WASHITA BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT AND REPORT
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Dr. Jeffrey P. Shepherd
 Department of History
 University of Texas at El Paso

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In memory of those who lost their lives at Washita, 1868
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Abstract

Designated through an Act of Congress on November 12, 1996, the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site tells the story of a pivotal era in U.S. history that can be termed a “clash of cultures.” The culmination of events that took place at Washita led to the end of a way of life for many groups on the Southern Plains and was the prelude to the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876. On the morning of November 27, 1868, Lt. Col George A. Custer and the 7th U.S. Cavalry attacked the sleeping village of Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle, camped along the Washita River. Black Kettle, his wife, and other men, women and children, as well as over 800 horses, were killed by soldiers. Major Joel Elliot and 17 of his men with the 7th Cavalry were also killed. The results from the attack at Washita created lasting impacts for the Cheyenne and other Southern Plains tribes, as they were eventually forced onto reservations. Their struggles to preserve a way of life and traditional homelands were suppressed. This report provides a survey of the legacy of the attack along the Washita, early efforts to remember and commemorate the deaths of Indians and soldiers, and the eventual movement to establish the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. It offers historical context, examples of organizations and individuals who tried to protect Washita, and it includes the local, statewide, and national perspective on creation of the site. It concludes that Washita was preserved due to a network of dedicated individuals, many of whom were personally or professionally related, the familiarity of residents of Roger Mills County with the history of Washita, the creativity and persistence of advocates, and the solemnity with which proponents approached the project. These factors enabled Indians and non-Indians, Democrats and Republicans, to cooperate and preserve the Washita site.
Acknowledgements

Several individuals assisted with the completion of this report. I would like to thank Dr. Pat O’Brien from the Desert Southwest Cooperative Ecosystems Studies Unit, in Tucson, Arizona, for first approaching me to work on this report. After I started the project, Superintendent Lisa Conard-Frost became the person of contact. She invited me to attend the 15th Anniversary of the establishment of Washita, and as Superintendent, she provided valuable assistance during the majority of the life of the project. At Washita, Frank Torres, Joel Shockley, and Carol Mapel helped me navigate the unique collections at the headquarters in Cheyenne. They introduced me to the history of the region and offered constant support and encouragement. Mathew Tucker Blythe became Superintendent upon the departure of Lisa Conard-Frost, and he helped move the project to completion. He also offered insightful comments on the text of the manuscript. I would also like to thank the interviewees for their time and willingness to talk with me about the history of Washita, the Cheyenne, the creation of the site, and the ongoing significance of remembering the attack in 1868. In particular, I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Bob Blackburn for his willingness to read through a draft of the report. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation for the staff at the Oklahoma Research Center at the Oklahoma Historical Society, who helped me locate important archival materials.
INTRODUCTION

The traumatic events that took place on November 27, 1868, along the Washita River forever changed the lives of the Native people of the Southern Plains and altered federal Indian policy across the United States. The Washita battle—or massacre as many of the victims refer to it—was a spark that ignited nearly a decade of warfare between Indians, settlers, and the military across the middle of the continent. From the Llano Estacado (Staked Plains) of New Mexico and Texas, to Wyoming and the Dakotas, Natives resisted the U.S. military, American settlers, the penetration of railroads, and the advancement of mining, timber, and cattle industries, all of which threatened the cultures of Indian nations. For the men, women, and children of the Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle’s camp who woke up early that morning to the crack of gunfire, it was a nightmare of great proportions. They were the victims of a surprise attack led by Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer, eleven companies of the Seventh Cavalry, and several Osage Scouts who had lead them to this camp on the banks of the Washita River.¹

The details of the attack are well documented in military reports, the journals of soldiers present at the event, and in the oral traditions of the Cheyenne and Arapaho survivors. As the families slept, the camps along the Washita River were surrounded by cavalry, sharpshooters, and infantry ensconced in nearby hills and bluffs, where they had a clear line of sight to the lodges and horses of Black Kettle’s band. As dawn broke, the bugler played “Gary Owen” and the troopers descended upon the families in approximately fifty-one lodges.² Women, children and the elderly scrambled out of their lodges and met a hail of gunfire. Warriors reached for their guns in a valiant attempt to defend their families against the horror unfolding around them. Some Cheyenne escaped and ran to the banks of the Washita, hoping that the sloping hills would provide them with cover. Many of them slid into the river, broke through the thin ice, and died a terrible death. Others were more fortunate and fled the violence that engulfed the camp. Though fortunate to survive, they had the misfortune of living with the memories of that cold morning.

Although dozens of Cheyenne lost their lives on November 27, a number of soldiers died at the hands of Cheyenne men and Arapahos and Kiowas camped in their lodges down the river.⁴ Black Kettle’s camp was quite large, and the adjacent lodges of Arapaho and Kiowa were sizeable and well-armed. As the Cheyenne men rallied against the soldiers, they exacted a hefty toll against the troopers and forced them to pull back from their attack. With the help of Arapahos (led by Little Raven) and Kiowas (led by Santanta) who were alarmed by the gunfire associated with the invasion, the three groups managed to repel the Seventh Cavalry. Indeed, Major Joel Elliot and several of his men became trapped between a group of fleeing Cheyenne and well-equipped Arapaho and Kiowa soldiers running towards the gunfire. Elliot’s troops

¹ For an extended list of primary and secondary resources on the Washita incident, see the references at the end of this report. For a few of the most relevant works, see Jerome A. Greene, Washita: The U.S. Army and the Southern Cheyennes, 1867-1869 (University of Oklahoma Press, 2004); Mary Jane Warde, Washita (Cheyenne: Oklahoma Historical Society and the National Park Service, 2005); Charles J. Brill, Custer, Black Kettle, and the Fight on the Washita (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).
² Greene, Washita, 117; Warde, Washita, 1. The Cheyenne referred to their tipis as “lodges.”
³ Warde, Washita, 6. The lack of sunlight during the early morning attack afforded some Cheyenne the cover they needed to flee. Others escaped while the Cheyenne warriors fought back against the military.
⁴ The exact number of Cheyenne dead is the subject of debate. Some Cheyenne claim that roughly 20 men and 20 women and children died, while military reports and memoirs from soldiers place the combined number at more than 100. See Greene, Washita, for a list of official and confirmed casualties.
were dug into a defensive circle and had to fight against the retaliating Natives. Moreover, with the arrival of a group of Comanche men—some of the most skilled equestrian fighters in North America—the soldiers stood little chance of surviving the hornet’s nest they had disturbed.  

Custer’s Seventh Cavalry wrought death and destruction upon Black Kettle and his people. The soldiers killed dozens—some accounts claim one hundred—men, women, and children. Additionally, Custer followed Sheridan’s orders and directed his men to destroy everything of value in the camp to the Cheyenne. Military records reported that the Cavalry burned 241 saddles, 573 buffalo robes, 390 teepee hides, 210 axes, 140 hatchets, 775 lariats, 470 coats, and more than a thousand other items. Perhaps most devastating to the Cheyenne was the slaughter of approximately 800 horses and mules. Without their horses, their means of survival, and without many of their family members—particularly their Peace Chief, Black Kettle—the surviving Cheyenne felt as if the world had closed in on them. They had not chosen war and they wanted to remain outside the conflicts that had erupted four years ago in the wake of the Sand Creek Massacre. The violence followed them nonetheless and they paid a heavy price for the tensions that defined the “clash of cultures” on the Southern Plains.

The battle—or the massacre as Cheyenne refer to it—that took place on November 27, 1868 along the Washita River forced a shift in U.S. Indian policy and sparked nearly a decade of cross-cultural warfare throughout the Great Plains. The deaths of Cheyenne, especially the Peace Chief Black Kettle, shocked a nation still reeling from the carnage of the Civil War and that was struggling to define its relationship with Native Peoples. Washita had a range of impacts for Native and non-Native: it brought Custer into the national spotlight as a celebrated “Indian fighter” and reinforced the influence of the Dog Soldiers within Cheyenne society. The event was a turning point for the Cheyenne and Arapaho peoples, tribes on the Southern Plains, and the relationship between the federal government and natives across the United States, as the federal government pursued a policy of concentrating Indians onto reservation across the West.

Although Cheyenne would never forget Washita, the memories of the event for the U.S. writ large began to fade away. It was, for instance, overshadowed by warfare between the U.S. and Indian nations that continued for another twenty years until Geronimo surrendered in 1886. The federal government extended the policy of Indian removal and brought more tribes into Indian Territory, and this disrupted the lives of Cheyenne survivors of Washita. President Grant’s “Peace Policy” (1869–1876), the end of treaty-making (1871), and the Dawes Allotment Act (1887), compounded by the entry of the railroad, caused a series of upheavals in the socio-cultural and economic landscape of Oklahoma. The “land runs” of the 1890s and early 1900s, as well Oklahoma statehood (1907) also invited thousands non-Indians who brought their own economic, social, and political objectives with them, and in the process, they recreated the

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5 Warde, Washita, 12.
6 Warde, Washita, 13.
7 Greene, Washita, 189. For a detailed account of the incident, see the War Report of the Battle of the Washita to the 40th Congress, 3rd Session, 1869.
8 The debate over the use of “battle” or “massacre” in reference to the event in 1868 and the naming of the historic site will be discussed in this report. For Cheyenne views on the name, see interviews with Gordon Yellowman and Lawrence Hart. Other interviewees agree that it was a massacre.
9 Robert M. Utley, The Indian Frontier of the American West, 1846-1890 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 130. Utley places Washita within the context of relations between the U.S. Military and Native Americans. Utley does not use the phrase “clash of cultures.” It is both a generic phrase used by many historians and a phrase employed by proponents of the historic site in the 1990s.
region. The settlers knew little of the Indians and believed that they had opened a frontier, settled a wilderness, and brought civilization to an unruly landscape. 10

Despite the changes across western Oklahoma in the decades after Washita, the memories that survived the violence can teach us a lot about cross-cultural tension and conflict. Understanding those complex memories, multiple perspectives and varied voices can help us come to grips with who we are as a nation. Unearthing those memories and making them available to the American public is precisely what the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site was designed to do when Congress approved it in 1996. 11 As a national historic site, Washita has an important mission to help Americans remember and learn from their sometimes painful history. 12 Sites such as Washita contribute to our collective memory and provide a multi-faceted view of the national narrative about our past. These places help us contemplate history in ways that transcend simplistic myths or stories that glorify individual men, politicians, and discrete events. They provide an important corrective to standard accounts of Westward Expansion and the peoples that constitute the American past. In the words of Cheyenne Peace Chief Lawrence Hart, whose ancestors were attacked in 1868, “These are the stories that need to be told.” 13

These goals motivated the people, organizations, and communities that promoted the creation of the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site in Cheyenne, Oklahoma. This report, which recounts the efforts of these groups to establish the historic site at Washita, is organized into five sections, each covering an era that is significant to the Washita story. Section I provides a summary of the battle/massacre and the context in which it occurred and the local, regional, and national impact that it had on Indian-white affairs and federal policy. The report then turns to the three eras (1890s-WWII, WWII-1990, 1990-1997) that approximate the efforts over the twentieth century to commemorate the tragic events of November 1868. The first era is covered in Section II and addresses the late nineteenth century to World War II: the generation after the actual event, the “closing of the frontier,” the land run of 1892, Oklahoma statehood in 1907, the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, and the efforts of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Chambers of Commerce, and regional tourist groups to incorporate the battle/massacre into a unified historical narrative. Section III covers activities and groups after World War Two through 1990, and touches upon the establishment of the Black Kettle Museum, the Wesner family and their landholdings, a national re-evaluation of U.S. history tied to “the Culture Wars,” and work conducted by the Oklahoma Historical Society and tourist groups to make regional history attractive to citizens across the country. The last era is covered in Section IV and starts in 1990 with a flurry of events associated with the legislative, philanthropic, and community efforts to establish a national historic site. Section IV focuses on individuals such as Chief Lawrence Hart, Congressman Frank Lucas, Dr. Bob Blackburn, Bob Duke, the Wesner family, the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, and others at the local, state, and national level. Section V provides a brief overview of key events during the first few years of operation as a national historic site, and a conclusion reflects upon the significance of the Washita story.

The methodologies supporting this research should be familiar to historians. First, the Principle Investigator (P.I.), Jeffrey P. Shepherd, Associate Professor of History at the University

10 Utley, *The Indian Frontier*, 133.
12 Dr. Bob Blackburn, quoted in “Washita Historic Site Dedicated,” *Shawnee News-Star*, 2 November 1997, Oklahoma Research Center, Oklahoma City, OK.
13 “Washita Battlefield National Historic Site near Cheyenne has ‘many stories that need to be told’” Robyn Hoffman, *Weatherford News*, 27 November 1997, in Oklahoma Research Center, Oklahoma City, OK.
of Texas at El Paso, attended the 15th Anniversary Symposium commemorating the creation of Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, where he met with Superintendent Lisa Conard-Frost, NPS employees, and individuals associated with the site. Next, Dr. Shepherd began a series of interviews with key people who helped create the site. The interviews were recorded digitally and sent to the University of Texas at El Paso Oral History Institute for transcription.\textsuperscript{14} In total, eleven interviews were conducted and they serve as the basis for this report.\textsuperscript{15} Additionally, the P.I. conducted archival research in documents from the regional, state, and national level; he searched the Congressional Record; and he investigated the manuscript collections in the Oklahoma History Center. Secondary sources and published materials were also consulted to provide context for the events associated with the battle/massacre and the creation of the site.

The end result is a package of deliverables that includes eleven digital interviews and the associated transcriptions, a report narrating the establishment of the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, and a number of archival materials used to write the report. It is hoped that the interviews, report, and archival materials will shed light on the people, groups and organizations that helped create a national historic site that seeks to illuminate an important event in the lives of Native People on the Southern Plains and of all Americans.

\textsuperscript{14} Standard NPS and UT protocols were followed. Digital and paper copies will be sent to the interviewees upon completion of the project.

\textsuperscript{15} Dr. Shepherd completed eleven interviews and had informal conversations via phone with Neil Mangum.
Section One: The Southern Plains and the ‘Battle’ on the Washita: 1860 – 1875

The Washita Battlefield National Historic Site has its origins in a complicated series of events in the mid-nineteenth century. Indian policies after the U.S. war with Mexico were in flux, as federal officials were caught between the old policy of removal to Indian Territory, promoted by President Andrew Jackson and epitomized by the Cherokee Trail of Tears, and new policies that reflected the vast lands acquired after the War.\textsuperscript{16} Those lands were controlled by some of the most powerful Indian nations the federal government would come in contact with. The Comanche, Apache, Cheyenne, Navajo, Lakota, Blackfoot and other tribes moved across thousands of square miles of high plains, desert, and mountainous landscapes that alone would have daunted most Americans. Combined with numerous smaller bands, tribes, and clans, the population of the newly acquired territories was considerable and posed a challenge to older removal policies. In short, the U.S. government could not relocate Indians westward or beyond the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. To complicate matters, the government temporarily dismantled much of the Army during the 1850s, established a small and weakly protected string of forts along the new international border, and monitored the boundary to enforce Section 11 of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Protecting the stream of westward migrants also kept the military busy due to the occasional confrontation between migrant and Indian.\textsuperscript{17}

The 1850s were a time of transition for Indian nations across the U.S. Treaty-making continued but many Indian nations ignored the limitations tied to the agreements, and rejected the demands of a government that could not protect tribal lands from encroachment by non-Indians.\textsuperscript{18} Texas created its own Indian policy of ethnic cleansing and violence, rejected the use of treaties, and waged a near war of extermination upon groups within its borders, thereby pushing tribes such as the Lipan Apache southward into Mexico, westward into New Mexico, and northward into Indian Territory. Comanches, despite the policies of Texas and the U.S., remained the dominant force on the Southern Plains and controlled an extensive trade network between New Mexico, western and central Texas, and Louisiana. They also raided deeply into Mexico. The influence of the Comanche rippled outward and placed pressure upon groups such as the Cheyenne, who also felt pressure from northern groups such as the Lakota. During the 1850s an incipient federal reservation system emerged, but failed miserably as non-Indians attacked tribes on reservations and near poorly armed forts. Worse, the 1850s brought new political debates about the extension of slavery in the West, and these debates intersected with debates about “the Indian Problem.” The U.S. was truly at a crossroads with Native People.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Most U.S. history textbooks offer basic coverage of the court cases in the 1820s and 1830s, collectively known as the Marshal Trilogy (after U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall), the tensions between the Cherokee Nation and the state of Georgia, and the policy of Indian Removal promoted by President Andrew Jackson, during the 1830s and 1840s. These policies of removal westward had to be reassessed after the U.S. War with Mexico because officials could not move the Indians “outside of” the territorial boundaries of the U.S.

