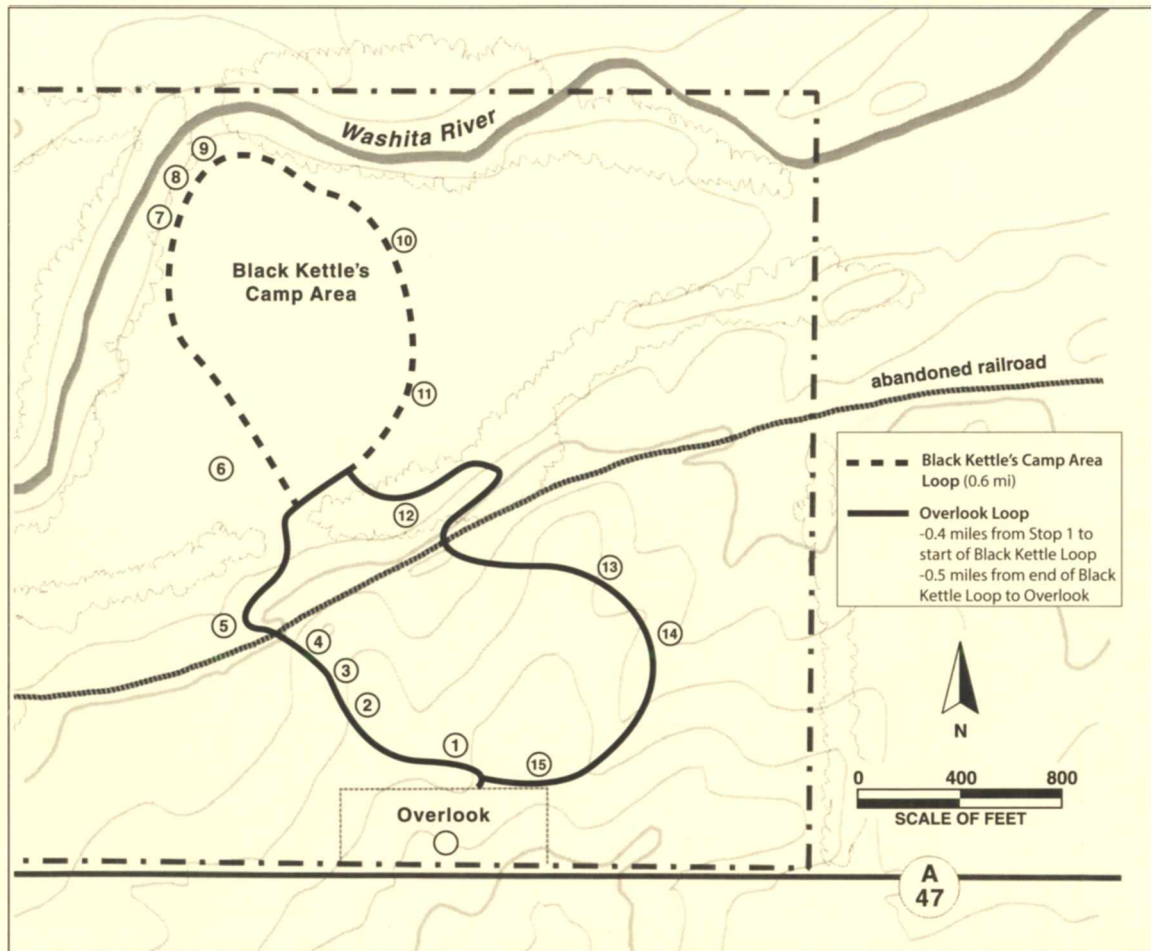


Washita Battlefield
National Historic Site
T R A I L G U I D E





Welcome to the self-guided tour at Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. This 1.5-mile trail is designed to provide you with a better understanding of the events that took place on November 27, 1868.

