

Native Americans

Conquest forms the historical bedrock of the whole nation, and the American West is a pre-eminent case study in conquest and its consequences. Conquest was a literal, territorial form of economic growth.

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The Legacy of Conquest, 1987¹

At daybreak on November 29, 1864, Colorado's Third Cavalry went hunting. Mainly young men — laborers from Denver, miners from the mountains — they had put aside picks and shovels to march out onto Colorado's eastern plains. At Sand Creek, 160 miles southeast of Denver, their commander, Colonel John Milton Chivington, halted them for a pep talk: "Men strip for action. . . . I don't tell you to kill all ages and sex[es], but look back on the plains of the Platte, where your mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters have been slain, and their blood saturating the sands of the Platte."²

Chivington's suggestion was sufficient; the regiment killed at will as it swept down on the nearby peaceful camp of Cheyenne and Arapaho. Old and young, women and children were indiscriminately slaughtered. A naked toddler provided a handy target as he wandered, confused, through the sand. Two troopers missed; the third did not. Captain Silas Soule, who refused to join in the butchery, later wrote to his mother, "It looked too hard for me to see little children on their knees begging for their lives, have their brains beaten out like dogs."³

Sketchy reports slowly reached Denver. Were over 500 Indians slain, as Chivington claimed, or was the number closer to 150, as others reported? Details did not concern the *Rocky Mountain News*, which praised the soldiers: "Among the brilliant feats of arms in Indian warfare, the recent campaigns of our Colorado volunteers, will stand in history with few rivals."⁴ Unwittingly, the *News* was correct. No event in Colorado's military annals rivals the savage ferocity of the Sand



Despite accomplishments as a Methodist minister, Sunday School teacher, and military hero, John M. Chivington's reputation suffers because of his role in the Sand Creek massacre. (Tom Noel Collection.)

Creek massacre. With guns and bayonets, Chivington and his men tried to write a bloody end to the Native American era that had begun in ancient prehistory.

Artifacts found at Dent, 40 miles north of Denver, suggest that hunters occupied that area some 11,250 years ago. Similar evidence from Lamb Spring, 25 miles southeast of Denver, also indicates that the Front Range has attracted people for more than 10,000 years. These sites and other excavations have given archaeologists a glimpse of the region's early residents. From at least as early as 9000 B.C. until shortly after the 1859 gold rush, nomadic bands hunted in eastern Colorado. At first they stalked large beasts — camel, giant bison, and mammoth. As those creatures died out, hunters pursued smaller animals.⁵

In relatively modern times, around a thousand years ago, some of the natives in eastern Colorado may have planted and gathered crops. People described by archaeologists as belonging to the Dismal River culture established villages on the South Platte around A.D. 1300. Later, Apaches controlled eastern Colorado until they were ousted by Comanche and Kiowa raiders from the north. Comanches and Kiowas, in turn, were pushed southeast by other hunters, Cheyenne and Arapaho, who occupied northeastern Colorado around the year 1800. All the while, the Utes, their past shrouded in misty prehistory, dominated central and western Colorado, sometimes venturing east of the mountains in search of buffalo. Often these wanderers camped in many of the same well-watered spots that would later attract Euro-American settlers. Prehistoric artifacts and even some human remains have been found in what are now Denver suburbs — Aurora, Franktown, Hazeltine Heights, Ken Caryl

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Little Raven and a band of Arapahos camped at the confluence of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River for several years after gold seekers founded Denver. He complained in vain: "It will be a very hard thing to leave the country that God gave us." (Denver Public Library, Western History Department.)



Ranch, Red Rocks, Roxborough Park, and Willowbrook.