\textsuperscript{17} Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, \textit{The American West: A New Interpretive History} (Yale University Press, 2000).

\textsuperscript{18} The treaty-making process was in flux after the Civil War. It was difficult to convince groups such as the Lakota, Comanche, Apache, and Cheyenne to remain on reservations that were much smaller than their homelands. Moreover, westward migrants sometimes crossed into those reservations and hunted game and disturbed tribal life. The U.S. military was charged with “keeping the peace,” which frequently translated into punishing Indians for conflicts caused by non-Indians.

This national context framed the lives of the Cheyenne at mid-century. The Cheyenne lived at the meeting point of the northern and southern plains where they found themselves pulled by a series of tumultuous changes during the nineteenth century. They were an Algonquian people who had moved onto the upper Plains from the Great Lakes region. During the early 1800s the rise of the Teton Sioux pushed the Cheyenne and their allies, the Arapaho, further south along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains. Some families of Cheyenne remained in the north and intermarried with the Sioux, and became their allies through the “Indian Wars” of the 1870s. The Cheyenne and Arapaho that moved southward carried with them an extensive knowledge of horse culture, weapons, and tools imported from the growing U.S., via tribes on the middle and upper Great Plains. As they moved southward their horse surplus demanded larger amounts of grazing land, which came at the expense of tribes on the lower and middle Plains. Within a generation or two—during the 1830s and 1840s—they became masters of a region that we know today as western Kansas, eastern Colorado, western Nebraska and southern Wyoming. Some groups extended into the Texas Panhandle. 20

*The Cheyenne and Westward Settlement*

As the southern plains became home to the Cheyenne, westward migrants moved to California, Colorado, Montana, and Alaska in search of gold and silver. The discovery of gold near Pike’s Peak and Clear Creek ensured an influx of newcomers to Colorado, which in turn guaranteed conflict with Cheyenne in eastern Colorado. Simultaneously, as the Civil War boiled over, Congress approved establishment of the Colorado Territory in February 28, 1861, creating the political structure to nominally govern the roughly 100,000 non-Indians that had streamed into the region. Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors reacted swiftly to the newcomers who hunted their game, mined for gold in their streams, and transformed the landscape they called home. In response, Dog Soldiers harassed supply trains and migrant caravans. The Cheyenne associated with Black Kettle, the Peace Chief, tried to avoid the deluge of foreigners that signaled a shift in their world. This desire for negotiation, rather than confrontation, motivated Black Kettle to sign the 1861 Treaty of Ft. Wise and accept a reservation south of the Arkansas River. 21

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21 Townsend, *First Americans*, 310. The Dog Soldiers were an elite society of Cheyenne warriors. Oral history interviews mentioned very little about the Dog Soldiers, especially before Washita.
Neither the Dog Soldiers nor the settlers streaming into Colorado Territory were pleased with the treaty of Ft. Wise. Non-Indian politicians such as Governor John Evans were incensed by federal protection of the Cheyenne, when he believed that signatories to the treaty attacked migrant camps and wagon trains. Evans nonetheless briefly held onto the hope that the tensions might be resolved if Indians relocated to reserves in the eastern portion of the territory.  

New spikes in violence, along with pressure from the territorial legislature, as well as and mining, timber, and grazing interests, converted the Governor to a new line of thinking: force Native people out of the territory, “open” the land for settlement, and file for statehood. By 1863, as conflict in eastern Colorado peaked, Evans took matters into his own hands.  

With the U.S. military preoccupied by the Civil War, Evans used the territorial militia to deal with “the Indian Problem” once and for all. He contemplated ordering the commander of the militia, Colonel John Chivington, to remove all Indians from the territory rather than declare war upon them. Evans’ decision enraged the Methodist Chivington, popularly known as the “Fighting Parson,” who advocated for total war upon the Indians of the territory. As Chivington and Evans stood at an impasse throughout much of 1863, Congress invited Native leaders to visit Washington D.C. to discuss peace, meet President Lincoln, and talk with representatives of the Department of War. Lincoln hoped that the meetings would result in a peaceful resolution of conflict on the Plains, but he also planned on the leaders leaving the capital with a sense of the futility of military resistance. Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Comanche leaders were indeed impressed with the size of the expanding nation—especially the military it commanded—but


23 Townsend, *First Americans*, 311.
these representatives already embraced compromise with the United States. When they returned home to their more militant kin, they were unable to dissuade them from war.\textsuperscript{24}

As the winter snows began to thaw in the spring of 1864, tensions escalated throughout Colorado Territory. Evans moved closer to supporting Chivington’s views on war against the Indians and he warned the non-Indian settlers of Indian depredations and atrocities. The reports of unprovoked attacks were questionable, but the shrill declarations fomented more violence between Indian and non-Indian. The specter of a full-blown race-war loomed large, especially as Kit Carson attacked the Navajo in New Mexico, as the Lakota and Anglos came to blows in the Powder River region, and as the U.S. Army was preoccupied with the Civil War.\textsuperscript{25}

April 1864 saw the tensions spill over into war. Units of Colorado militia attacked Cheyenne and Arapaho villages in retaliation for uncorroborated raids by Indians upon Anglo towns and migrant caravans. On May 26, a group of militia attacked a village of several hundred Cheyenne associated with Lean Bear, one of the leaders who travelled to Washington D.C. a year ago. Lean Bear rode out to the troopers who were led by an inexperienced lieutenant in the Colorado militia. The young officer foolishly ordered the troopers to fire upon the lone Cheyenne and killed him in a volley of bullets. Cheyenne and Arapaho soldiers sought revenge for the death of Lean Bear and the dozens of kin that died in the attacks by the militia that spring. The violence that Evans and Chivington predicted came true, but not because the Indians had provoked the whites: the governor and the militia left the Indians with no other option but to defend themselves against attacks upon their villages.\textsuperscript{26}

Governor Evans issued an ultimatum that summer that proved untenable for Indians in the territory: move to reservations near military forts or face certain death. In the \textit{Rocky Mountain News} he aired his warning to the “merciless savages” and he declared any man who killed one of the “hostiles” to be a hero and a patriot. The editor of the newspaper added, “A few months of active extermination against the red devils will bring quiet and nothing else will.” \textsuperscript{27} Some bands moved to the forts hoping the soldiers would protect them from settlers who were prone to shooting at any Indian that came into their gun sites. Unfortunately, soldiers sometimes fired upon the very same Indians that agreed to concentration on the military reservations. This did little to garner trust among the bands that sought peace and it surely convinced the bands committed to military resistance that their decisions were justified.\textsuperscript{28}

Retaliatory attacks continued until the parties met in September to discuss a truce. Black Kettle, White Antelope, and other leaders hoped that the overtures from Governor Evans and Colonel Chivington would produce an agreement that respected the land claims of the Cheyenne and Arapaho, while ending the shooting of Indians. The meeting was supported by George Bent, a Cheyenne who managed a trading post in southern Colorado, and Major Edward Wynkoop, the commander of Fort Lyon, both of whom had seen enough bloodshed. Wynkoop was amenable to a peaceful resolution to the conflict plaguing the region. The Governor and the tribal leaders staked out unusually similar positions to avoid war and maintain peace, but one might have

\textsuperscript{24} Townsend, \textit{First Americans}, 311. Leaders from tribes travelled to Washington D.C. and returned to their communities with similar impressions: the U.S. was a large and powerful nation that must be accommodated rather than confronted. This view was not always embraced by all members of a tribe, thus we see divergent views in response to American expansion.

\textsuperscript{25} Townsend, \textit{First Americans}, 311; Berthrong, \textit{The Southern Cheyennes}, 195. Historians have documented discrepancies between claims of “Indian depredations” and actual attacks by Indians upon non-Indians.

\textsuperscript{26} Townsend, \textit{First Americans}, 312.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Denver Rocky Mountain News}, 10 August 1864, quoted in Berthrong, \textit{The Southern Cheyennes}, 201.

\textsuperscript{28} Townsend, \textit{First Americans}, 312.
doubted Evans when the “Fighting Parson” and the territorial militia were terrorizing Indians. Black Kettle made the first gesture of good will and brought his band of nearly 500 Cheyenne onto a reservation near Ft. Lyon, on the banks of Sand Creek. That was November of 1864.29

_Sand Creek and War on the Plains_

Since winter was fast approaching, Cheyenne hunting parties rode into western Kansas in search of food. Their departure left the camps at Sand Creek virtually defenseless. Governor Evans took advantage of this and ordered Chivington and the U.S. regional military commander, General Curtis, to move against the tribes. Although there is speculation that Evans gave Chivington the direct order to attack Sand Creek and kill its inhabitants, the maneuver was well within the bounds of Evans’ policy towards Indians. It is possible that Chivington ordered the November 29th surprise attack without the knowledge of Evans, even though it comported with the Governor’s war upon tribes in Colorado.30 Regardless, the violence was astonishing. Nearly 700 armed troops opened fire on the sleeping Cheyenne and Arapaho, nearly all of whom were women, children and the elderly.31 As gunfire filled the air, Black Kettle emerged from his lodge carrying a white flag. He and his wife fled for cover, but his Arapaho ally, White Antelope died in a hail of bullets. When the bloodshed ended, nearly two hundred Indians lay dead, mutilated or grotesquely disfigured. Chivington, however, lamented the fact that so many Indians had escaped. He had wanted total annihilation of the camp and its inhabitants.32

News of the massacre spread and resulted in Congressional and military investigations. Eye witness accounts from soldiers corroborated the violence. One officer from the First New Mexico Infantry said that “in going over the battle-ground the next day I did not see a body of a man, woman, or child but was scalped, and in many instances their bodies were mutilated in a most horrible manner.”33 Governor Evans argued that he had been informed that the Cheyenne and Arapaho at Sand Creek were hostile, and he avoided prosecution. Colonel Chivington and the militia received blame for the massacre but faced little in the way of punishment. As the truth of the carnage spread, even the Colorado public turned on the leaders, and Evans and Chivington saw their political dreams evaporate after Sand Creek.34

Warriors across the Southern Plains were not so forgiving, as Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche and Kiowa military societies waged full-scale war upon Anglo communities. More than one thousand warriors attacked military posts along the South Platte trail, ransacked ranches, and surprised migrant wagon trains. For nearly a year, Indian warriors controlled the Southern Plains in an unprecedented show of cooperative military force. In January of 1865, for instance, Cheyenne Dog Soldiers organized a strike on Fort Rankin and a nearby settlement along the South Platte River. Non-Indian towns and even cities such as Denver lived in fear of an impending attack, and the militias had been able to do little to protect them. Even the U.S. Army seemed paralyzed in the wake of the Civil War.35

Tensions remained high on the Southern Plains for a decade. The economic, political, military, and cultural shadow of the Civil War loomed large and shaped U.S. relations with

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29 Townsend, _First Americans_, 312; Berthrong, _The Southern Cheyennes_, 208.
30 Berthrong, _The Cheyennes_, 216-218. Donald Berthrong doubts that Governor Evans explicitly gave the order to attack Sand Creek and kill its inhabitants, but other scholars accept the view that Evans approved the attack.
31 Townsend, _First Americans_, 313.
32 Townsend, _First Americans_, 314; Berthrong, _The Cheyennes_, 220.
33 Quote from _Sand Creek Investigations_, 71, quoted in Berthrong, _The Cheyennes_, 221.
34 Townsend, _First Americans_, 316.
35 Townsend, _First Americans_, 317; Berthrong, _The Southern Cheyennes_, 227.
Indians in the territories. First, the recently unified nation struggled to mount the forces it believed were necessary to bring “peace” to the frontier. This brief vacuum of power enabled the Plains tribes to gain the upper hand and seek justice for the Sand Creek Massacre. Second, westward migration leapt ahead of political and military control of the region and hundreds of thousands of Americans and new European immigrants flooded into Native homelands, further exacerbating racial tensions. Ex-soldiers and homesteaders hoped to claim “free land,” while emancipated slaves also moved west in search of new opportunities. Cattle ranching boomed, new towns cropped up overnight, and interpersonal violence seemed to characterize the frontier settlements. Third, the federal government invested millions into a transcontinental railroad system that promised to unify a fractured economy and make whole a nation that was divided by regional cultures and political loyalties. These three factors—Native resistance, a disorganized military, and rapid western expansion—forced the federal government to rethink its policy towards Indians across the American West.\(^{36} \)

The post-war policies were directly influenced by the violence of Sand Creek. Federal officials knew that they could not negotiate treaties with Indian nations enraged by the deaths of their kinsmen and who were also skilled equestrian warriors. Informed observers of Indian affairs knew that the Comanche, Cheyenne, Arapaho and Sioux peoples could field a powerful show of force that would stunt westward expansion for years and they advised policy makers accordingly. Territorial governors feared for the lives of their citizens but they also feared that the looming threat of violence would stall the growth of their economies and delay statehood. All roads thus lead to the drafting of a new policy of peace and treaty-making between the U.S. and Indian nations, inflected by the threat of “total war” under the direction of William Tecumseh Sherman, the recently appointed Secretary of War.\(^{37} \)

The policy resulted in the offer of treaties and reservations, and the threat of military force against those who resisted. Dozens of tribes across the west filed for peace, and by early 1866, bands of Southern Cheyenne signed treaties and moved to reserves. Initial attempts during 1865 proved ambiguous. Comanche-Kiowa agent Jessie Leavenworth sent Jesse Chisholm into Indian Territory to advocate for peace. Black Kettle, camped in northwest Oklahoma at Wolf Creek, agreed to meet with George Bent and other families at the mouth of the Little Arkansas River. There they agreed to future meetings and councils for peace.\(^{38} \) During October 1865 they agreed to the Treaty of the Little Arkansas, which granted the Cheyenne and Arapaho a reservation along the Cimarron River in exchange for the forfeit of lands in Colorado. There were few signatories to the treaty, which was essentially negated when Dog Soldiers launched a campaign during the winter of 1865-1866 across western Kansas. They attacked dozens of wagon trains and allegedly scalped westward migrants. Instability and unpredictability returned to the Southern Plains.\(^{39} \)

\(^{36} \) Townsend, *First Americans*, 324  
\(^{37} \) Townsend, *First Americans*, 326  
\(^{39} \) Hoig, *The Cheyenne*, 58; Berthrong, *The Southern Cheyennes*, 242.
As Cheyenne Dog Soldiers harried wagon trains and frontier towns in 1866, U.S. military retaliation increased. During the summer, General William Tecumseh Sherman inspected the region around Fort Laramie and was troubled by the impunity of the tribes but chose a measured response to their displays of power. In his report to General Grant he recommended military control over Indians on reservations, but he did not foresee a war in Colorado. By the end of the year, however, the conditions changed and so did the views of Sherman. The Fetterman Massacre along the Bozeman Trail, ongoing attacks upon wagon caravans, and myriad thefts and depredations forced the hand of Sherman in 1867. He ordered Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, the military commander in Kansas to depart from Fort Riley in March of 1867 with 1,400 military men, including Lt. Colonel George Armstrong Custer commanding the U.S. Seventh Cavalry. Hancock met up with a group of Cheyenne and Sioux, but violence was averted when Major Wynkoop, fearing another Sand Creek, flew the white flag. Nonetheless, Hancock ordered Custer to track a fleeing group of Cheyenne, while he burned lodges in the camp. Custer and Hancock pursued Cheyenne and Arapaho alleged to be responsible for raids and attacks across the Southern Plains—attacks which the Indians said were in retaliation for the burning of their lodges by Hancock in April.