The Battle of the Washita was just one of many clashes between the Cheyenne people and the U.S. Army. Peace Chief Black Kettle, whose village was attacked here that cold November morning, was involved in two of the bloodiest. Almost four years earlier, on November 29, 1864, troopers attacked Black Kettle's village at Sand Creek, Colorado Territory. Scholars estimate that 150 to 300 Cheyenne and Arapaho men, women, and children were killed in this attack on a peaceful band that had been guaranteed safety by the army. Black Kettle and other Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs had been pursuing a policy of peace with whites when the massacre occurred. Afterward, Black Kettle continued his pursuit of peace for his people. In the following four years, peace treaties between the Plains tribes and the U.S. government were made and broken. Both sides committed small-scale attacks on each other. The conflict grew into Gen. Philip Sheridan's winter campaign of 1868–69 and the attack at the Washita.

Washita Battlefield National Historic Site was established in 1996 to preserve this important Southern Plains Indian Wars site. This site is a unit of the National Park Service, whose mission is to protect and preserve America's cultural and natural treasures.

At 315 acres, the park's boundaries extend to the row of trees to the east, the second row of trees to the west, the second row of trees to the north, and the road to the south. Please note that this is a sacred site to the Cheyenne people. Warning: The trail is uneven and steep in places, and flooding may occur during heavy rains. Please be on the lookout for snakes, ticks, and other wild animals. Please stay on the trail for your safety. Do not smoke or carry food on the trails. Horses, pets, and bicycles are not permitted. Law prohibits the use of metal detectors or other ground-searching devices.

*Cover: Chief Black Kettle. Drawing based on a photo taken in 1864.
(Courtesy of Oklahoma Historical Society)*

1 The Attack: The Seventh U.S. Cavalry, led by Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer, attacked Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle's village—below you near the second line of trees—just before dawn on November 27, 1868. Behind the ridge to the northwest (near the white water tower), Custer divided his forces into four battalions. Custer led the largest battalion of four companies (approximately 284 men) straight toward the village. Maj. Joel Elliott and Captains William Thompson and Edward Myers led other groups of soldiers east and west of Custer's battalion to try to surround the village. A Cheyenne warrior in the village fired a warning shot, bringing the village to life. The regimental band started to play the Seventh U.S. Cavalry's song, "Garryowen," but freezing temperatures stopped the musicians after a few bars.

2 Red Hills: The Horseshoe Hills located one mile to the north formed as a result of erosion of the surrounding softer Elk City sandstone about 250 million years ago, leaving the harder Doxey shale behind. The hills hid Maj. Joel Elliott's movements and attack. Warriors from other villages downstream coming to Black Kettle's aid and the Seventh U.S. Cavalry used the hills as an observation post. Behind the ridgeline to the west, Captains Thompson and Myers moved into attack position to complete Custer's plan to surround the village.

3 Magpie's Escape: In the confusion that surrounded the surprise attack, Magpie made a daring escape from the village. He watched as Black Kettle and his wife, Medicine Woman Later, were shot from their horse

Officers of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry near Fort Dodge, just before the start of the Washita Campaign. (Courtesy of Yale University Library)





Cheyenne captives from Washita at Camp Supply, Oklahoma, 1869

and killed as they tried to cross the Washita. He ran south with his father, Big Man, and another Cheyenne, Pushing Bear. Magpie was shot in the calf and separated from his father. In pain, but able to keep moving, Magpie made his way through the area just west of here toward the two large mounds south of the highway. Almost to the mounds, a soldier overtook him. Magpie, armed with a pistol, shot the trooper. Magpie then escaped by riding with Pushing Bear on the trooper's horse. He joined his father that evening after the troops left.

4 Custer's Command Post: The small knoll that you see in front of you may have been Custer's command post during the later stages of the attack and the battle that followed. From there

he would have been able to see the vast majority of the battleground. He could see the Arapaho and the other tribe's warriors on the ridge to the north, but he could not see all of his command or the final part of the action—Maj. Elliott's last stand.