Such deep roots did not assure the natives of uncontested ownership of the land. In 1706 Spain claimed what would become Colorado, and, later, Mexico fell heir to those claims. France also coveted Colorado, which its explorers, Pierre and Paul Mallet, entered in 1739. But neither France nor Spain and Mexico actually settled the area. The United States bought what would become northeastern Colorado — the eastern slope of the Rockies north of the Arkansas River — from France as part of the Louisiana

Purchase in 1803. Nearly half a century later, after the rest of Colorado had been taken from Mexico at the end of the Mexican War (1846–1848), federal negotiators started to talk with the actual residents of the region — the Native Americans.

Sioux, Shoshones, Crows, Assiniboin, Arikaras, Arapahos, and Cheyennes by the thousands gathered at Fort Laramie on the North Platte in the late summer of 1851. Officials told them that the government did not want their land, that the U.S. Army only wished to build posts and to secure safe routes for prospectors and settlers on their way to California and Oregon. Supposedly to promote harmony among the natives, who sometimes fought over territory, agents allocated land to each group. A large tract stretching some 200 miles east from the Rocky Mountains between the Arkansas and North Platte rivers was reserved for the Arapahos and Cheyennes.⁶ Those nations agreed to the Treaty of Fort Laramie, which by specifying group lands set the stage for later agreements forcing individual nations to give up more and more territory. With 27 wagon loads of gifts, the natives appeared contented. Even the land settlement, over 40,000 square miles for fewer than 10,000 Arapahos and Cheyennes, seemed reasonable. "I will go home satisfied," said Cut Hand, an Arapaho. "I will sleep sound and not have to watch my horses in the night, or be afraid for my squaws and children."⁷

For a few years the natives did sleep well. Then, minor clashes between the Cheyennes and whites gave the army an excuse to make war. Commanding over 800 men, Colonel Edwin V. Sumner and Major John

C. Sedgwick defeated the Cheyennes in 1857. Afterward, peace chiefs talked of settling down and of learning to farm. The gold seekers of 1858 and 1859 enjoyed generally peaceful passage across the plains to the Cherry Creek mining camps. William B. Parsons, author of a gold rush guidebook, praised the natives for aiding a lost prospector: "Indians will always do this unless provoked by the white man's cruelty or rapacity to do otherwise."⁸

In Denver, greenhorn prospectors mingled with hundreds of natives. The site had long been a favorite campground for the Arapahos, who relished the wild cherries that gave Cherry Creek its name. Albert Richardson, one of the first journalists to visit Denver, looked out from his cabin on a dozen Indian lodges. He saw "braves lounging on the ground wearing no clothing except a narrow strip of cloth about the hips," and "naked children playing in the hot sand" while the women were "dressing the skins of wild animals or cooking puppies for dinner."⁹ Sensible gold seekers gave a party for their native landlords in January 1859. Unfortunately, such civility did not last. In April 1860, "drunken devils and bummers" attacked Indians camped near town and raped the women. "Hellish work," said the old mulatto trapper, James Beckwourth, who lamented that the natives "had been abused worse than dogs" on their own land.¹⁰ Beckwourth asked for justice. Horace Greeley, touring the gold fields in June 1859, pled for compassion, predicting that unless the aborigines were handled as "a band of orphan children," they "will be practically extinct within the next fifty years."¹¹ Cheyenne elders concluded that it was useless to resist the white hordes. Sweet Medicine, a legendary Cheyenne holy man, had prophesied that the strangers would drive his people "worse than crazy."¹²

Boomers and gold seekers worried less about compassion than they did about land. They organized companies to claim town sites, and as a dodge to secure Indian titles included among the town founders the traders William McGaa and John S. Smith, both of whom had Native American wives.¹³ The United States knew, however, that such ploys rested on sand. To gain clear title to farms and mines, to Denver, Golden, Central City, and Boulder, the promises made at Fort Laramie in 1851 had to be undone.