As the military continued to pressure the Dog Soldiers, the Indian Bureau, members of the newly established Indian Peace Commission, and Congress convinced President Grant to extend the olive branch to the Southern Plains tribes. In the fall of 1867, representatives from the U.S. and several Indian nations met in southern Kansas for the Treaty of Medicine Lodge Creek. The Medicine Lodge Treaty signed by the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho in late October promised food, annuities, tools, and farming land on a reservation that was a fraction of

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40 Berthrong, *The Southern Cheyennes*, 270.
their homelands. By most accounts the Treaty and the reservation were a failure. Federal authorities could not provide the equipment necessary to survive on the reservation and young men ventured outward in search of bison. Leaving the reservations alarmed the non-Indian population and resulted in disproportionate punishments. Moreover, non-Indian hunting parties killed the bison and left their carcasses to rot, taking only the hides and heads as trophies.\textsuperscript{43}

\textit{The Attack Along the Washita}

Such egregious waste enraged the Cheyenne men and Dog Soldiers who had rejected the Medicine Lodge Treaty and continued to resist the military and federal representatives. For much of the spring of 1868 the Southern Plains was in a state of unrest. During the late summer of 1868, nearly two hundred Cheyenne ransacked non-Indian farms in southern Colorado and western Kansas. Though they took cattle and food to feed their starving families, General Sherman declared the Southern Plains to be in a state of war and ordered the use of force to bring the perpetrators back to the reservations. This declaration reinforced the pre-existing anger among the Cheyenne and Arapaho who felt betrayed by the false peace and failed promises of the Treaty of Medicine Lodge Creek. Sherman also implemented his policy in a manner that would surprise the Southern Plain peoples. Rather than track down the warriors who were allegedly responsible for the crimes, Sherman commanded General Philip Sheridan to implement a campaign into the heart of Cheyenne country during the winter of 1868-69, where he would attack the villages and camps of all Cheyenne he came into contact with. The eventual result of this order was the death of Cheyenne and Arapaho along the Washita River later that year.\textsuperscript{44}

As Sheridan mustered his troops, Black Kettle and Little Robe took their bands deeper into the southern reaches of their territory in western Oklahoma. Hoping that his people were safe, Black Kettle and Little Robe travelled to Fort Cobb on November 20 to meet with Colonel William B. Hazen, who was responsible for distributing rations and goods to tribes seeking refuge in the vicinity. Hazen rejected their request for a peace treaty and to move 180 lodges from the Washita River to Ft. Cobb on the grounds that he lacked the authority to approve treaties. Hazen added that Sheridan and his troops were headed his way to punish the Cheyenne and Arapaho for the attacks of the previous months. Black Kettle and his compatriots were most assuredly dismayed when they returned to their camps with this new information.\textsuperscript{45}

Just hours before the pre-dawn attack by Custer, Cheyenne elders met with Black Kettle to discuss moving the lodges downriver the following day. They doubted the rumors of U.S. soldiers amassing in the vicinity, and even if it had been true, they did not believe that Custer would punish them for the violence of the previous years. Moreover, they could not fathom a winter attack by U.S. soldiers against a string of camps that contained nearly 6,000 Native people, many of whom were seasoned soldiers. The rumors were true, of course, and the soldiers were moving into position around the lodges at that very moment.\textsuperscript{46}

Much has been written about the attack by Custer upon Black Kettle’s band on the Washita River during the morning of 27 November 1868. At best, the shots fired by Custer and his troops grew out of the atmosphere of violence and cultural conflict on the Southern Plains. Historians generally agree that there were young Cheyenne men associated with Black Kettle’s

\textsuperscript{43} Townsend, \textit{First Americans}, 334; Hoig, \textit{The Cheyenne}, 60; Berthrong, \textit{The Southern Cheyennes}, 300.

\textsuperscript{44} Townsend, \textit{First Americans}, 334; Hoig, \textit{The Cheyenne}, 60; Berthrong, \textit{The Southern Cheyennes}, 307.

\textsuperscript{45} Hoig, \textit{The Cheyenne}, 62; Berthrong, \textit{The Southern Cheyennes}, 325. Colonel Hazen oversaw the Comanche and Arapaho, not the Cheyenne, and lacked jurisdiction to approve treaties with them.

\textsuperscript{46} Hoig, \textit{The Cheyenne}, 64
camp who had participated in raids against migrant trails and trading posts during the summer. The efforts of Black Kettle to calm these energetic and inexperienced warriors were also well known among the government officials familiar with the Cheyenne. Black Kettle personified his position of Peace Chief, and his desire for negotiation with the U.S. predated the massacre at Sand Creek four years ago. Indeed, he approved the series of treaties that required him to move his people out of Colorado and onto a reservation in Oklahoma. Thus, the attack on his lodges was all the more disconcerting due to his efforts to avoid violence.  

At worst, the deaths of the Cheyenne and Arapaho grew out of an intentional assault upon a sleeping village that had not directly harmed U.S. citizens. Regardless, when Custer and his Seventh Cavalry attacked the village that morning, men, women, and children fell victim to the hail of bullets. Cheyenne men struggled to mount a resistance to the assault upon their families, but the mounted soldiers shot them down as they exited their lodges. The scene eerily mirrored the massacre at Sand Creek: women and children screamed for their lives as soldiers stabbed and shot them in the back. Elderly Cheyenne died and took with them the wisdom of generations. Custer and his men had orders to hang the warriors and take the women and children hostage, burn their belongings, and shoot their horses.  

![Figure 3: “The Battle of the Washita,” Mary Jane Ward, Washita, 2.](image)

The surprise attack quickly turned into a general melee when surrounding warriors arrived. Arapahos and Cheyenne soldiers from lodges further upstream descended upon the soldiers and cavalry as they continued to attack Black Kettle’s camp. Indeed, Custer soon found himself surrounded by mounted warriors who wanted revenge, while Major Joel Elliot died two miles downriver from gunshot wounds inflicted by Arapahos. The result of the pre-dawn attack was somewhere between Custer’s estimation of 103 dead males and more reliable estimates of 20 dead men. More disturbingly, estimates place the number of dead women and children at 47.

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47 Hoig, The Cheyenne, 64; Berthrong, The Southern Cheyennes, 326.
48 Hoig, The Cheyenne, 65; Berthrong, The Southern Cheyennes, 327. There may be one case of amnesty among Custer’s men. A soldier allowed Corn Stalk Woman and her niece, Moving Behind, to remain hidden.
between 18 and 40. The soldiers killed roughly 800 ponies and destroyed approximately 50 lodges. Military estimates state that 19 enlisted men died.  

Custer and his men barely escaped with their lives. Lt. Bell in essence saved them when he arrived with ammunition that allowed him to stave off the growing numbers of warriors. When Custer realized that he was outnumbered he fled the still burning lodges and regrouped eastward to Camp Supply. Within days he had returned to the field, fighting Indians to the north of the lands that he had so dramatically invaded. Although General Sheridan was pleased with the result of the attack, he chastised Custer for leaving the battle unaware of Elliot’s fate. Sheridan placed full blame upon Black Kettle for the depredations of the previous summer, and was unmoved by the atrocities committed by the soldiers. He held little sympathy for the surviving Cheyenne from Black Kettle’s camp, some of which eventually straggled in to Camp Supply, sought peace, and hoped that they could recover from the violence of November 27, 1868. Sheridan ordered the continuation of the military campaign for the rest of the winter, and the military attacking Cheyenne camps, burned their lodges, and drove them into submission.

New Lives, New Realities

The Cheyenne who left the Washita River after Custer’s attack soon faced another series of challenges. Some sought refuge along the Texas boundary between the Washita and South Canadian rivers. Little Robe met with Tall Bull and White Hope, the leaders of the Dog Soldiers, to discuss settlement on the reservation. The two rejected Little Robe’s offer and they trekked northward to join southern bands of Sioux. They were surrounded by the military and forced to return south. The remaining bands that sought peace had to adapt the reservation.

The Cheyenne quickly felt the weight of new federal policies bear down upon them. The recently elected President Ulysses S. Grant moved the reservation from north-central Oklahoma on the Arkansas River, southward to the Canadian River near El Reno, were they encountered the full array of rations, schooling, Christian sermons, agriculture, and cultural transformation that characterized reservation life in the late nineteenth century. Grant had recently promoted a “Peace Policy” that entrusted Indian Affairs to religious groups such as the Society of Friends. Consonant with this policy, the survivors of Washita were overseen by Brinton Darlington, an energetic 60 year old Quaker Indian Agent. When Darlington arrived at the Upper Arkansas Agency in July 1869, he faced unscrupulous Indian traders, intransigent military leaders, greedy non-Indians, and of course the doubts of the Cheyenne and Arapaho themselves. Although he convinced Stone Calf to bring thirteen lodges to the reservation, Cheyenne such as Bull Bear and Medicine Arrows remained beyond its boundaries and subject to imprisonment by the military.

The 1870s brought new challenges to the Cheyenne peoples on and off the reservation. Agent Darlington died in 1872, and with him the Cheyenne lost an ally who—despite his sense of cultural superiority—protected them from the more unsavory elements of frontier Oklahoma. Diseases hit the Cheyenne and dwindled their numbers. Harsh winters and the declining buffalo herds brought many tribes to the brink of starvation. Illegal traders and whiskey peddlers swarmed the reservation, and non-Indians began squatting nearby. In 1873 and 1874 U.S. government surveyors entered Cheyenne lands and mapped it for railroads and non-Indian settlement. Cheyenne warriors attacked and killed members of a surveying party, which ignited

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49 Hoig, The Cheyenne, 65; Berthrong, The Southern Cheyennes, 328.
51 Berthrong, The Southern Cheyennes, 340.
52 Hoig, The Cheyenne, 70; Berthrong, The Southern Cheyennes, 348.
retaliation by the military. On 27 June 1874, Cheyenne, Comanche, and Kiowas fought with buffalo hunters and a military detachment at Adobe Walls in the Texas Panhandle. The violence continued on the Canadian River for nearly a month until a group of Cheyenne lost six warriors in what became known as the Battle of Adobe Walls.53

The attack on Adobe Walls sparked the Red River War and Sheridan’s declaration of war on the Southern Plains. He ordered Colonel Nelson A. Miles and Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie to push into the Texas Panhandle and attack the Cheyenne and Arapaho wherever they met them. One noteworthy attack took place at Palo Duro Canyon, north of present-day Lubbock, Texas, where Mackenzie killed several Cheyenne, destroyed hundreds of lodges, and captured or killed nearly 1000 horses. Sheridan, Miles, and Mackenzie pushed into Cheyenne territory and burned their lodges, destroyed their horses, and slaughtered buffalo. They killed relatively few Cheyenne as they waged war upon the land and resources that enabled them to live an independent existence. These attacks continued into 1875 and are known as the Red River Wars, which permanently ended the resistance of the Cheyenne on the Southern Plains.54

The holdouts were eventually rounded up and forced onto the reservations with the rest of their tribe. A few of the most recalcitrant warriors were taken to Fort Marion, in Florida, where the U.S. Military was housing a number of the most resistant Native warriors from tribes across the American West. It eventually held Apaches associated with Geronimo. Thousands of miles away from home, many of the Cheyenne died within the massive old walls of Castillo de San Marcos, built by the Spanish in the 1670s, to subdue the Indians surrounding the colony of St. Augustine. By 1875, less than a decade after Custer’s attack upon Black Kettle and his lodges along the Washita River, the Southern Cheyenne had seen their world turned upside down.55

53 Hoig, The Cheyenne, 71; Berthrong, The Southern Cheyennes, 329; John H. Moore, The Cheyenne (Blackwell, 1996), 267. Diseases such as smallpox hit the Cheyenne during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well.

54 See Anderson, Utley, etc.

55 Hoig, The Cheyenne, 72; Moore, The Cheyenne, 269.
SECTION II: Cheyenne Life and Public Memory in Western Oklahoma, 1890s – 1940s

During the late nineteenth century, one generation after the attack along the Washita, and several generations before the creation of the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, citizens in Oklahoma Territory began a conversation about history that tells us a lot about public memory and commemoration. This conversation began as the Cheyenne survivors of Washita faced allotment, land runs that dissolved their reservation, and non-Indians who established schools, churches, businesses and other institutions of “civilization” on that land. In the process, non-Indians crafted histories of the region that emphasized frontier conflict, Indian Wars, and the heroic settlement of the West. These narratives revealed nostalgia for “battles” against “savage Indians,” and the rugged life of the Wild West, but they took root in modern institutions such as historical societies, newspapers, and magazines that were part and parcel of dispossession. Believing that the frontier had been “closed,” the authors of these narratives simplified race relations and forced their stories into one of inevitable conflict rather than intentional U.S. expansion and Natives protecting their homelands. As these new associations crafted public memories about Indians in the past, they did little to understand the Native people in the present. They froze the Cheyenne in the nineteenth century even though their communities endured into the twentieth century. And yet, these public memories and narratives of Indian-White conflict help us situate the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site in historical context. They demonstrate public interest in history and the commemoration of Washita, and they help us understand the fairly solid regional support in favor of a site that told a controversial story of violence, conflict, and death.56

Cheyenne Life at the Turn of the Century

Cheyenne life during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was shaped by the legacies of land allotment, the 1892 land run, and the growth of the non-Native population. As most Cheyenne moved to the reservation after the end of Red River Wars, they confronted Indian Agents, school teachers, missionaries, agricultural instructors, and military troops. The collective goal of these individuals was the assimilation of Native people into the U.S. through education, religious conversion, and the inculcation of property rights with private allotments of land. This process was supposed to follow several stages, with the initial phases requiring Indians’ isolation from white society—especially its least savory elements—until they could compete and promote their interests. The government would eventually release Native people from its oversight so they could struggle on their own as full-fledged citizens with a mastery of English, respect for private property, and the will of a Christian God in their hearts.57

The scenario sketched out by the government and “Friends of the Indian” failed by most accounts. The support systems on reservations were inadequate, beef rations were small and frequently rancid, commodities such as flour and sugar led to health problems, and tribal

