terms with their meaning and a past marred by violence and tragedy.<sup>50</sup>

Debates over language and different understandings of how to properly designate sites of violence in the United States will continue. It is important that the National Park Service, despite using controversial language, is attempting to preserve and incorporate different perspectives into historical sites that were ignored or only traditionally interpreted with one narrative.<sup>51</sup> Even though Robert Utley warned against the practice of “presentism” in studying history it seems that revisionism is not what is taking place with sites formerly known as battles in the West. Rather, tribes are telling their side of the story. As Lepore said, wars have two names. Edward Linenthal believes that American public history’s greatest achievement happened when Custer Battlefield witnessed a complete makeover from a one-sided shrine to Custer into a more

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<sup>50</sup> Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America’s Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Robert L. Spude, “On the Plain of Sand Creek, In the Valley of Washita,” *Perspectives in History* 46:5 (May, 2008), accessed January 3, 2013, <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2008/0805/0805pub1.cfm>.



balanced Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. It was about more than one history and he encourages diverse interpretations at Washita.<sup>52</sup>

In an 1868 article announcing the death of Chief Black Kettle at Washita, the *Baltimore Sun* recalled Sand Creek as both a battle and a massacre within the same paragraph.<sup>53</sup> It reveals there has never been a consensus to defining the violent confrontations of the so-called Indian Wars. It seems that describing Washita as a battlefield misinterprets the historical views of all Cheyenne and Arapaho and of many historians. Describing Sand Creek as a massacre is more universal but offends a small group of Colorado military descendants and nationalists. This paper is not necessarily suggesting that the NPS change the name of its historic sites. Within the context of the time, Sand Creek and Washita were remembered as battles to segments of the population and to others they were remembered as massacres or brutal modes of conquest. Broken treaties, indiscriminate slaughter, and depredations against settlers or colonizers or Natives happened in the context of both collisions. This is a study on how two events with many similarities came to be remembered differently through time and how the National Park Service incorporated unambiguous language into their historic designations. Although it is unintended, in an ironic way, the Park Service's representations of Sand Creek and Washita are useful to analyze together. The contrasting language provides an insightful lesson about 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural and political conflicts and the complexity of memory over time.

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<sup>52</sup> Edward Linenthal, "Washita Present," in *Washita Symposium: Past, Present, and Future, November 12-14, 1998*, accessed January 2, 2013, [http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/waba/symposium-98/sec4.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/waba/symposium-98/sec4.htm).

<sup>53</sup> "The Indian War-Death of Black Kettle-Sketch of a Warrior," *Baltimore Sun*, December 8, 1868, 1.

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