5 The Escape: After the surprise attack, some people of Black Kettle's village headed this way to make their escape, while others made their way downstream. Running in the general direction of the pavilion and toward the south-southeast, the Cheyenne were met by gunfire from all sides. Some troops fired at fleeing women and children. One 14-year-old girl named Moving Behind later spoke of running from the camp with her aunt, Cornstalk Woman. She told of bullets flying around them as

*Lt. Col. George A. Custer,
Field Commander of the
Seventh U.S. Cavalry, 1869*



they ran. They ran south until they reached the tall grass on the hillside. They hid there, hearts pounding, afraid to move, fearing death. Army scout Ben Clark reported to Custer that troops were firing at escaping women and children. Custer, wishing to avoid another Sand Creek-type massacre, ordered a cease-fire and told troops to bring in the Cheyenne women and children as prisoners. Fifty-three women and children were brought to the center of the village as captives.

6 Black Kettle's Village: You are now east of what is believed to be the site of Black Kettle's village. The village may have extended $\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile to the west and 75 yards to the east from this point. The village contained 51 lodges and about 200 to 300 people. This village was to the west of the main camps of Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, and Plains Apache four to seven miles downstream. These camps contained approximately 4,000 to 6,000 people. Black Kettle's wife, Medicine Woman Later, believing rumors that the U.S. Army was dangerously close to the village, pleaded with her husband to move the village downstream near the other camps the night of November 26. Due to the extreme cold and their concern

for the elderly, the women, and the children in the camp, Black Kettle and his council decided to move the village the next day, November 27. Traditionally, the U.S. Army did not attack in harsh weather, leaving Black Kettle plenty of time to move.

7 Washita River: "Washita" is an Anglicized version of the two Choctaw words "Owa Chito," meaning "Big Hunt." Known as the "Hooxeeohe," meaning "Lodge Pole," to the Cheyenne, the Washita River and its valley offered sanctuary for the Plains tribes. The valley provided protection from the wind. Winter was a time to meet old friends from other camps and prepare for the following year's activities. The Washita starts west of here in Texas

Maj. Joel Elliott in civilian dress, circa 1867



and flows more than 580 miles until it intersects the Red River in south-central Oklahoma. The Washita has changed course many times over the years and was subject to flooding every spring until a flood-control project in the 1950s contained the river. While walking this trail you will see wide depressions that mark old river channels.

8 Osage and Sharpshooters: Accompanying Custer in the attack was 1st Lt. William W. Cooke and his company of 40 sharpshooters. Known as the "Corps d'Elite," these sharpshooters were the best shots in the Seventh U.S. Cavalry and were excused from extra duty for practice and to keep them fresh. On the morning of the attack they hid themselves in

the brush on the north side of the river and waited for their targets to appear. After Custer attacked the village, many Cheyenne fled downstream along the river where the sharpshooters shot at them. Very few Cheyenne who came this way survived unscathed. Custer also brought along twelve Osage Indians that he used as scouts and guides. The Osage, enemies to the Cheyenne, were at war with most of the Plains tribes. The Osage scouts led Custer toward the village, hearing sounds and smelling smoke from the camp long before the soldiers. The Osage did not participate in the initial attack, fearing that the soldiers would mistake them for Cheyenne and shoot them. Instead they waited behind the color bearer of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry on the north side of the river until the village was taken. The Osage then rode into the village, taking scalps and helping the soldiers round up the fleeing Cheyenne women and children.

9 Sugarloaf: The large red rock knoll located about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to the north is known as Sugarloaf. As they moved east into position, Capt. Albert Barnitz of G Company and Maj. Elliott spotted the village from this knoll. After the attack, warriors from other villages downstream used

this knoll and the ridge behind it to snipe at the soldiers and watch their movements. They did not attack for fear of harming the captive women and children that Custer's men held in the village area.

10 River Channel: Where you are standing was most likely the river channel in 1868. Over the years the river has changed its course many times due to annual spring floods. These floods have deposited many feet of silt over what was once Black Kettle's village. Archeologists working with the Oklahoma Historical Society and the National Park Service have done several excavations in the area trying to determine the exact location of the village, but as of yet have been unable to do so.

11 The Ravine: Cooke's sharpshooters worked their way downstream near this spot where a party of seventeen warriors made a stand to protect fleeing women and children.