56 These trends were common across the U.S. West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Newspapers may have represented different political perspectives and some may have critiqued U.S. treatment of Indians, but they embraced a constellation of beliefs about the future of Indians. Those that critiqued Indian policy usually objected that the means of assimilation were inhuman or ineffective, while embracing the ultimate goal of detribalization. Additionally, newspapers and other non-Indian institutions may have expressed “respect” for Native people and they may have “honored” their cultures, but they nonetheless predicted the inevitable demise of “the Indian.” Such differences reflected the two general stereotypes of the “noble” and “savage” Indian.

members chaffed at the limitations on their movement. Hunting trips were regulated and sometimes led to conflict with non-Indians. Cattle trails, unscrupulous traders, buffalo hunters, and the arrival of the railroad brought additional challenges for the Cheyenne. Moreover, non-Indians refused to respect the boundaries of the reservation and hunted on these lands.\textsuperscript{58}

Nonetheless, the Cheyenne and Arapaho enjoyed some success. Farming, for instance, provided Cheyenne with opportunities. Although not all men became farmers, those who did rejected much of the technology and seed provided to them by the Indian Bureau and instead used seeds and traditional hoes given to them from Caddoans. By 1890 with the assistance of a Quaker missionary named John Seeger, the Cheyenne had begun tilling the soil and bringing crops to harvest. But even as they made progress towards self-sufficiency, the federal government reduced rations when Cheyenne farms yielded crops.\textsuperscript{59}

A broader series of federal laws hampered Native economic and social stability that slowly emerged from their tentative successes with farming. The federal government passed the Dawes Severalty Act, also known as the Allotment Act, in 1887. The Act sought to force private property onto Indians, divest them of “surplus land,” and transfer that land to non-Indian citizens. The Dawes Act provided male Indians with 160 acre allotments, which should have been held in trust for up to twenty-five years by the federal government. This period was supposed to give Indians time to establish their farms, build wealth, learn the capitalist market place, and become individualistic. After that time period, the land could be sold at auction.\textsuperscript{60}

The Allotment Act was not initially implemented on the Cheyenne reservation because it contradicted the terms of the 1867 Medicine Lodge Treaty, which stated that three-fourths of males over the age of eighteen must support alterations to the treaty. Advocates of allotment knew that it was unlikely that they would obtain the signatures, so Congress sought a way around the stipulations. It created the Jerome Commission and ordered it to gather the signatures to alienate the land. Through fraud, forgery, and bribery, the Commission secured its signatures and proceeded with allotment. Cheyenne protested—they even filed a lawsuit that became the Supreme Court case \textit{Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock} (1903)—but the die was cast. Congress authorized allotment and the government sold the land. It was a bitter moment for the tribe.\textsuperscript{61}

In light of the unique situation in Indian Territory, it is amazing that so many Cheyenne remained in and around their original land base. Some rejected allotment but others viewed an allotment as the only way to hold onto any land at all. Many Cheyenne took allotments along the North Canadian River; along the Canadian River below Thomas, OK, and adjacent to the Washita River. Some tribal members accepted allotments throughout present day Hammon and Clinton, but only a few established homes near the site of the battle in 1868.\textsuperscript{62}

The larger and more intractable problem was the non-Indian population, particularly members of Congress, who passed amendments to the Dawes Act and the Jerome Commission. These additions enabled non-Indians to lease Indian land (forcibly or without permission from allottees, and frequently for decades), reduce the period of “tutelage,” and set up Competency Commissions that judged Native “intelligence” on the basis of skin color and “blood.” The laws

\textsuperscript{58} Hoxie, \textit{A Final Promise}, 243. Commodities such as lard, coffee, sugar, and flour were not part of the traditional Cheyenne diet. Rapid transition to these foods, combined with limited access to older sources of food, caused endemic health problems such as heart disease, obesity, and diabetes.

\textsuperscript{59} Moore, \textit{The Cheyenne}, 270.

\textsuperscript{60} Moore, \textit{The Cheyenne}, 281.

\textsuperscript{61} Moore, \textit{The Cheyenne}, 282; Hoxie, \textit{A Final Promise}, 154.

\textsuperscript{62} Warde, Washita, 50.
violated the 25 year period of “tutelage” and allowed agents to sell Indian land. These amendments accelerated dispossession across the U.S. West. 63

The Oklahoma Land Runs also divested reservation land from Native people. 64 The land run was the Oklahoma variant of non-Indians purchasing “surplus land” on the reservation after allotment. The run on the Cheyenne and Arapaho reservation began in 1892 and brought nearly 30,000 homesteaders onto Native land. Although this number paled in comparison to other runs in Indian Territory, it handicapped the economy of the Cheyenne. By 1902, nearly all Cheyenne land had been leased or sold via allotment and the land run. 65

At the turn of the century, Cheyenne and the homesteaders lived a complicated yet albeit peaceful co-existence. Cheyenne families who survived Washita shared western Oklahoma with an array of non-Indians, ranging from ex-confederate soldiers to new immigrants from Europe, although the majority were white Anglo Protestants from Texas, Kansas, or Missouri. They established towns that were isolated by miles of rolling prairie and they built farms dedicated to corn, cotton, and wheat, as well as the pasturage of cattle and horses. By most accounts they were strong and resilient people who lived modest lives and enjoyed the beauty of the Southern Plains landscape. This isolation, however, proved challenging during the early twentieth century. The town nearest the future historic site, Cheyenne, lacked a railroad connection but served as the seat of Roger Mills County. The Clinton and Oklahoma Western Railroad initially bypassed Cheyenne when it entered Roger Mills County in 1910, but locals raised capital to finance the Cheyenne Short Line connecting it to Cheyenne in 1914. 66

As non-Indians moved into the region, Cheyenne tribal members tried to remain close to familiar places and maintain family ties. They confronted challenges in the form of boarding school or public school education, financial poverty, social marginalization, and racism. They also faced language loss and separation from traditional cultural practices. In the late 1890s, for instance, Indian Agent A.E. Woodson sought to undermine the power of Cheyenne chiefs by stripping them of their authority to distribute rations. In an insult to their revered status in Cheyenne society, he forced them to stand in line for their own rations. Woodson outlawed the Sun Dance and Medicine Arrow rites, criminalized the Ghost Dance, and tried to break up families that chose allotments next to each other. 67 Ceremonies and Cheyenne communalism nonetheless persisted. Cheyenne families lived together in Canton and Watonga in Blaine County, Clinton in Custer, and Hammon in Roger Mills County. The White Shield community near Hammon was known for its traditional ways, which consisted of berry-picking and hunting of rabbits, quail, and turkey, and fishing. Combined with truck farming, grazing cattle, raising horses, and wage labor, Cheyenne persevered as distinct peoples into the twentieth century. 68

**Crafting Public Memories in Western Oklahoma**

As the post-Washita generations adapted to life in Western Oklahoma, non-Indian communities created institutions and organizations that they recognized as pillars of civilization. Schools, banks, churches, civic and philanthropic groups, newspapers, railroads, and businesses cropped up on old Cheyenne lands. While these entities tended to look forward into the future,
they also relied on versions of the past to justify their presence on the lands of the Cheyenne. The historical narratives that they crafted provided context for the ways in which locals grappled with the memories of Washita and situated it in the larger story of “the settling of the West”. Discussing the origins, significance, and legacy of these narratives in the early twentieth century can also help us understand the debates over and eventual support for the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site in the late twentieth century.

Borrowing from the nineteenth century rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, which made westward expansion a mandate from God, these groups portrayed themselves as the victors of the Indian Wars and masters of the “Wild West.” They conquered a rugged landscape of vast plains, searing desert heat, and daunting mountains while surviving the violence of a lawless frontier. As “civilization” eclipsed savagery, westward expansion “closed” the frontier in 1890 and successfully “ended” one chapter of American history. The new, ensuing chapter was marked by modern institutions, progress, industrialization, and the promise of a better future, but it nonetheless relied upon the old visions of the past.69

The narrative that persisted after the “closing of the frontier” formed the core storyline for all of American history, and it took root in western Oklahoma via the associations, organizations, and institutions the newcomers established. Newspapers, historical societies, amateur historians, popular novelists, and other groups imagined a history of glorious yet hard won struggles with Native peoples. Massacres of Indians became “battles,” and Native people defending their homelands became “raiders” committing “depredations” upon citizens. These plotlines were fueled by popular interest in first-person accounts and memoirs, and in interviews with the aging soldiers and scouts who fought the Cheyenne. Historical societies revered the “settlers” that broke the land and the Indian barrier, and historical magazines extolled the virtues of the rugged individualist. Veterans from the Indian campaigns gathered together to reminisce about past glories. Dime novels, “commemorations” of past battles, and even the new medium of silent film revealed a longing for the tumultuous era of Indian wars and frontier upheaval.70

This nostalgia for a lost yet imagined past signaled an appetite for something different than the hard economic realities faced by people in the twentieth century. Many homesteaders believed that the future promised prosperity and success if they worked hard, tilled the soil, and obeyed the laws. The reality was less romantic. The “modern” world of corporations, trusts, industrialization, urbanization, and new cultural mores challenged beliefs of communities tied to traditional and agrarian ways of life. Farming on the plains was difficult and farmers faced myriad economic and environmental hardships. In the face of these demands, many people embraced the popular stories of the frontier as a time of cultural simplicity and civic virtue.71

Several institutions fulfilled that desire for a romanticized past. Popular magazines followed these story lines about the settling of the West and the wild frontier, and they situated Washita within that narrative. One popular mass produced article on the incident was written by Lewis Hornbeck and published in Sturm’s Oklahoma Magazine.72 Released in 1908, Hornbeck’s

69 Richard White (Ed.) The Frontier in American Culture (University of California Press, 1994).
72 Lewis Hornbeck, “The Battle of the Washita,” Sturm’s Oklahoma Magazine, 1908, v. 5 n.5 pp. 30-36, in Sturm’s Oklahoma Magazine, Oklahoma State University Special Collections Online (Accessed March 18, 2013);
narrative of Washita exemplified writing from the era that was replete with villainous Indians and heroic soldiers fighting on the frontier. His language was ethnocentric and exuded the nationalism of a country barreling into the future and struggling to create a narrative of its own past. Hornbeck wrote, "For years after the Civil War the frontiers of Kansas and Texas were continued scenes of rape and massacre perpetrated by the different tribes of the West, who persistently refused to abide their respective treaties, and defiantly abandoned their reservations for bloody havoc among the unprotected settlements. The worst tribes among the southwestern Indians were the Cheyennes, Arapahoes and Kiowas."\(^{73}\)

Hornbeck simplified the treaties, ignored the incursions of whites onto Native lands, and turned the Cheyenne into marauders. He continued with this line of thinking in the piece. “In 1868 and following an unexampled series of outbreaks and wanton massacres on the part of the Indians, the government tardily determined to abandon the method of a miserable and misguided milk and water policy in the more sensible attempt to teach these murderous tribes that their game was one in which two could play.” In reference to the attack he cast Custer and the cavalry as heroes of the frontier. Rather than illuminate the plans of the military to wage war during the winter, Custer became the victim of a “trap” set by the Cheyenne and Arapaho. “Custer had attacked the main village of the Cheyennes, but was not aware of the trap he was in. Immediately below them lay the full Kiowa tribe, then the Arapahoes, then more Cheyennes, then the Comanches and Apaches. Nearly all the hostile tribes of the country were there, camped together for strength and safety.”\(^{74}\) In reference to the survivors, he argued; “With even numbers the advantage was all with the Indians; with superior numbers, at home, and fighting in a single body, it had been a miracle for the troops to escape a massacre.”\(^{75}\) Non-Indians were victims of a massacre by savages, while Indians simply lost a fair battle with the military.

Hornbeck noted how Custer returned to the site a month later with over 1,000 troops and a contingent of Kansas volunteers.

It was then that the bodies of the brave Elliot and his fourteen men were found—all horribly mutilated. In the Kiowa village...were found the scalped remains of a young white woman and a small white child. The woman had been but recently captured and a neat pair of new cloth slippers were yet on her feet. Evidently she was killed to prevent her falling into the hands of Custer with her damning story of outrage and suffering at the hands of her captors.\(^{76}\)

Articles such as this shaped the initial myths about Washita and the Indian Wars. Although some first-person accounts were accurate—particularly soldiers’ testimony to Congress about violence towards the Cheyenne—the public narrative relied upon standard notions of Indian aggression and military valor. This echoed the larger narrative of frontier history.

Periodicals such as *Sturm’s Oklahoma Magazine* helped craft the memories of Washita and the Indian Wars that became familiar to Americans during the early twentieth century. First published in 1905 in Tulsa, *Sturm’s Oklahoma Magazine* was initially titled *Sturm’s Statehood*.

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\(^{74}\) Hornbeck, “The Battle of the Washita,” 32
\(^{75}\) Hornbeck, “The Battle of the Washita,” 33.
\(^{76}\) Hornbeck, “The Battle of the Washita,” 34.
Magazine. Established and edited by Missouri journalist Oliver Perry Sturm, the magazine moved to Oklahoma City in 1906 with a circulation of roughly ten thousand. The magazine addressed items of national and local interest. It featured an "Indian Department" that covered Indian history and literature, edited by Ora Eddleman Reed, who was of Cherokee descent. Like Twin Territories: The Indian Magazine and McMaster's Oklahoma Magazine, Sturm's promoted Oklahoma's early towns and natural resources. It stopped publication in 1911.\(^7\)

Organizations such as the Oklahoma Historical Society (OHS) also played a role in crafting a history—and in turn an identity—for the territory and state. The OHS could not have been established at a more symbolic moment in U.S. history: 1893. Only a few years after the end of the Indian Wars and during the same year in which Frederick Jackson Turner presented his now famous paper at the Chicago World’s Fair extolling the “closing of the frontier,” the founding generation of the OHS sat at the cusp of a new era. 1893 was also pivotal for local reasons: it was one year after the opening of the Cheyenne and Arapaho lands. The relevance of the year surely was not lost on the Oklahoma Territorial Press Association when they met in Kingfisher, Oklahoma to discuss the future of the territory’s past. Taking place in the shadow of the opening of the Cheyenne reservation, the meeting was physically close to those old lands. Kingfisher, established in 1889, sat on the eastern edge of the old Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation. Like the sooners hoping to claim land, the pioneers of the OHS sought to claim the territory’s past. And by all accounts they did an admirable job with the heritage of Oklahoma.\(^8\)

After nearly thirty years of collecting historical materials, the OHS established a scholarly journal in 1921. The Chronicles of Oklahoma was a forum for historians to publish essays on the region’s history. It printed archival materials, released first person accounts of historical events, ran book reviews, and reproduced speeches from the meetings of the OHS. The articles of the Chronicle provide a window into the past, but they also reflect the views of historians during the early twentieth century, many of whom embraced the narratives of Indian-White conflict and expansion. In conjunction with the editorials and materials within the journal, they help us understand how public memory was shaped in Oklahoma. This is especially relevant because the state incorporated The Chronicles into the curriculum of many public schools and introduced generations of Oklahomans to the histories it narrated.\(^9\)

Nearly every volume of The Chronicles published before World War Two contained something on Native peoples or the “frontier.” These materials contribute to our understanding of the history of the region and its people even as they echoed the narratives of Manifest Destiny and the “inevitable” demise of the Indian race. The most egregious of the articles portrayed Indians as “marauders” attacking innocent settlers, while heroic soldiers protected the pioneers. The more sophisticated articles lamented the “clash of civilizations” that accompanied westward expansion and they critiqued Indian extermination. Several of the articles used the term “massacre” to describe the attacks of Indians upon whites, but used the term “battle” to describe the attacks of the military upon Indians. They generally referred to the events along the Washita as a battle, not as a massacre. Authors mentioned Indians “scalping” non-Indians, but rarely noted the same actions of non-Indians upon Indians. Authors referred to Indians as “wild,” to the

lands of western Oklahoma as “vacant,” and to the short-lived reservations as “wastelands.” Articles pursuing these storylines continued to be published through the 1940s and 1950s. 