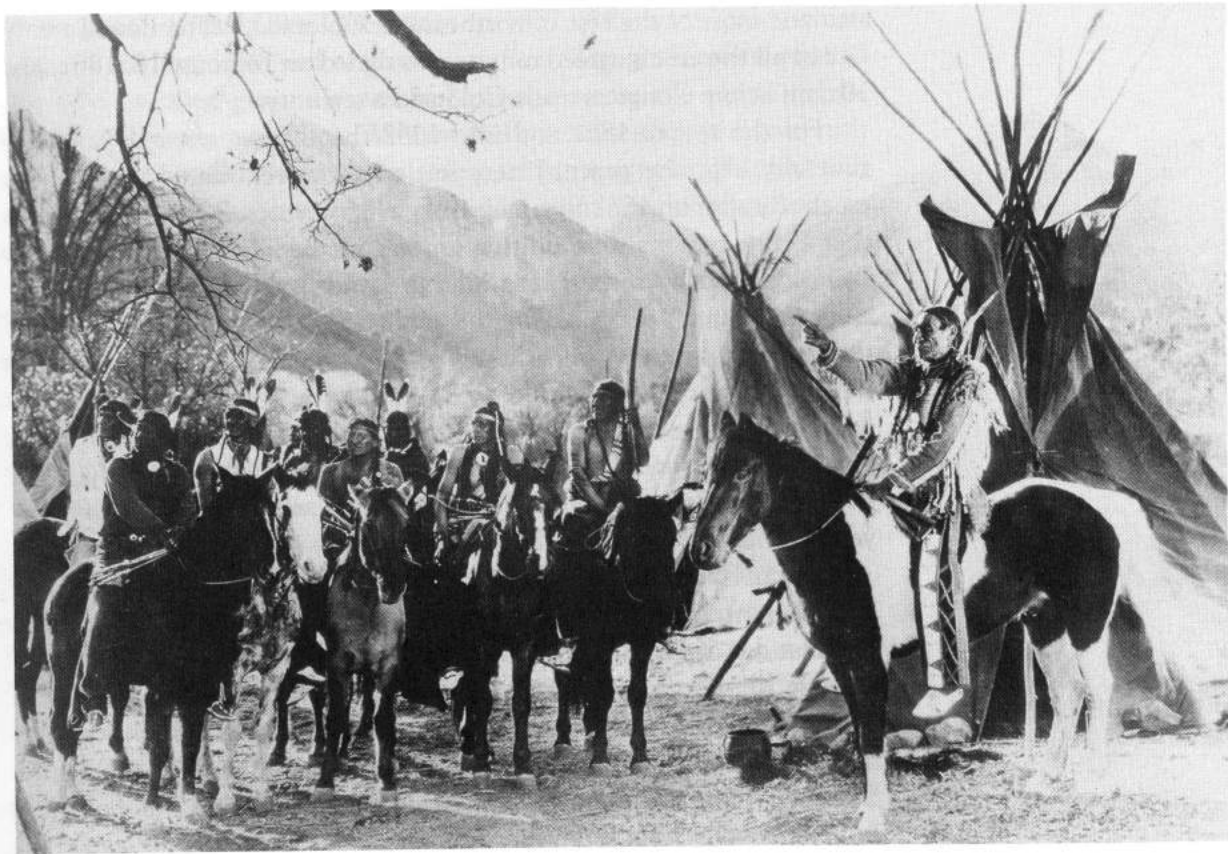
In 1860, Indian agent Albert G. Boone, grandson of the frontiersman Daniel Boone, approached the Cheyennes and Arapahos. The government sent them gifts, and Boone spent his own money to buy more. In early 1861 his investment paid off. Some of the chiefs agreed to the Treaty of Fort Wise, which gave the United States control of the Denver

area and most of the rest of northeastern Colorado.¹⁴ The flawed treaty — not all the chiefs agreed to it — was signed on February 18, 1861, just 10 days before Congress made Colorado a territory.