12 Pony Kill Site: Part of Custer's orders from Gen. Philip Sheridan included depriving the Indians of their way of life and destroying their village. In this area, troopers of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry deprived the Cheyenne of one of their most valuable assets—their transportation. The Cheyenne first

acquired horses in the mid-eighteenth century through contact with other Southern Plains tribes. With these mounts the Cheyenne became a powerful tribe and a force to be reckoned with on the Southern Plains. The ponies, as they were called, feared the soldiers because they smelled different from their owners. The soldiers forced captive Cheyenne women to corral the ponies and lead them into this area. At first, the troopers tried to slash the ponies' throats, but this was time-consuming and dangerous. Moving Behind spoke of wounded ponies moaning loudly like humans as they passed her hiding place. It was then decided to shoot the ponies. The troopers made quick work of them, and soon the bodies of approximately 800 ponies and mules covered this area. The horse bones remained on site until 1935, when they were taken away to be ground into fertilizer.

13 A Sea of Grass: This site is an example of a mixed-grass prairie. Among the grasses found here are big and little bluestem, Indian grass, and buffalo grass. The grass surrounding you is little bluestem. Two Cheyenne women, Moving Behind and Cornstalk Woman, used this grass to hide from the pursuing soldiers. Moving Behind later recalled this event, saying, "There was red grass along the path, and though the ponies had eaten some of it, it was still tall enough for us to hide."



Osage scouts helped guide the army to the Washita. This photograph was taken in Kansas in November 1868.

14 Major Elliott: Second in command at the Battle of the Washita, Maj.

Elliott started the day with three companies of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry, riding behind the red rocks and attacking the village from the northeast. After charging through the village, his command rode up into this area where several Cheyenne were spotted escaping to the east. Elliott, with regimental Sgt. Maj. Walter Kennedy and sixteen troopers, chased after them. The detachment caught a few Cheyenne women and children. Sgt. Maj. Kennedy was charged with returning the captives to the main body of troops. Kennedy's journey

back was cut short when Arapaho warriors racing toward the sound of gunfire coming from Black Kettle's camp caught and killed him. As Elliott's command continued downstream they met more Arapaho warriors also coming to Black Kettle's aid. The troopers tried to retreat but were cut off. They dismounted, let their horses go, and settled into an old river channel along what is now Sergeant Major Creek. Soon the troopers were killed and their bodies mutilated. Custer left the field that day without finding out what became of Elliott and his detail, an act that deeply divided the officer corps of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry.