While historical societies and territorial magazines reached a growing audience, standard newspapers were read by a wider array of people. Like dime novels and the popular Wild West Shows of Buffalo Bill, the newspapers embraced the sensationalistic narratives of a frontier populated by savage Indians, heroic lawmen, and humble settlers. One example of this can be seen in an article from the *KC Star*, dated 3 December 1908. In “Custer’s Oklahoma Fight: An Old Scout Goes over the Washita Battlefield,” the author speaks with Ben Clark, the Chief of Scouts for Colonel George Armstrong Custer in 1868. Clark had a lot to say about the violence of the Cheyenne and the heroism of Custer. According to Clark, Custer “suppressed one of the most powerful Indian uprisings that ever menaced the Western Frontier.” Years after he left the military, he became an historical interpreter at Ft. Reno, a role founded upon his legitimacy as a Scout and “eye-witness,” which solidified his narrative of the events. Clark took a reporter from *The Star* to the site, which was on a farm owned by G. F. Turner, a merchant from Cheyenne. Clark’s version of the event cast Custer in a forgiving light and emphasized infanticide and the “mutilation” of U.S. troops by Cheyenne and Arapaho. He also noted a “war dance” performed by the Cheyenne after “scalping” troops. 

While similar accounts about Washita emerged in publications in Oklahoma and the Plains, some local groups expressed a sincere interest in commemorating the site and the event. As early as 1910, residents of Cheyenne tried to mark the site with a stone engraved monument. After a few initial attempts, local politics, financial constraints, and the demands of daily life postponed efforts. Dorothy Alexander, a longtime resident of Western Oklahoma, recalled hearing about a women’s group that tried to establish a monument or set aside land in the 1920s in recognition of the battle/massacre. Bob Duke, managing director of the Black Kettle Museum confirmed that memory. Duke said that a women’s club in the 1930s wanted the site to be included in the National Park system. He noted that preservation of the site was one of their founding charter issues, but said that the Great Depression sidelined their efforts.

To the Cheyenne Star and regional newspapers contained stories covering similar local efforts to commemorate the “frontier heritage” of Western Oklahoma, and attract tourists simultaneously. On 6 February 1930, the Star reported on a meeting between the Secretary of the Isaak Walton League of Oklahoma, Mr. Hill, and the State Game Ranger, Mr. Mabry, as well as citizens of Hammon, who were interested in a monument to the Washita “Battle.”

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81 “Custer’s Oklahoma Fight: An Old Scout Goes over the Washita Battlefield,” *KC Star*, Photocopy, Folder 4, Box 1, Mary Jane Ward Papers, Oklahoma History Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Clark was probably referring to the tragic decision by some Native people to kill their children when faced with their own deaths and their child’s abduction. No doubt this happened, but the rates of infanticide may not have been as high as reported by non-Indians. Allegations of infanticide by non-Indians proved their alleged savagery.

82 Interview with Bob Duke, 11 June 2012, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Loretta Fowler, report, p. 48.

83 They referred to it as a battle.
group believed that if they could dam the Washita River and create a game refuge and lake, it would make for “one of the finest playgrounds in the entire West,” while protecting the “early history of our country.”\(^8^4\) The plan failed but others cropped up. In December of 1930, U.S. Congressman Jim McClintic introduced a bill asking for an appropriation of $10,000 to establish a national landmark on the Washita. The proposed monument would be “dedicated to the memory of those who lost their lives in the Battle of the Washita” and in particular to “honor Chief Black Kettle, esteemed member of the Cheyenne Indian Tribe.”\(^8^5\)

As these efforts unfolded in the 1930s, one particular event caught the attention of people throughout the Cheyenne and Anglo communities in West Oklahoma. On November 27, 1930, the town of Cheyenne witness one of a small handful of reburial ceremonies for the remains of ancestors who died at Washita. The skeleton, publicly referred to as the “Unknown Indian Soldier,” was found by Judge Cunningham sometime in 1915 on the C.G. Miller farm. According to the *Cheyenne Star*, “The bones have been preserved throughout the years and in September last, they were claimed by the Indians and [the] request [was] made that they be interned on the battlefield.”\(^8^6\) The ceremony was organized by Cheyenne tribal members, and Chief Magpie, a survivor of the attack, gave the blessing. His speech captivated the nearly 5,000 attendees who must have been shocked when he forgave General Custer for the deaths of his people. Wrapped in a blanket to protect him from the cold winds, Magpie reportedly asked “the white man to look charitably upon the Indians of the past and to deal now with them with justice.” The event included a local high school marching band, a dozen speakers (including C. J. Brill, Secretary of the Park Association of the State of Oklahoma; and J. B. Thobun of the Oklahoma Historical Society), and a full military salute from the American Legion. The ceremony was sponsored by the Kiwanis Club and the Platonic Club of Cheyenne. Organizers hoped that it would help raise awareness of the deaths on the Washita and perhaps galvanize support for the creation of a historic site or commemorative monument in their memory.\(^8^7\)

Commemoration of the event was part of a growing interest in Oklahoma history and a national trend towards historic preservation. State agricultural fairs often contained “historical reenactments” of battles and massacres, and they typically followed the format popularized by Buffalo Bill. Anniversaries of the land runs, the establishment of towns, and even Fourth of July parades incorporated the popular narratives of the frontier past. Indeed, the state of Oklahoma helped construct these public memories through the Oklahoma Historical Society. Following the lead of groups dedicated to historic preservation, the state began responding to the “neglect and destruction of sites and buildings important to the material and cultural development of the state.” In 1934 the Oklahoma Historical Society purchased the barracks at old Fort Gibson, a military outpost in the Three Forks area that date back to 1824. That success contributed to the acquisition of Sequoyah’s home site near Sallisaw, which was initially protected by a cover

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\(^8^4\) “Battle Site may Become a Park: Site of Battle of the Washita May become National Park and Game Refuge,” February 6, 1930, *The Cheyenne Star*, in Wessner Papers.


\(^8^6\) “Indians Will be in Full Charge: Unknown Indian Soldier’s Remains to be Buried on Battlefield November the 27th, November 20, 1930, *The Cheyenne Star*, in Wessner Papers.

\(^8^7\) One must wonder about the number of attendees as 5,000 people seems to be an exceptionally high number. “Indians Will Be in Full Charge: Unknown Indian Soldier’s Remains to be Buried on Battlefield November the 27\(^\text{th}\), November 20, 1930, *The Cheyenne Star*, in Wessner Papers.
With this discussion of Cheyenne life in the early twentieth century and an analysis of efforts to remember the incident along the Washita, we see several patterns at work. The Cheyenne people tried to hold onto their lands and cultures while the federal government and territorial groups opened up their reservation, allotted their land, and promoted the land run. As Cheyenne were marginalized in the twentieth century, non-Indian organizations and institutions crafted a popular narrative of an imagined frontier past set in the nineteenth century. These associations constructed a plotline of savage Indians, heroic soldiers, and hearty pioneers. More staid entities such as the Oklahoma Historical Society and the state of Oklahoma contributed, but in a less direct manner, to the general narrative of the events in 1868. Importantly, this narrative of the past took root as Cheyenne tribal members in the present protested land loss, faced prohibitions on their traditions, and negotiated the modern world of wage labor, private property, and public education. Non-Indians were more interested in the “historical Indians” that they had constructed than the real Indians living next to them. By contrasting these two images from the early twentieth century—Cheyenne struggling to survive in the modern world and the crafting of an imagined past based on myths and stereotypes—we better understand the significance of the establishment of the Washita Battlefield National Historic site in the late twentieth century.

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88 Oklahoma Battlefield Commission Report, 12.
Section III: Post-War Oklahoma, Historic Preservation, and Remembering Washita

The United States changed considerably after World War II. Having survived sacrifices of the Great Depression and the violence associated with a global conflict of unprecedented proportions, Americans were ready to enjoy their victories and embrace a future of social mobility. Many Americans partook in this new era of prosperity and leisure despite concerns about post-War demilitarization and anxieties associated with the atomic era and the Cold War. By the early 1950s, suburbs attracted new middle class families with disposable income, the federal government linked the states with the Eisenhower National Highway System, and summer-time vacationers explored National Parks and Monuments. Americans reveled in new technologies and growing abundance, but they also contemplated the histories that were fading from memory as national policies promoted urban renewal, and as rural landscapes were being transformed into planned communities and shopping centers.89

Oklahomans were equally ambivalent about these post-War trends. While many embraced the new economic opportunities, they were also startled at the impact of wartime industrialization and postwar development. Historical buildings, old barns, homesteads, and memories of important events from the nineteenth century were being swept away in the name of progress. Many residents began to fear the loss of the historical identity associated with the disappearance of these cultural resources. Responding to this growing concern about neglect and memory loss, institutions such as the Oklahoma Historical Society and the state Planning and Resources Board began to add historic sites and museums to their pre-existing educational outreach and public planning programs. Early efforts to address public history resources began in the 1950s and accelerated in the 1960s, as the Civil War Centennial Celebration (1961-1965) raised awareness about historic battle sites across the state. This movement to identify, catalogue, and protect historic sites gained momentum as Oklahomans and their counterparts in other states reacted to poorly planned urban renewal projects and short-sighted growth.90

Post-War Preservation and Commemoration

The Washita Battlefield site gained prominence as statewide efforts to preserve the histories and cultures of Oklahoma expanded. The state supported several initiatives during the 1950s that reflected the growing interest in historic commemoration and the history of Custer’s attack on the Cheyenne in 1868. The first effort mirrored those embraced by states across the nation. Beginning in 1949 and continuing into the 1950s, the Oklahoma Historical Society and the Oklahoma Department of Transportation installed historical highway markers on roads across the state and several commemorated the Cheyenne warriors and U.S. soldiers who died in 1868.91 These markers sought to attract the attention of the growing number of tourists who were interested in history just as much as they were focused on leisure and relaxation.92

The second and larger effort to commemorate the Battle of the Washita included the Black Kettle Museum, which was established in 1958 by the Oklahoma Department of Tourism and Recreation. Sue Shotwell served as the first curator of the museum, which was a short

89 Kevin Fernlund (Ed.) The Cold War American West (University of New Mexico Press, 1998).
91 There are hundreds of markers across the state, but a few in western Oklahoma include: the Chisholm Trail (Enid), the Santa Fe Trail, the Route 66 Will Rogers Highway (Clinton), the first Washita County Court House (Cloud Chief), Seger Colony (Washita County), and Ft. Reno (El Reno).
92 Battlefield Commission Report, 56.
distance from the present Washita National Park Service Headquarters. It contained artifacts from the battle as well as a sizeable diorama of Black Kettle’s village before the attack. The diorama was nine feet by four feet in size, and depicted the Seventh Cavalry charging into Black Kettle’s camp along the Washita. Norman artist H. W. Klippel was commissioned by the Industrial Development and Parks Department of the state of Oklahoma to design and paint the diorama in preparation for the centennial of Black Kettle’s death.  

The museum was the most visible commemoration of the attack along the Washita for several decades. After Sue Shotwell, Mae Sue Bright became curator and she oversaw the collections and staff until the late 1980s. Dorothy Alexander, a lawyer, poet and storyteller who grew up in the region and was involved with the establishment of the National Historic Site, recalled that it was “sort of a little you know, Granny’s old closet” for years until the Oklahoma Historical Society took it over. According to Dr. Bob Blackburn, who served as the Deputy Director of the Oklahoma Historical Society in the 1990s, “Mae Sue had been hired in the early days because someone in town knew her, and the [state] Senator said hire her. ‘That’s the way it was done in those days, and Mae Sue was still there’” through the late 1980s.

The last important development in the decade was a 1958 “National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings” by the federal government, which included an assessment of the Washita Site. The report placed Washita under the theme “Military and Indian Affairs,” but did not suggest it for preservation, claiming that the Ft. Sill site better represented the historical importance of the Indian Wars and frontier conflict. Although another report published in 1970 concluded that the site may have been overlooked due to the sheer number of sites investigated, the 1958 National Survey did nonetheless acknowledge the significance of Washita. This precedent helped place the Washita site in the institutional memory of the National Park Service, and helped build its credibility as a potential national historic site.

The 1960s brought several successful attempts to gain recognition for Washita. As noted previously, the impact of urbanization and renewal projects on long-neglected historic resources spurred sentiment in favor of preserving those buildings and cultural sites. In parallel with statewide efforts to protect locations of significance, the citizens of Elk City moved forward to protect the Washita Battlefield. On 30 January 1964, Mrs. Bess Thornton, President of the Elk City Chamber of Commerce, suggested to the visiting Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall, that the Washita Battlefield site become a unit of the National Park Service. With the assistance of members of the Oklahoma Congressional delegation, the Elk City group obtained a meeting with Udall while he was on a previously scheduled trip through the region investigating potential historic sites. His interest in the site dedicated to “cultural conflict” on the “Indian frontier” was part and parcel of the first steps toward preserving the Washita site.

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94 Interview with Dorothy Alexander, 20 February 2012, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 9.
95 Interview with Dr. Bob Blackburn, 1. Blackburn could not recall which Senator suggested the hiring of Mrs. Bright; “New Landmark Denotes Battle of Washita History at Site Near Cheyenne,” Sunday, November 24, 1968, Elk City Daily News, Elk City, Oklahoma, in Betty Wessner Personal Files.
97 William E. Brown, “Washita Battlefield: The National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings” (U.S. Department of the Interior, July 1964), 3. Brown mentions the 1958 report in his survey, and his survey says that the report took place in “1958/9.” I did not find any additional mention of this report. It is not clear how Thornton and the Elk City chamber of commerce were able to convince the delegation to invite Udall to visit western Oklahoma.
This was an important meeting that facilitated additional discussions about preserving the site as a unit within the NPS. On 17 February, Secretary Udall returned and met with seventeen local and regional supporters for the project, in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Udall hoped that the NPS would investigate the site’s potential, especially since members of the Oklahoma congressional delegation supported the proposal. That degree of support for a historic property was rare and Udall hoped to capitalize on the recent momentum to bring the site into the NPS.98

With Secretary Udall expressing support for the site, proponents enjoyed several small but significant successes.99 Robert M. Utley, Regional Historian for the National Parks Service, travelled to Elk City on 25 April to meet with Congressman Victor Wickersham, Mrs. Thornton, and a large group of western Oklahoma business and political leaders about the site. Led by an attorney from Cheyenne, Harry C. Chapman, the group visited the site. William H. Brown participated and was assigned by Utley to write a report on the battle. Brown’s report, Washita Battlefield: The National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings, was one of a handful of projects completed by the federal government after WWII, in an effort to contextualize the battle and explain its significance for Indian-White relations. Brown’s report also provided support for the establishment of a national monument or historic site in commemoration of the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and U.S. soldiers who died at the site. This survey provided baseline historical data as well as a solid narrative that anchored ensuing policy debates about the site.100

These efforts were part of a national shift in policies associated with historic preservation that was reflected in new NPS policies. The implementation of the Mission-66 (1956-1966) program of the National Park Service to improve visitor centers and interpretive services, also provided support for the Historic American Buildings Survey, and the National Historic Landmarks and National Register of Historic Places programs.101 Washita became a National Historic Landmark in 1965 and the federal government automatically placed it on the National Register of Historic Places in 1966, after Congress passed the National Historic Preservation Act. The Act stipulated that “the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people.” The Act was the culmination of decades of work dating back at least to the Antiquities Act of 1906, which recognized the importance of archeological and historic sites for the nation’s heritage. The time seemed right for such legislation considering the social and cultural changes faced by the country, combined with, according to the Act, “the ever-increasing extensions of urban centers, highways, and residential, commercial, and industrial development” that threatened to destroy historical sites.102

The application forms for Washita included important information regarding the site and the submission and approval process. Unfortunately, the initial paperwork associated with the nomination of Washita for National Register was somewhat difficult read and interpret, so the

99 Other than the survey by Brown, I am not aware of documentation confirming Udall’s support for the site. I would argue that he supported the site but wanted the advocates at the state and national level to move through the standard procedures for proposing a site.
102 An Act to Establish a Program for the Preservation of Additional Historic Properties throughout the Nation, and for Other Purposes, Approved October 15, 1966 (Public Law 89-665; 80 STAT.915; 16 U.S.C. 470)
Park Service revised and rewrote the original application and approval forms decades later. This official documentation, rewritten in 1976, states that the “essential features of the site are generally unchanged,” although there were some human alterations near the battle site—farms, roadways and railroad easements—along the six miles of the Washita River under consideration. The document states that twelve miles (7,680 acres) were originally part of the application for Landmark status. The nomination referred to the event itself as an illustrative example of the “cultural collision between the white man and Indian,” each of which represented “diametrically opposed philosophies” that were ultimately irreconcilable.  

