

When the Soldiers and Settlers Came



Native Villages, Massacres, and Survival

Before they became massacre sites, these places were homes. At Mystic, families lived within a fortified Pequot village. At Gnadenhutten, hungry Lenape returned to harvest food. At Tuluwat, Wiyot people gathered for a ceremony of renewal. Along western rivers, winter camps sheltered children, parents, elders, and leaders trying to preserve their communities.

Remembering those ordinary purposes changes how we understand what followed. These were not simply locations on military maps. They were places where people expected life to continue.

Sand Creek and Wounded Knee are among the best-known massacres of Native Americans, but they belong to a longer history. The episodes below are not an exhaustive list, nor were their circumstances identical. Their perpetrators included colonial forces, civilian attackers, militia, and the U.S. Army. Some attacks occurred during wars; others struck people pursuing neutrality or seeking protection. In each case, understanding the community matters as much as identifying the men who attacked it.

Mystic, Connecticut, 1637: A Village Set Ablaze

The Pequot lived in southeastern Connecticut, where European settlement and competition over trade intensified existing political rivalries. Native nations were not a single united bloc: the Mohegan and Narragansett pursued their own interests and allied with the English against the Pequot.

At dawn on May 26, 1637, English forces under John Mason and John Underhill, accompanied by Native allies, attacked the fortified village at Mystic. Pequot defenders resisted. When the

English assault encountered difficulty, the attackers set the village's dwellings on fire. People trying to escape faced the forces surrounding the enclosure.

Hundreds of Pequot men, women, and children died. The subsequent campaign scattered surviving communities, and captives were enslaved. The 1638 Treaty of Hartford sought to disperse the survivors and suppress the Pequot name itself. Military defeat was followed by an effort to dismantle a people's collective existence. [Mashantucket Pequot Museum's Battlefields of the Pequot War project](#)

Yet the Pequot did not disappear. The existence of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and its work documenting the war provide a direct answer to the old assumption that conquest ended their history.

Gnadenhutten, Ohio, 1782: Neutrality Offered No Protection

The Native Christians at Gnadenhutten, principally Lenape associated with Moravian missionaries, had tried to remain outside the American Revolution's violence. Their neutrality nevertheless attracted suspicion. Forced from their settlements in 1781, members of the community endured hunger before returning to the Tuscarawas River valley to gather crops.

In March 1782, Pennsylvania militiamen seized Native people at Gnadenhutten and killed more than ninety, including children. The militiamen invoked attacks on white settlers as justification, although the people they murdered had not committed those killings. This was collective punishment imposed on a vulnerable community rather than the defeat of an opposing army.

For the wider Moravian Lenape community, the aftermath brought further displacement and repeated attempts to establish secure homes. Some eventually settled in present-day Ontario. Their descendants continue to commemorate the massacre, including through an annual remembrance associated with the Ohio site. [National Park Service: Moravian Lenape timeline](#)

Gnadenhutten exposes a painful contradiction: adopting Christianity and refusing warfare did not guarantee safety in a nation fighting in the name of liberty.

Tuluwat, California, 1860: A Ceremony Interrupted

Tuluwat, an island village in Humboldt Bay, was a spiritual center for the Wiyot people. In February 1860, they gathered there for their World Renewal Ceremony. Many men left at night to replenish supplies while women, children, and elders remained.

On February 26, local white attackers crossed to the island and assaulted the sleeping community. Other attacks struck Wiyot settlements in the surrounding area. Estimates differ, and totals for the coordinated massacres should not be confused with deaths at Tuluwat alone. The Wiyot Tribe records estimates ranging from eighty to 250 for that night's series of attacks.

The destruction did not end when the attackers departed. Survivors faced displacement, deprivation, and further deaths. According to the tribe's history, no charges were filed against the perpetrators. [Wiyot Tribe: History](#)

For the Wiyot, Tuluwat was never merely a crime scene. It remained a place to which they belonged. Their eventual return would become an important chapter in the recovery of both land and ceremonial life.

Bear River, Idaho, 1863: A Winter Camp Destroyed

On January 29, 1863, troops commanded by Colonel Patrick Edward Connor attacked a Northwestern Shoshone winter encampment near present-day Preston, Idaho. The people gathered there included families whose lives depended on movement through their homelands and access to seasonal resources. To the Northwestern Shoshone, the place is known as Boa Ogoi.

The expedition followed escalating conflict involving settlers, travelers, and Shoshone people. During the attack, Shoshone defenders resisted the soldiers, but the fighting became a massacre that included the killing of women and children. Estimates vary, but hundreds of Shoshone died. Bear River ranks among the deadliest attacks on Native communities by U.S. troops. [National Park Service: Bear Hunter](#)

Its occurrence during the Civil War helps explain why it has often received less national attention than Sand Creek or Wounded Knee. For the surviving Shoshone, however, it was a defining catastrophe, not a peripheral event. The Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation has worked to recover the site, including a substantial land purchase in 2018. [Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation: History](#)

Sand Creek, Colorado, 1864: The Betrayal of Those Seeking Peace

The Cheyenne and Arapaho families at Sand Creek had reason to believe that negotiation could protect them. Chief Black Kettle had sought peace through contact with military authorities. Colorado territorial governor John Evans had instructed Native people considered friendly to seek safety near designated posts. After negotiations and dealings with officers at Fort Lyon, families gathered at Sand Creek.