For the rest of 1861 and into 1862 the Cheyennes and Arapahos generally kept the peace. Jittery settlers, however, feared the natives, especially after an 1862 Sioux uprising in Minnesota. Reacting to rumors that Plains nations were uniting for war in the summer of 1863, John Evans, Colorado's second territorial governor, asked the Cheyennes to meet with him. "I set out," Evans complained, "with provisions to supply them and make them a feast, and after I got there they didn't come." Evans's emissary, Elbridge Gerry, did talk with Bull Bear, a Cheyenne warrior, who asked Gerry if Evans wanted the natives to live as white men did. Gerry said yes, to which Bull Bear, responded: "Well, you can just go back to the Governor and tell him that we are not reduced that low yet."¹⁵

The natives also explained that they were preparing for the autumn buffalo hunt.¹⁶ They needed to hunt to live. Major Scott Anthony, commander of Fort Lyon on the Arkansas River, reported: "The Indians are all very destitute this season and the government will be compelled to subsist them to a great extent, or allow them to starve to death, which would probably be the easier way of disposing of them."¹⁷ Starving young warriors sometimes raided wagon trains and stole food from farmers. In June 1864, four Arapahos went further, brutally murdering Ellen Hungate, her husband, Nathan, and their young daughters on a ranch 25 miles southeast of Denver. William Byers long remembered the Hungates' "bloated, festering bodies . . . drawn naked through the streets in an ox wagon." Denverites counted the 80 bullet holes in Nathan's corpse and looked upon the children with their heads nearly severed from their bodies.¹⁸

Panic swept Denver a few days later when ox drivers outside of town were mistaken for Indians. Women and children fled to two of Denver's most substantial buildings, the U.S. Branch Mint and the Army Commissary. At the commissary, sentries prepared to chop away the stairs "at the first sight of the red devils." Upstairs, ladies who had seen the Hungates' corpses described them to those who had not.¹⁹ The scare passed, but people remained tense, ready to believe rumors. Mail was cut off in the late summer when carriers refused to cross the plains. George W. Kassler, a local businessman, wrote to his fiancée, Maria Stebbins, "The given cause was fear of Indians, but it was really a piece of strategy on the part of the mail contractor who threw up his contract and got it renewed at



double the old figures."²⁰

Farmers in outlying areas were especially frightened. Mollie Sanford worried about her husband, Byron, who spent part of the summer of 1864 hauling logs from Denver to his ranch south of town. "I feel there is a great risk in his going over a lonely road 10 miles, for bands of Indians have been seen, and murders have been committed as near as that to Denver. For weeks I have hardly slept without my clothes on, ready to flee at a moment's warning." Once she considered adopting an orphan girl who had been rescued from the natives: "She saw her father butchered, and only three years old, can and does recount the whole tragedy."²¹

To control the Indians, Governor Evans, in August 1864, raised the Third Colorado Regiment commanded by John Chivington. A six-foot, four-inch tall ex-Methodist preacher noted for his "muscular Christianity," Chivington had rejected a chaplaincy for a fighting command early in the Civil War.²² For helping defeat Confederates at the 1862 Battle of Glorieta Pass in New Mexico he was made a colonel. Now, as the

Initially friendly Arapahos turned wary as gold seekers illegally seized their land, entering Indian wars that permanently altered the United States by perpetuating the need for a standing army and fostering a legacy of conquest. (Denver Public Library, Western History Department.)

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"Nits make lice," Chivington said of Native American children such as these Arapaho youngsters. (Denver Public Library, Western History Department.)



commander of the military district of Colorado he was ready to fight Indians. For over two months the Third Colorado patrolled the South Platte River — boring duty that earned them the nickname "bloodless." The threat, it seemed, had passed. Accompanied by Major Edward W. Wynkoop, Indian leaders came to Denver in September 1864 asking for peace. "What shall I do with the Third regiment, if I make peace?" a perplexed Evans asked Wynkoop.²³ Chivington dismissed the emissaries, telling them to go to Fort Lyon, where Wynkoop fed them until he was replaced by Major Scott Anthony, who withdrew their ra-

tions and suggested that they camp north of the fort on Sand Creek.