While the new legislation did not result in Washita becoming a unit of the NPS, the laws hinted at the shifting attitudes within the NPS towards monuments and historic sites. Jerry Rogers recalled these evolutionary changes while first working for the NPS in the 1960s. Rogers was born and raised “just across the State line in a little town called Vega, barely inside Texas on Interstate 40.” His long career with the NPS began as a graduate student at Texas Tech in the History Department, when he landed a seasonal job at Fort Davis National Historic Site, in 1965. While working at Fort Davis he met Robert Utley, who had already become a premier historian of the American frontier. Rogers also met William Brown when Brown was working on the survey of the Washita site. Around 1966, Utley invited Rogers to work in Washington D.C. when the National Historic Preservation Act and the National Register were becoming the law of the land. Rogers had a front row seat to the early years of the new policies, and he recalled how Washita was already being considered for preservation by the NPS. In 1968, he and Utley took a trip from Dallas to Denver, and stopped at Camp Supply, Washita, Ft. Dodge, and other sites associated with the Indian Wars of the Southern Plains. Both agreed that Washita would have made a great national monument, if not a national park. 

When the federal government passed the Historic Preservation Act and included Washita in the National Register of Historic Places, the citizens of Oklahoma were primed to embrace historic preservation. Much of the new responsibility fell onto the Oklahoma Historical Society, which received grants for preservation and the expansion of its acquisition and restoration of historic buildings and cultural properties around the state. The OHS began managing numerous sites that citizens of the state believed were important to their cultural heritage. Military posts such as Fort Washita and Fort Towson were purchased, stabilized, and opened for public tours and educational programs. Indeed, by 1980 the OHS owned more than 100 historic properties.

1968: A Pivotal Year

As these local, statewide, and national discussions about historic preservation continued to gain momentum, the 100th Anniversary of the Battle of the Washita sought to commemorate the event with a reenactment of the confrontation, and enhancements to the rest stop near the battle site, where a large engraved stone monument recounted the attack in 1868. In 1968 the state of Oklahoma made enhancements at the rest stop adjacent to the large stone engraved monument dedicated to the battle. The Oklahoma Industrial Development and Park Department, which oversaw the roadside rest stop and picnic bench, added a circular covered memorial

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104 Interview with Jerry Rogers, 8 August 2012, Santa Fe, New Mexico.
105 Battlefield Commission Report, 14. Ft. Towson was established in 1824 by the U.S. military to reduce violence between Indians and settlers near present day Hugo, Oklahoma. Mention of sites across the state provides context for the role of the Oklahoma Historical Society in preservation of culturally significant properties.
behind the engraved granite monument. Visitors could walk to the memorial and “get an
elevated view of the battle site and pick out where Black Kettle’s village stood, where the troops
came from and locations of the several skirmishes that made up the fight.”

On 24 November 1968, in commemoration of the centennial anniversary of the Battle of
the Washita, the state held an event introducing the new memorial to the general public.
Hundreds of residents from Roger Mills County and western Oklahoma, including Cheyenne
tribal members, attended the unveiling of the additions, enjoyed a parade and barbeque, and
watched a reenactment of the Battle that took place a hundred years ago along the banks of the
Washita River. The reenactment stoked emotions among Cheyenne and Arapaho who had to this
point remained on the sidelines of discussions about national monument status.

Echoing the early twentieth century Wild West Shows of Buffalo Bill, the U.S. 7th
Cavalry Association Grand Army of the Republic reenacted the incident from 1868. The
reenactment sought to commemorate the “clash of cultures” that unfolded along the Washita, but
organizers were not prepared for the responses of Cheyenne participants, many of whom had
ancestors that died in the confrontation. The Cheyenne were shocked by the “realistic” aspects
of the re-enactment and the attendant gunfire, smoke, soldiers, horses, and noise tied to the
charge of the 7th Cavalry Association into the camp. To the Cheyenne in the camp, it was
disturbingly similar to the stories told by their relatives about that tragic day.

The reenactment left an indelible mark on many Cheyenne and Arapaho, such as Chief
Lawrence Hart, who, along with members of his family, participated in the event. Hart
recounted how he and his family agreed to portray their ancestors in this modern representation
of the attack on Black Kettle’s camp. Hart had his family in a teepee “awaiting” the arrival of
the actors playing the role of the Seventh Cavalry, but, much to his surprise, the reenactors swept
into the camp firing their weapons (loaded with blanks), yelling at the Cheyenne and Arapaho
participants in the camp. This shocked Hart and his family because the plan had been for the
soldiers to come in much later and without a full cavalry charge, and without weapons firing.
According to Bob Blackburn, the actors portraying the soldiers decided to invade the camp
early than planned, with guns firing, because they wanted the Cheyenne and Arapaho to be
surprised. Hart recalled how his daughter broke down in tears and was frightened for her life.

The 1968 reenactment is still remembered not only by Chief Hart and his family but other
Cheyenne and Arapaho traumatized by the historical legacy of November 27, 1868. The
reenactment brought into focus the long-standing grief of tribal members, but it also revealed
moments of reconciliation and cross-cultural healing. When the reenactment ended, Hart and
several tribal members met with the group portraying Custer and his troops. Nearly one hundred
years after the deaths of their ancestors, the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and great-grandsons of the 7th
Cavalry faced each other. Chief Hart bestowed upon Harvey West, Captain of the Regiment, a
finely woven blanket, which West placed upon his shoulder. West drew his saber and gave Hart
a crisp salute, did an about-face, and quietly walked away. Captain Eric Golf, also a descendant
of the cavalrymen, offered Chief Hart his “Gary Owen” pin. As Hart accepted the gift, Golf told
Hart and his fellow tribal members, “never again.” With these powerful gestures, the two groups

107 “New Landmark Denotes Battle of Washita History at Site Near Cheyenne,” Sunday, November 24,
1968, Elk City Daily News, Elk City, Oklahoma, Betty Wesner Personal Files, Newspaper Clippings.
108 “New Landmark Denotes Battle of Washita History at Site Near Cheyenne,” Sunday, November 24,
1968, Elk City Daily News, Elk City, Oklahoma, Betty Wesner Personal Files, Newspaper Clippings.
109 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 21 February 2012, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Interview with Chief
Lawrence Hart, 14 November 2011, Clinton, Oklahoma.
embraced. Decades later, when work had begun in earnest to garner support for the creation of a site, Chief Hart recalled how the events of 1968—the reenactment, the exchange of the blanket, the salute, and the offer of the pin—each represented the potential for cooperation, trust, and respect that sat at the heart of commemorating Washita.\textsuperscript{110}

The third event of 1968 was the discovery of human remains, probably Cheyenne, associated with the attack in 1868. Tribal members agreed to a reburial ceremony that would provide a proper spiritual resting place for the Cheyenne killed in the attack.\textsuperscript{111}

\section*{Waning Interest in Preservation}

In contrast to the crucial series of events in the 1960s, the 1970s and early 1980s brought little movement towards recognition of Washita. The only noteworthy step towards preservation during this period was a 1970 National Park Service study on the Washita, titled “NPS Alternative Study for Washita Battlefield.”\textsuperscript{112} The study proposed that the “Washita Battlefield be included in the National Park System for its high academic significance, impeccable site integrity, and exciting interpretive potential.” Initial goals included the preservation of 800 acres in federal ownership and an additional 2100 acres in “scenic easements” to protect the “historic resources and surrounding setting.” The study outlined the possible mission of the site, to “1.) Tell the story of the Washita Battle; 2). Interpret how the Battle related to the formulation of national policy to find more humanitarian means of solving Plains Indian wars; 3). Offer an unstructured form of interpretation where the visitor could derive, in a philosophical sense, what his visit to Washita has meant to him.”\textsuperscript{113} Initially the NPS hoped to build a visitor facility, parking lot, and interpretive trail directly adjacent to the site near the engraved granite monument and covered picnic area. The study suggested the construction of an auto-path or trail for cars to drive through that took visitors into the actual camp of Black Kettle as well as the larger battlefield landscape. The “to scale” replica of the site would have included life-size sculptures of Cheyenne and Arapaho families, as well as the invading forces of Custer and his Seventh Cavalry. The study also listed the topographical, climactic, economic, cultural, and historical resources of the region surrounding the site; and it provided valuable data regarding the land ownership and status of plots that would be impacted if the project went forward.\textsuperscript{114}

Lastly, the study offered a useful explanation for why the Washita site was not protected by the NPS during previous considerations of its historical significance (1958 and 1964). The author states that the following two factors kept the site from being categorized as having “exceptional value” by the NPS: nearby Ft. Sill was recommended for this classification because it reflected many similar historical events; and the tremendous number of sites under consideration for “Military and Indian Affairs” led to Washita being overlooked. The study concluded with a ringing endorsement for preservation of the site by the NPS.\textsuperscript{115}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{110} Interview with Bob Blackburn, 21 February 2012, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Interview with Chief Lawrence Hart, 14 November 2011, Clinton, Oklahoma. DVD recording of official commemoration of the opening of the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, 1 November 1997, in offices of WBNHS.
\item \textsuperscript{111} Interview with Chief Lawrence Hart.
\item \textsuperscript{112} NPS Alternative Study for Washita Battlefield, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, March 1970.
\item \textsuperscript{113} The approach to interpretation has changed in the decades since this statement.
\item \textsuperscript{114} NPS Alternative Study for Washita Battlefield, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, March 1970. The Report stated that there were five owners impacted if NPS sought an 800 acre site.
\item \textsuperscript{115} NPS Alternative Study for Washita Battlefield, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, March 1970, Appendix B.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Events during the 1970s—the Vietnam War, Watergate and the OPEC crisis—overshadowed public projects protecting historic events and cultural resources. The weak economy of the era profoundly impacted Oklahoma and reduced the funds that would have supported such efforts. The 1976 Bicentennial of the American Revolution reminded Americans of their past and sparked interest in historical reenactment, but this trend was weakened by the tumultuous events across the country. In short, local and statewide groups made little progress towards the establishment of a National Historic Site for Washita until the following decade.

Economic troubles during the early 1980s were devastating to the oil and gas industry of Oklahoma. Bob Blackburn recalled how banks collapsed, land values plummeted, and families in western Oklahoma who had previously sold their land for thousands of dollars, could not receive two hundred, even with mineral rights. Blackburn said that “Ranching was in the tank. Oil and gas were non-existent. The price of oil got down to $10 a barrel in these years.” In light of what many experts termed a “Second Great Depression,” the country witnessed a shift in the basis of the rural economy, as oil and gas, and farming and ranching became increasingly difficult to maintain. According to Blackburn, “People were looking for something, [they were] a little desperate.” In retrospect, he observed that “If it had been good times probably that would have changed the way all of this [Washita Battlefield National Historic Site] came about.”

The stagnant economy reduced funds for preservation projects but it also caused Oklahomans to investigate alternate industries such as historical tourism. This unexpected turn towards historical tourism was a boon for advocates of the Washita site.

During the 1980s the Cheyenne tribe also became involved with cultural and historical preservation, and the Washita site was central to their interest. In 1982, Cheyenne leaders met with the OHS to discuss Washita as a national historic site. Jerry Rogers believed that their commitment was tied to the federal government’s advocacy for Tribal Historic Preservation Officers and its work with tribes to submit sites to the National Register. According to Rogers,

We [the NPS] encouraged tribes to develop Tribal Preservation Officers, and to do things that were counterpart to what the State Historic Preservation Officers had been doing. And even though there was an innate movement among Indian Tribes to begin to focus more on their heritage and to recapture some of what was lost or was threatened, I believe that our work from the National Register played a fairly significant role in generating tribal – successful Tribal Preservation Programs across the country. And that began to create not just tribal interest in nominating places to the National Register, which they did, and not just in preserving their own historic places for themselves and for the sake of their own culture, but also enlarging and correcting the fairly limited perspective that the National Park Service had been applying to various historic sites it already had, such as what was then called Custer Battlefield.

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116 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 21 February 2012, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Dr. Blackburn believed that the dire economic condition of Oklahoma led many people to search for new sources of revenue and ways to make a living, thus the historic site and the National Park Service seemed attractive.
118 Interview with Jerry Rogers, 8 August 2012, Santa Fe, New Mexico.
As the Cheyenne grew interested in historic preservation, so did many groups across the state of Oklahoma. Perhaps the most significant event of the pre-1990 era that helped set the stage for the “final push” to establish a Washita as a unit of the NPS was the first reenactment in 1988 of the Battle of Honey Springs, fought on 17 July 1863, in Indian Territory. Organized by the OHS, more than 250 people took part in the reenactment of this important engagement from the Civil War in Indian Territory. More than 20,000 observers made the event a success, helped to popularize the practice of “living history,” and raised awareness about the Civil War and “Indian War” Battlefields in Oklahoma.\(^{119}\)

Due to the events, programs, policies and initiatives dating back to the 1950s, the stage was now set for the intensive movement to create the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site in the 1990s. The Black Kettle Museum was a longstanding local institution that taught visitors about the confrontation in 1868. This, along with the picnic area, overlook, and granite engraved monument adjacent to the battle site, represented standard efforts at historical commemoration. The 1960s brought a surge in interest in historical preservation through the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act and the creation of the National Register of Historic Places. This legislation benefitted Washita. Following on the heels of these developments, the One Hundredth Anniversary of the attack in 1968 brought the event into the foreground of statewide preservation efforts, and the re-creation of the battle raised awareness throughout the public. Although preservation stalled in the 1970s and early 1980s, the Oklahoma Historical Society, the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, and a few groups on the state and national level quietly moved forward their efforts. Importantly, the decade closed with one of the most significant displays of public history: the reenactment of the Civil War Battle of Honey Springs. This event sparked Oklahomans’ interest in Civil War history and the closely related “Indian Wars.” Taken together, the events of the post-World War Two era set the foundation for the movement in the 1990s to create the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site.