On November 29, 1864, Colonel John Chivington led Colorado volunteer troops against the village. The National Park Service estimates that approximately 230 Cheyenne and Arapaho people were killed, most of them women, children, and elders. Soldiers also mutilated the dead.

Some officers refused to participate. Captain Silas Soule and Lieutenant Joseph Cramer left accounts condemning the attack—evidence that its brutality was recognized by witnesses at the time, not merely judged differently by later generations. [National Park Service: Sand Creek history](#)

The massacre devastated families and undermined the position of leaders who had argued that accommodation could preserve their people. Black Kettle survived, but survival brought a terrible question: what assurance could a peace chief offer after a village seeking protection had been attacked?

Washita, Oklahoma, 1868: Black Kettle's Final Refuge

Four years later, Black Kettle again faced an Army attack. On November 27, 1868, Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer's Seventh Cavalry struck his Southern Cheyenne village along the Washita River in present-day Oklahoma. Black Kettle and his wife were killed.

The attack formed part of a campaign intended to force Native peoples onto reservations by striking villages and destroying the resources that sustained independent life. Soldiers burned property and killed hundreds of horses. For survivors, the loss of shelter, provisions, and animals compounded the deaths of relatives. [National Park Service: Washita](#)

Washita requires careful treatment. It has been described as both a battle and a massacre, and accounts differ over casualties and the identities of those killed. Those disagreements should be acknowledged rather than concealed. They do not change the central fact that the target was an inhabited village, with consequences extending well beyond its armed defenders.

Black Kettle's presence links Washita inseparably to Sand Creek. His continued pursuit of peace had not secured lasting protection for himself or his people.

The Marias, Montana, 1870: Heavy Runner's People

On January 23, 1870, troops under Major Eugene Baker attacked Heavy Runner's Piikani, or Piegan Blackfeet, camp on the Marias River. Heavy Runner had maintained peaceful relations with U.S. authorities, but that relationship did not save his community. Accounts of the massacre describe a camp containing many women, children, and elders.

The survivor Bear Head later recalled Heavy Runner approaching the soldiers with a document intended to demonstrate his friendly standing. He was shot. Bear Head's testimony also described the destruction of lodges and possessions, leaving survivors to confront winter without the things that sustained them.

Military reports and Native accounts differed in their descriptions of the victims and the number killed. The Montana Historical Society presents those competing records together, including Bear Head's recollections. Read alongside official justifications, his account restores the perspective of someone whose family and community endured the attack. [Montana Historical Society: *Blood on the Marias*](#)

The distinction matters. An official report could describe an operation as successful while survivors remembered the killing of relatives and the destruction of their homes.

Wounded Knee, South Dakota, 1890: Families Under Guard

Wounded Knee lies on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota—not in California. Its massacre followed a period of profound insecurity for the Lakota. After Sitting Bull was killed in December 1890, Hunkpapa refugees joined Chief Spotted Elk, also known as Big Foot, and his Miniconjou community.

Spotted Elk's group traveled toward Pine Ridge. Army troops intercepted them and brought them to Wounded Knee, where the Seventh Cavalry sought to disarm them on December 29. Gunfire erupted, followed by a devastating assault. Estimates commonly range from 150 to 300 Lakota dead, including women and children. Spotted Elk was among those killed. [National Park Service: Spotted Elk's journey and Wounded Knee](#)

Disagreement over the precise opening moments must not obscure the scale and character of the killing. Nor should Wounded Knee be treated as the final page of Native American history. It was a catastrophe endured by people whose families, communities, and political struggles continued.

What These Communities Had in Common

These events cannot be reduced to a single military pattern. Mystic occurred during a colonial war involving Native alliances. Gnadenhutten's victims had pursued neutrality. Tuluwat's attackers were civilians. At Bear River, armed resistance preceded the killing of noncombatants. Sand Creek struck people seeking peace, while Washita remains a contested example of an Army attack on a village.

What connects them is the vulnerability of whole communities when distinctions between combatants and noncombatants were disregarded. Homes, food, horses, and winter shelter became targets or were destroyed alongside human lives. The consequences extended beyond the recorded death toll: survivors had to find safety, care for children, rebuild households, and preserve knowledge carried by people who had been killed.

Historical precision strengthens this account. Death tolls should not be inflated to make an atrocity seem more serious, and uncertainty should not be used to minimize it. Native testimony deserves examination alongside military reports—not relegation beneath them.

The Story Continues With the Descendants

At Tuluwat, Wiyot people returned in 2014 to complete the World Renewal Ceremony interrupted by the massacre. In 2019, Eureka transferred its remaining city-owned portion of the island to the tribe. These developments followed years of tribal effort to recover and restore the place. [National Museum of the American Indian: Wiyot renewal](#), [Wiyot Tribe: Landback](#)

That return offers an appropriate place to conclude. The history of these massacres belongs not only to the soldiers and settlers who committed them, but to the people who survived, preserved their accounts, and taught subsequent generations where they came from.

To chronicle the atrocities honestly is to acknowledge deliberate acts, failed protections, and immense human losses. To chronicle Native history fully is also to recognize that destruction did not have the last word. The descendants remain—and the places still matter.