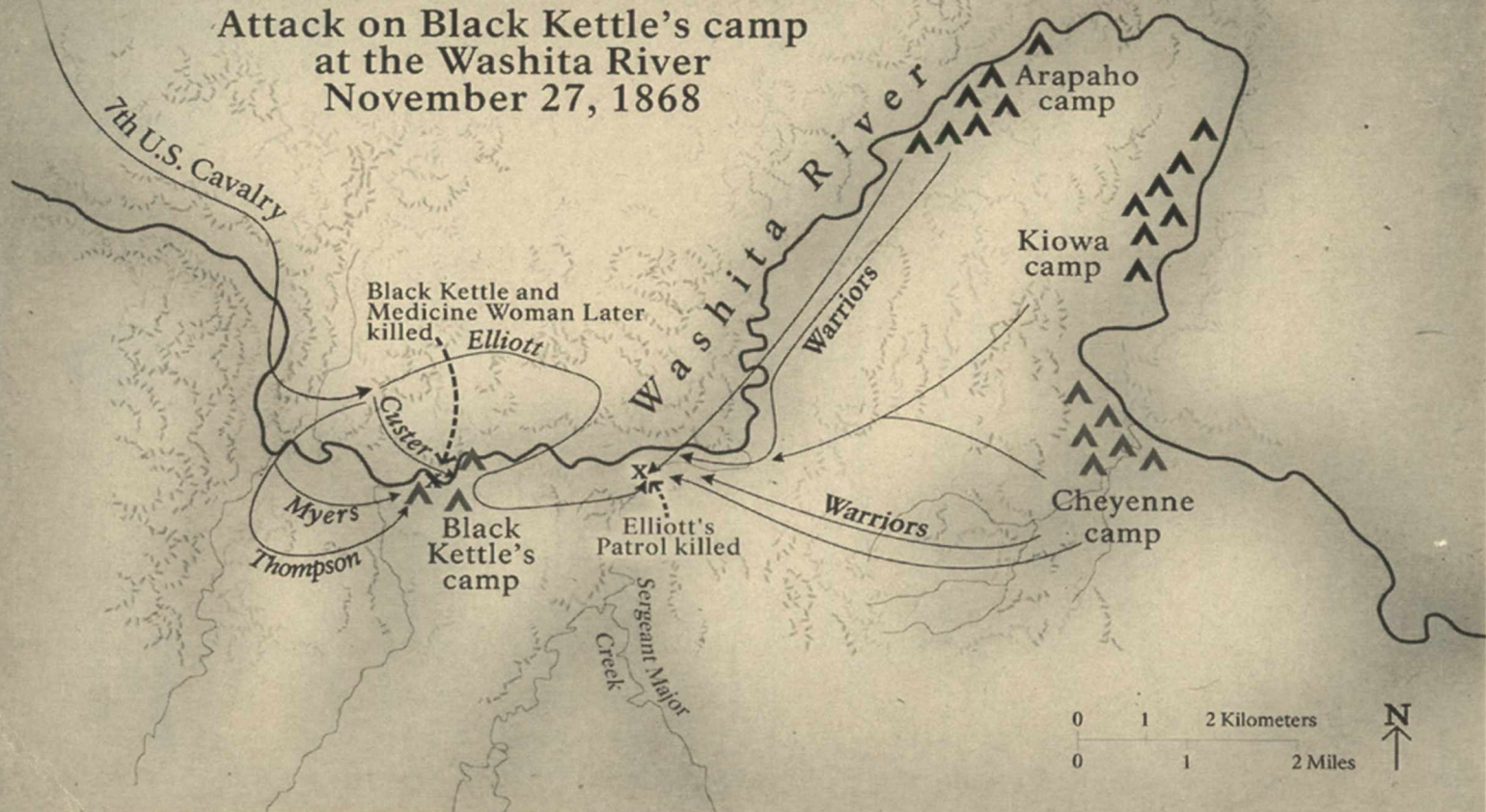


Cheyenne captives from Washita at Fort Hays, Kansas, 1869

15 After the Attack: Relatives in other bands of Cheyenne took in those who had narrowly escaped. The 53 women and children prisoners were held at Fort Hays, Kansas, until June of 1869. Custer and the Seventh U.S. Cavalry returned to this site in early December with Gen. Sheridan and the Nineteenth Kansas Cavalry. They found the remains of Elliott and his men, plus Clara Blinn and her son. They had been taken captive in the early fall and were in one of the camps along the Washita—who killed them is debatable. The campaign eventually

ended about 45 miles west of here when Lt. Col. Custer and his men surrounded a large village of Cheyenne, took three males as hostage, and gained the release of two captive white women, ultimately forcing the Cheyenne to accept the reservation way of life. During the Red River War (1874–1875), the army again targeted the Cheyenne. The Cheyenne would meet Custer once more in 1876 at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Though the Plains Indians defeated Custer at Little Bighorn, their freedom to roam the land was soon denied, and they were restricted to reservations.

**Attack on Black Kettle's camp
at the Washita River
November 27, 1868**



Other National Park Service sites related to the Cheyenne and Washita:

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site
Fort Larned National Historic Site
Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument
Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site

To learn more about this event, please read:

Sandy Barnard. *A Hoosier Quaker Goes to War: The Life & Death of Major Joel H. Elliott, 7th Cavalry*. Wake Forest, NC: AST Press, 2010.

Charles J. Brill. *Custer, Black Kettle, and the Fight on the Washita*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1938.

Jerome A. Greene. *Washita: The U.S. Army and the Southern Cheyennes, 1867–1869*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004.

Richard G. Hardorff. *Washita Memories: Eyewitness Views of Custer's Attack on Black Kettle's Village*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006.

Stan Hoig. *The Battle of the Washita: The Sheridan–Custer Indian Campaign of 1867–69*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976.

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