SECTION IV: 1990s and the Creation of the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site

Compared to the establishment of most historic sites, the creation of Washita moved forward quickly in the 1990s. The previous efforts of groups during the twentieth century laid the foundation for the efforts that geared up in 1990 and resulted in the opening of the site in 1997. During the early 1990s residents of western Oklahoma were familiar with campaigns to preserve the Washita Battlefield and they were not surprised by the recent attempt. Some were especially excited about the revenue it might create through a boost in local tourism. Others were worried about the size and scope of the site, the process by which land would be transferred, and potential control over natural resources by the federal government.

The effort in the 1990s succeeded because of a coalescence of local, state, and national events and trends that had not existed previously. Shifts in policies and affairs pertaining to Native Americans were part of this context. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) and the Five Hundredth Anniversary of Columbus (1992) landing in the Western Hemisphere provoked greater awareness about Native history and culture. Ongoing national debates about history education standards in public schools, controversies surrounding the commemoration of the Enola Gay and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nakasaki, reparations for Japanese-Americans due to internment, and the general “culture wars” provoked heated discussions about history, memory and American identity. Moreover, the Oklahoma Congressional delegation was behind it, Frank Lucas was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, the Cheyenne Business Council approved it, the state government promised funding, Republicans members of Congress supported it, and the U.S. and the state of Oklahoma had completed several reports on the historical significance of American battlefields. All of these issues facilitated the creation of the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. 120

Despite the support for Washita, the historic site experienced delays and setbacks that threatened its approval. Local support sometimes turned sour and meetings in and around Roger Mills County revealed suspicion about property values, mineral rights, and condemnation proceedings. In 1994, Congressman Lucas pulled his support for the bill because he could not guarantee protection of property rights. Proponents had to revise a dead bill, garner support, obtain signatures, and secure new funding mechanisms. Everyone went back to the drawing board to rethink the whole process. With various adjustments and creative funding mechanisms, Lucas reintroduced the bill in mid-1996 and Congress approved it in October of 1996. President Clinton signed P.L. 104-333 into law on November 12, 1996 and a ceremonial dedication was held on November 1 of 1997.

Setting the Stage in the Early 1990s

Between 1990 and the introduction of the first Washita Bill in 1994, several events set the stage for the eventual creation of the historic site. In 1990 the Oklahoma legislature transferred control of the Black Kettle Museum and other properties from the Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department to the Oklahoma Historical Society. It released employees and sought a new staff that could modernize and manage the museum. 121 The transfer offered an opportunity

120 Edward T. Linenthal, History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the America Past (Holt, 1996).
121 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 1.
to update the museum, but in 1991 the state legislature cut the budget of the Oklahoma Historical Society by 18%. This reduction resulted in the closure of the Black Kettle Museum.122

In 1991 the Department of Interior created the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) under 16 USC 469K-1 and entrusted its administration with the National Park Service. The ABPP assisted with research into and public awareness of battle sites, and according to its mandate, “works with private landowners, battlefield friends groups, interested community groups, non-profit organizations, academic institutions, local, state, and tribal governments and federal agencies” to protect and preserve battlefield sites across the United States. In 1992, under the leadership of Neil Mangum of the NPS, the ABPP released a report that recognized the Honey Springs Battlefield in Oklahoma as a top priority. This was a boon for the state, and as the supporters of Washita would soon learn, for protecting the site where Black Kettle’s people died. As in Oklahoma, the ABPP encouraged the creation of state commissions across the U.S. to investigate resources and sites.123

During the early 1990s various groups moved forward to protect Washita. In the fall of 1992, Dorothy Alexander attended the 100th anniversary commemoration of the 1892 Oklahoma Land Run. This acreage at one time was a part of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation. While attending the event, she was aware that both local citizens as well as tribal members were discussing how to protect and preserve the Washita site. An “ad hoc” committee had been organized to come up with ways to promote tourism as an alternative revenue source in light of the declining oil and gas industries. She recalled that the Washita discussion was tied to the Coyote Hills Guest Ranch, west of the town of Cheyenne. Coyote Hills was one example of a growing interest in historical tourism in rural areas hit hard by the recent economic down turn.124

Alexander’s support for the historic site was tied to her background and family roots in Western Oklahoma. She was born a few miles from the site and lived in Roger Mills County most of her life. She remembered a connection with the site and had an affinity towards Cheyenne history. She noted that her grandmother was of Native American descent and that this was one of the reasons that she wanted to preserve the area. These personal and family roots in the region gave her a unique insight into the campaign to protect Washita.125

Dorothy Alexander’s memories of the early 1990s and local conversations about Washita and Coyote Hills reveal the many stories that took shape outside of Congressional hearings and political lobbying. One memory that she relayed involved Coyote Hills, Washita, and two friends named Debbie Napier and Cass Nichols. Both were familiar with Washita, and Nichols had family roots in the region dating back a century. While they were working on the Coyote Hills Ranch, Napier told Alexander, Nichols, and several Cheyenne working with them, such as Ed Black, that she had had a “vision” that something important was going to happen at the Washita site. She could not clearly define what she had seen—perhaps it was simply a strong

122 Bob Blackburn, Presentation of Washita Battlefield National Historic Site History, Washita Symposium, 12-14 November 1998, Cheyenne, Oklahoma, DVD Recording, held in WBNHS, Cheyenne, Oklahoma.
123 American Battlefield Protection Program, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/abpp/, Accessed 24 June 2013. Congress passed legislation in 1996 establishing the Program. Phone conversation with Neil Mangum, 5 September, 2013, notes in possession of author. In 1992 the Oklahoma Historical Society received a $1 million Enhancement Fund from the U.S. Department of Transportation. The OHS could use it for projects across the state, such as the Route-66 Museum. Although not a direct benefit to Washita, it reflected a growing federal commitment to historical sites.
124 Interview with Dorothy Alexander, 2.
125 Interview with Dorothy Alexander, 2.
feeling—but the Cheyenne that Napier spoke with were moved by her story. They too had felt something significant would soon happen at Washita. Within a week, the Cheyenne she spoke with had contacted relatives to organize an event to raise awareness about the site. 126 Alexander recalled how Napier’s story about Washita excited members of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. Several tribal members “took up a collection and they bought a buffalo, a live buffalo, and they butchered it and they cured the hide and they built a burial scaffold on the little mesa,” where Napier first thought about the Washita site. The gathering was a moving tribute the deaths in 1868, and it re-ignited interest in preservation. Alexander recalled:

A lot of the peace chiefs came. Archie Hoffman came and Lawrence Hart [joined the event]. And I can’t remember who the other people were but there was a great gathering. A lot of tribal members and a lot of the peace chiefs came. And they had a storytelling and so people got very – the White people got excited about it and so they [tribal members] said, “Well the time has finally come. We must do what we can.”127

Although the tribes expressed an official interest in Washita during the 1980s as the worked to build a Tribal Historic Preservation Office, this little known event reignited their awareness. It primed tribal members to participate in regional discussions about a historic site and it encouraged them to reach out to public officials such as Frank Lucas. Thus, the input of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, as well local residents such as Alexander, Napier, and Nichols, was as crucial to the success of the project as were the Congressional hearings and lobbying.

A few key events in 1992 signaled a shift towards greater support for preserving Washita as a historic site. Honey Springs’ status at the top of the NPS list of battlefields to be protected created a supportive context for recognition of Washita. The NPS Intermountain Region Office out of Denver decided to pursue Washita, and it followed up on the reports, visits, and attempts to preserve the site going back to the 1950s. John Cook, the Intermountain Regional Director, contacted Bob Blackburn at the OHS and told him that even though Honey Springs was on the top of the list, he said that he wanted the NPS to investigate Washita. 128 Cook sent a team led by Doug Ferris and Neil Mangum to meet with Blackburn in his offices at the OHS. Blackburn took them to meet with Chief Lawrence Hart, who introduced them to the Cheyenne Peace Chiefs and members of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Business Council. 129

Blackburn, Hart, Mangum, and Ferris met at a farm owned by the Wesner family. Dale and Betty Wesner bought the land in the 1950s from Betty’s parents, who purchased the land in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Betty and Dale were quite interested in the historical significance of their farm, and Dale was careful to gather and catalogue artifacts such as shell casings and arrows potentially associated with events from the 1860s. Betty advocated for its status as a monument or historic site, so she was excited to meet with Blackburn and his guests. Bob Blackburn remembered the meeting well, “the Park Service folks talked to them [the Wensers], and with Lawrence came the Chairman of the Cheyenne-Arapaho (C-A) Business Committee.

126 Interview with Dorothy Alexander, 2.
127 Interview with Dorothy Alexander, 2.
128 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 4.
129 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 5; phone conversation with Neil Mangum. This meeting between Hart, Blackburn, Ferris and Mangum led to additional meetings and surveys supporting the creation of the Washita site.
The Head of the Peace Chiefs came, Mr. Heap-of-Birds. So I have three Cheyennes, the Wesners, the National Park Service crew, and we take a tour.\textsuperscript{130}

The meeting and tour around the property went well and Blackburn sought the approval of the Cheyenne—particularly Lawrence Hart—to move forward with the proposal for a historic site. He asked to speak with Hart in private, so as not to put him on the spot in front of the entire group. Blackburn recalled that Hart was serious and enthusiastic about preserving the site where his ancestors were attacked by the Seventh Cavalry. The other Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders were equally supportive. With their approval, Blackburn returned to the NPS representatives and the Wesners, and informed them that they had the green light to continue.\textsuperscript{131}

This meeting was especially timely due to the support of key individuals at the federal level. The Director of the National Park Service was Roger Kennedy, who had an interest in preserving the history of rural America. His wife, Frances Kennedy, was a fundraiser for the Conservation Fund, which was established in 1985 to protect America’s natural, cultural, and historical resources. Mrs. Kennedy was the director of the Historic Lands Program and she was dedicated to environmental conservation and battlefield protection, seeing them as interrelated issues. Jerry Rogers was the Deputy Director of the NPS under Kennedy. Rogers was from West Texas, loved the Southern Plains, and was familiar with the Washita site. The support of these individuals helped revive conversations at the national level about protecting Washita.\textsuperscript{132}

In 1993, in tandem with the ABPP, the OHS, local residents such as Dorothy Alexander, and recent efforts within the NPS, the Oklahoma state legislature approved the creation of the Oklahoma Battlefield Preservation and Development Study Commission (Oklahoma Battlefield Commission).\textsuperscript{133} Representative John Bryant of Tulsa raised the idea of a commission to “focus state resources on both short term and long range plans” for historic preservation. With limited debate, the state legislature passed House Bill 1622 creating the Commission and the Governor signed it into law on 24 March 1993. The Commission consisted of the following members: Representative John Bryant was the Chair of the Committee and Senator Frank Shurden was the Vice Chairman. Also serving on the Commission were: Representatives Dusty Rhodes and Betty Boyd, Senators Paul Muegge and Bill Gustafson, Gubernatorial appointees Colonel William Francis and Dr. Daniel Lawrence; Ex-Officio Members were Blake Wade, Executive Director of the Oklahoma Historical Society; Scott Smith, Marketing Manager in the Oklahoma Department of Commerce; Doug Hawthorne from the Oklahoma Department of Tourism and Recreation; and Nathan Hart from the Oklahoma Indian Affairs Commission. Additional key individuals that assisted were: Melvina Heisch, Dr. Stanley Hoig, Neil Mangum, and Chief Lawrence Hart. Bob Blackburn and Debbie Terlip from the OHS conducted the research and compiled the report.\textsuperscript{134}

The mission of the Oklahoma Battlefield Commission was to “pursue the identification, preservation and promotion of battle sites in the state.” The Commission goals were: assess threats to battlefield sites’ integrity, evaluate current efforts of preservation, articulate methods from promoting heritage tourism, investigate resources, and promote community involvement. The Commission was bolstered by a national Civil War Sites Advisory Committee (CWSAC) which sought to do across the country what the Oklahoma Committee aimed to do on a state level. The (CWSAC) was created by Congress in reaction largely to an expensive preservation

\textsuperscript{130} Interview with Bob Blackburn, 6.

\textsuperscript{131} Interview with Bob Blackburn, 6.

\textsuperscript{132} Interview with Bob Blackburn, 6-7.

\textsuperscript{133} The popular name for the commission was the “Oklahoma Battlefield Commission.”

\textsuperscript{134} Battlefield Commission Report, 7.
experience associated with the Battle of Manassas. When the Commission released its findings in 1993, Honey Springs and Washita were favored on the list.\footnote{Battlefield Commission Report, 7.}

These Commissions grew out of an expanding interest in “living history” and historical reenactments of Civil War battles, which were spurred on by the 1976 American Bicentennial battle reenactments across the U.S. In particular, the reenactments of the Battle of Honey Springs in eastern Oklahoma attracted tens of thousands of visitors and, according to the Commission, “benefited the town of Checotah with its highest tax sales revenues ever.” The reenactments taught Americans about their heritage and improved regional tourism.\footnote{Battlefield Commission Report, 8.}

The Oklahoma Commission helped identify potential sites for inclusion in the NPS portfolio of sites dedicated to history and culture. The Commission adopted the “Battlefield Criteria” used by the ABPP and it ranked Washita and Honey Springs as “the top priority in the state and [recommended them] to the Legislature a Concurrent Resolution.” The Commission hoped Congress would include these sites in the NPS, noting that they were “Class A, Priority 1 sites.” Such a resolution would allow the OHS to transfer the property owned by the state (after purchasing or accepting as a donation) to the federal government.\footnote{Battlefield Commission Report, 23.}

In 1994 legislative action on a federal level to preserve Washita began with earnest. One of the most important changes was the election of Frank Lucas to U.S. House of Representatives in a special election, filling the vacant seat of Glen English. Lucas was a state representative from Western Oklahoma and worked on a state version of a Washita bill before moving to the U.S. House of Representatives. The election of Lucas was crucial because he represented Oklahoma District 6, which included the site of the incident along the Washita. Moreover, he was from a well-established ranching family with deep roots in the region, and because of this he understood the importance of protecting the Washita site. He was particularly familiar with earlier failed attempts to preserve the site. Lucas recalled that the “early effort at the site was led by the state of Oklahoma, [and included] a small viewing field area on top of a hill, a little museum in town that was kind of a collection of everything and a little bit of Washita Battle related issues.” But even as a teenager when thinking about Washita, he “understood that we could do better. We just didn’t have the resources, the time or the focus. We could do better.” He was also well-liked by many people and had numerous professional and personal contacts. Lucas went to Oklahoma State University, where Bob Blackburn received his Ph.D., and he grew up knowing the Wesner family. Being a Republican gave Lucas clout with conservatives who were skeptical about transferring private property to federal agencies such as the NPS. Thus, he was uniquely positioned to assist with the preservation of the site at the federal level.\footnote{Interview with Bob Blackburn, 2.}

Although Lucas was only a freshman Representative in 1994, he knew that he had to move ahead quickly before the political winds changed and the Republicans lost control of the House. Looking back at that pivotal year, he understood the gravity of the situation.