In mid-November Chivington and the Third Colorado left Denver for Fort Lyon, pausing there briefly before marching to Sand Creek. Their attack on November 29, 1864, completely surprised the waking natives. White trader John S. Smith, who was visiting the camp, tried to reason with the soldiers but hastily retreated when one yelled: "Shoot the old son of a bitch; he is no better than an Indian."²⁴ Assuming a mistake had been made, Chief Black Kettle raised a U.S. and a white flag. His gesture did no good. The camp scattered. Many fleet-footed young men escaped. Women, children, and the old died.

"All acquitted themselves well, and Colorado soldiers once again covered themselves with glory," reported the *Rocky Mountain News*.²⁵ Chivington returned a hero. He praised most of his men but condemned Captain Silas Soule for seeming "more in sympathy with those Indians than with the whites."²⁶ Soule was not alone in his opposition to Chivington. Wynkoop, who had pledged peace, called Chivington an "inhuman monster," a judgment shared by John Smith.²⁷ Not only had Smith seen the natives slaughtered; his own half-Indian son, Jack, was taken prisoner and shot in cold blood. In 1865 both the army and Congress launched inquiries. In Washington, congressmen accused Governor Evans of giving testimony marked by "prevarication and shuffling," a charge that helped lead to his removal from office. Chivington, the



On April 23, 1859, William N. Byers began publishing the *Rocky Mountain News*, in part to help bring law and order to Colorado by scaring off "redskins" and paleface "bummers." (Denver Public Library, Western History Department.)

lawmakers said, had disgraced his uniform by ordering a "foul and dastardly massacre."²⁸

Denver was placed under martial law. Soule, military commander while the army investigated, testified against Chivington, for which he earned the enmity of the colonel's partisans, one of whom shot and killed him. The Episcopal preacher Horace B. Hitchings praised the courageous captain: "He did his duty in the midst of danger, did his duty in the face of death, and fell by the assassin's hand."²⁹ Squiers, the soldier who shot Soule, escaped. So did Chivington. His army career was wrecked, but he went otherwise unpunished. Denver tried to forget.

Angry natives did not forget. "Now no peace," they told James Beckwourth.³⁰ Crossing the plains in March 1865, Clara V. Witter saw "where whole corrals made of wagons had been burned, nothing remaining but wheels and graves of the killed along the road."³¹ Fighting continued in eastern Colorado until 1869 when General Eugene Carr, assisted by William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, defeated Cheyenne chief Tall Bull south of Sterling. That battle at Summit Springs proved to be the last significant clash between the army and Plains Indians in Colorado.³²

The removal of the Arapahos and Cheyennes did not spell the end of

Native Americans in Denver. Utes from southern and western Colorado continued to frequent the city, especially in the 1870s, when payments due them under an 1868 treaty were made at the Denver Ute Agency. They posed no threat. Merchants welcomed their dollars and laughed as the once proud Utes stumbled drunk along Larimer Street. A scalp dance at Sloan's Lake in 1876 drew a large crowd including "lots of ladies prominent in church and society circles straining for a sight of the reeking scalps, which they scanned as eagerly as if they had been new bonnets."³³ Soon, white pressure for Ute territory deprived them of most of their Colorado land. Their demise in the early 1880s demonstrated that Colonel John Chivington had only done brutally and sensationally what others did with more finesse and less fanfare.³⁴

Speaking of Sand Creek some 20 years after the event, John Evans unabashedly asserted, "The benefit to Colorado of that massacre, as they call it, was very great for it ridded the plains of the indians."³⁵ With Chivington or without him, Euro-Americans and Native Americans would have clashed. Methods might have differed without him; the results would not. The natives, slowly emerging from a hunting and gathering economy, possessed the land; the whites, speeding through the age of steam, wanted it. The newcomers' greed for gold and real estate, backed by their military muscle, cleared the way for town builders.