I couldn’t tell if ’94 was a fluke or a real change, so not only did I have the property owners who were willing and supportive, but I was in a legislative position in the majority with a focus that there might never again be on this site in western Oklahoma to get it done. So all the stars or the marbles or however you want to describe it were lined up, and I knew I had to move.
The support was there at that moment in the state and federal level. I just had to win the process over.  

The first bill was supported by the NPS, the OHS and the Oklahoma Congressional delegation. The bill combined Honey Springs and Washita for preservation under the stipulations of the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) and the Oklahoma Battlefield Commission. Bob Blackburn had a unique vantage point on the process because he worked in the middle of the local, state-wide, and federal groups interested in the legislation. He recalled that the Oklahoma delegation, which consisted of David Boren and Donald Lee Nickles in the Senate; and Frank Lucas and Mike Synar in the House of Representatives, was a talented group with myriad personal and professional assets. Even though Lucas was a Republican and Synar was a Democrat—they cooperated and backed the bill in Congress.

In March, the delegation introduced legislation in the U.S. House proposing the combination of both parks into one bill. Mike Synar told the Daily Oklahoman, "Making the Honey Springs and the Washita battlefields [into] national parks is an excellent opportunity for Oklahoma to showcase some of its rich cultural history." Senator David Boren (D-Seminole) added that "The cultural diversity of each of these sites makes their preservation even more important" to the state and its residents.

In March of 1994, Blackburn and a small group of supporters travelled to Washington D.C. to meet with the Oklahoma delegation about the bill. House Bill 4821 (H.R. 4821) contained somewhat standard language that, according to Blackburn, stated that the federal government through the National Park Service intended to create a historic site potentially using eminent domain. Blackburn recalled that it angered many of the members of the House and forced a redraft of the bill to clarify that property owners would receive full and fair compensation for their land. This draft was completed in June 1994, and it was one bill—with two titles, one for each proposed site—that supporters testified in favor of to Congress.

Congressman Lucas attended public meetings in and around Cheyenne to discuss the bill and the project with his constituents. The meeting on 18 July 1994 in Cheyenne at the Roger Mills County Courthouse was one of the first times that a full proposal was unveiled to the public. Joining Lucas were Doug Farris, Associate Director of the Southwest Region of the NPS; Dr. Lewis Stiles, President the OHS; and Dr. Bob Blackburn, Deputy Director of the OHS, to answer questions and gauge community support. According to the Daily Oklahoman, the audience was split roughly 50/50 in support for and against the proposal. Congressman Lucas told the newspaper that he believed that his constituents were “cautious” but receptive about the historic site. He told the Daily Oklahoman, “We’d buy 350-400 acres west of the battle site, and seek preservation easements on as many as 2,000 acres. That way, the landowners would agree to keep the land in its present form and not develop it.” Lucas believed that protection of the site was important for the state of Oklahoma and all Americans interested in their past. Lucas said, “This represents such a slice of Oklahoma history, and the angle of the U.S. Army during the Indian Wars. There’s also the consideration of the culture of the Cheyenne Tribe.”

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139 Interview with Congressman Frank Lucas, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 3.
140 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 6-7.
142 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 10.
The July 1994 Congressional Testimony

Roughly one week later, Lucas and other proponents returned to Washington D.C. to testify in support of the Washita site. The testimonies of July 1994 were extremely important, although not everyone supported the bill. The hearing was chaired by Minnesota Congressman Bruce Vento, from his state’s 4th District. Those giving testimony were Dr. Bob Blackburn, Chief Lawrence Hart, Oklahoma Governor David Walters, U.S. Representative Mike Synar, U.S. Representative Frank Lucas, and Jerry Rogers (NPS). Mike Synar spoke eloquently about the significance of the two sites for the array of National Parks across the U.S.:

I believe the history of our great nation can be compared to one of the beautiful Indian blankets in my office; it is made up of hundreds of individual, but tightly woven, interdependent threads. I believe that a full understanding of the history of our nation, particularly events in the frontier West, is not complete without a proper National memorial to the heroic and tragic events that took place on these Oklahoma battlefields. The battles that occurred at Honey Springs and the Washita had a profound and lasting effect upon Indian Territory, now known as the great state of Oklahoma, and the ultimate settlement of the American Southwest.

Jerry Rogers, the Associate Director for Cultural Resources at the NPS, followed Synar with an assessment of each site’s historical significance. Regarding Washita, he commented:

In the broadest context, the Battle of the Washita can be interpreted as a conflict of cultures. The encounter directly resulted from repeated failed understandings between two divergent and dynamic cultures. For the Indians, the after-math of the encounter pushed them into an ever-shrinking domain. With hunting grounds destroyed or replaced by farms and ranches, and iron tracks invading buffalo range, many of the Indian survivors of Washita reluctantly accepted their fate of reservation confinement.

He also summarized the rights of landowners, the process for transferring land and the significance of the site for the NPS.

TITLE II of H.R. 4821 would establish Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. The proposed legislation gives the Secretary of the Interior the authority to acquire lands or interests in lands by donation purchase, or exchange, for the purposes of the park, and to manage the historic site. The bill also provides for the possibility of property owners to retaining a right of use and occupancy for a term of years.

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144 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 11.
145 Federal Document Clearing House Congressional Testimony, July 29, 1994, Friday, TESTIMONY JULY 29, 1994 MIKE SYNARR CONGRESSMAN 2ND DISTRICT, OKLAHOMA HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES/NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS PUBLIC LANDS BILLS.
following acquisition. A general management plan for the proposed historic site would be completed within 3 years of the date funds are made available. This plan, among other things, would address involvement of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribe in the formulation of educational programs for the national historic site.\textsuperscript{147}

Congressman Frank Lucas testified before the subcommittee and drew upon his knowledge of history and the significance of the Washita site.

The Battle of the Washita's message compliments the 367 units in the National Park Service System. Its unique mission will serve as a solemn reminder of the Plains Indian tribes' struggle against reservation confinement and their fight to maintain traditional Indian lifestyles. The diversity of the greatest national park system in the world will truly be enhanced when this National Landmark is made into a National Park. It also must be stated the Battle of Washita site retains much of the same character as it did in 1868 and that it is already a registered National Historic Landmark.\textsuperscript{148}

Governor Walters offered his interpretation of the historical events at Washita and Honey Springs, and spoke eloquently about incorporating multiple perspectives in the popular historical narrative. Walters said, “The impact of both the Civil War and the military conquest of the Southern Plains traditionally has focused on the dominant Anglo-American culture. It is time we give equal recognition to the impact on minorities, both during the period of conflict and following through with the sad legacy of suffering and the struggle for justice and civil rights.” Walters added that Oklahoma was involved in preserving and promoting both sites and assured Congress that it would remain dedicated to the process.\textsuperscript{149}

Chief Lawrence Hart gave a stirring testimony to Congress. He summarized his personal interest in and the efforts of the tribe to preserve the site where his ancestors. He said that the “event of November 27, 1868” has an impact on every Cheyenne living today even if they were not lineal descendants of the victims. He told members of Congress that “This and other stories need to be told.” He assured Congressman Lucas and his colleagues that “I, and the traditional Cheyenne societies and chiefs and our families fully support this effort. Above all else, a national park can be of great benefit educationally to all of us and to future generations.”\textsuperscript{150}

Looking back on the first round of testimony and his initial work with representatives from the American Battlefield Protection Program, Chief Hart remembered it as a “bittersweet

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{147} Federal Document Clearing House Congressional Testimony, 29 July 1994, TESTIMONY JULY 29, 1994 JERRY ROGERS ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR CULTURAL RESOURCES, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE DEPART OF THE INTERIOR HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES/NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS PUBLIC LANDS BILLS.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{148} Federal Document Clearing House Congressional Testimony, 29 July 1994, TESTIMONY JULY 29, 1994 FRANK LUCAS CONGRESSMAN 6TH DISTRICT, OKLAHOMA HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES/NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS PUBLIC LANDS BILLS.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{149} “Agency Backs National Parks At Battlefields,” The Daily Oklahoman July 30, 1994, Chris Casteel, Washington Bureau, p.1}

experience.” He was pleased with the support for preserving Washita and he spoke movingly about Cheyenne history and the significance of the deaths for the generations today. But he was also disappointed that it required revisions to the bill and several years to secure legislation setting aside the land. Nonetheless, the chance to testify in front of Congress galvanized his advocacy for preservation and strengthened his relationships with Lucas and Blackburn. 151

As Congress considered the bill, community meetings revealed a range of opinions about the proposed legislation and the creation of a national historic site from land that was private property. Some residents in Roger Mills County became concerned about the increased presence of the federal government and feared that they would appropriate land, gain control of oil and mineral resources, negatively impact hunting, and marginalize local interests. Others worried about the real or perceived plans to use eminent domain to condemn private property. 152 More than a few simply wanted additional information. Lucas was aware of the anxieties when he held a meeting in the Cheyenne High School gymnasium. He recalled telling his staff,

> When we start this, we’re gonna give every person here five minutes to say his Or her peace, to ask their questions. Everybody gets five minutes. There will be no repeats. We’re not stopping for the bathroom break, and the only thing that will cause an intermission is if someone throws the fire alarm. We are grinding through. 153

The three and a half hour gathering became legendary in the community, but when it was over, someone told Lucas, “You know, that really didn’t seem like all that exciting a meeting.” 154

Bob Blackburn recalled it differently. He marveled at the number of attendees filling up the gymnasium, but worried that they were “out for blood.” While Lucas believed that a third of the people at the meeting opposed the project, a third supported it, and a third hoped to see a brawl, Blackburn discerned a majority were skeptical of what they believed to be a land grab. Blackburn remembered that “It was not quite a lynch party, but it was close.” He admired Lucas for taking fire from constituents, but Blackburn knew that this was a step in the process. 155

The famous meeting at the Cheyenne High School was one of many public discussions about the site. Dorothy Alexander recalled a meeting where Neil Mangum from the NPS was talking with locals at the Okie Café in Cheyenne. Mangum asked attendees, “If this happens, what do you want to see there?” Questions such as this reflected the openness that Alexander thought helped win over residents of Roger Mills County. The NPS also collected surveys and questionnaires to canvass the community most closely associated with the site. 156

Not all attendees fully supported what was shaping up to be an emphasis on the deaths of the Cheyenne and Arapaho. Some hoped that the historic site would stress the military, particularly Major Elliot—who died at Washita—and Lt. Colonel Custer—who later died at Little Bighorn. Gary Scott, the son-in-law of Dale and Betty Wesner, allegedly was one of the most vocal proponents for a “balanced” representation of the military and Custer. Dorothy

151 Interview with Chief Lawrence Hart, 14 November 2011, Clinton, Oklahoma, 1.
152 The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Black Kettle National Grasslands were in the region for decades, but the fears of an increased footprint stemmed from a generalize suspicion of the federal government held by many people in the American West.
153 Interview with Congressman Frank Lucas, 3-4.
154 Interview with Congressman Frank Lucas, 3-4.
155 Interview with Bob Blackburn.
156 Interview with Dorothy Alexander, 15.
Alexander recalled Scott at one of the meetings opining for “big paintings of Custer” at the eventual museum managed by the Park Service. Those paintings did not materialize, but the NPS tried to incorporate the experiences of soldiers involved with the incident on the Washita.

Despite the testimonies in July for Washita, sentiment for the bill changed in the coming months. In August, Mike Synar lost his reelection bid to Republican Tom Coburn, who deleted Honey Springs from the bill. The deletion of Honey Springs was not the only change to new drafts of the bill. In response to the initial size of the site, pressure mounted to reducing the site by a factor of ten from 3,000 acres to nearly 320. A new bill would not protect a 5,000 acre view shed. When finalized, the bill incorporated a state obligation to purchase the land and transfer it to the NPS. Nonetheless, conservative lawmakers refused to appropriate money for the site.

Frank Lucas similarly began to rethink the bill. Although he strongly supported the site in his testimony in July, by early October he was receiving unfavorable responses from constituents. The meeting at the Cheyenne high school gym was split between supporters, opponents, and those who were undecided. In contrast, a tense meeting occurred after Congressional testimony in the late summer of 1994 when he, Blackburn, and representatives from the NPS met for a second time with community members at the Cheyenne County Courthouse. Congressman Lucas recalled that it was a “pretty exciting meeting” because the size and scope of the project was unacceptable to locals. They worried that the 3,200 acre site would hurt property values and reduce land on the tax rolls. Lucas said that the proposed relinquishment of oil and gas rights within the 5,000 acre view shed really “lit up my community.” Lucas decided to draft a new bill to appease residents in Roger Mills County.

Lucas pulled his support for the bill because he wanted his constituents to feel comfortable with the project. Speaking to the Oklahoma Journal Record, Lucas said “As I told the people of Roger Mills County at the outset of this project, I am unalterably committed to preserving the rights of the landowners as well as preserving the colorful history of the area.” He was especially concerned about property rights. He assured his constituents that no lands would be condemned or appropriated through eminent domain. He added, “until and unless the landowners, mineral owners, and community step forward and express their desire for it to proceed, I will not participate in any legislative package which would establish a national park on the site of the Washita Battlefield in Roger Mills County.” In short, the 1994 bill was dead.

Support for a commemorative site at Washita had similarly waxed and waned over the twentieth century, so the recent twists and turns were familiar. Dorothy Alexander recalled how groups cropped up in the mid-1920s to discuss the preservation of Washita, although their efforts were overshadowed by the efforts in the 1990s. As far back as she could remember, “there’s always been some movement to try to establish it as a state or national park, some sort of recognition, and it kind of came in waves.” She added that,

I think in about ’84 or ’85, I can't remember exactly… but a group formed, a

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157 Interview with Dorothy Alexander, 15. See interview with Jeannette and Gary Scott for his views on the battle, Custer and the military, and on the interpretive center in the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site.
158 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 11.
159 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 11.
group of citizens, and explored the possibilities. We even talked to the people at Fort Reno and went to some of their events there primarily to explore what was available or what we could do or where the funding would come from. That group sort of died of natural causes and then in the late '80s it resurfaced. I'd say about '88 or '89.  

These efforts were important because they provide additional context for the ongoing work to create a historic site. They also demonstrate that the bills introduced in the 1990s found resonance in western Oklahoma because people had previously been interested in protecting Washita. When the public meetings and letter writing campaigns gained steam between 1994 and 1996, people joined in because they were already familiar with the issue.

Legislation at the state level moved forward despite delays at the national level. After Frank Lucas won his seat in Congress, Randy Beutler replaced him in the Oklahoma House of Representatives. Beutler grew up in Elk City, a few miles from Lucas’ hometown of Cheyenne. He was a school teacher and a historian with a keen interest in Washita. He was also a Democrat, but, according to Dorothy Alexander, Beutler pursued the issue in a nonpartisan way that even appealed to skeptics. In addition to Beutler, Senator Bob Kerr from Altus was “extremely active,” through his support of the bill in the Senate. Governor David Walters also remained interested in preserving Washita. Lastly, Republican John Bryant from eastern Oklahoma wanted to preserve Honey Springs Battlefield and supported the inclusion of Washita in statewide efforts, building off of his work as Chairman of the Oklahoma Battlefield Study Commission. The bill was signed into law by Governor Walters in the fall of 1994.

Important individuals emerged across the state in support of the process, but few were as important on the local level as Bob Duke. When Lucas and Blackburn first began to collaborate on Washita, Lucas said that he knew someone from the area who might replace the staff at the Black Kettle Museum. Lucas introduced Blackburn to Bob Duke, who had a Master’s Degree in History and who had an interest in Black Kettle, Custer, and Washita. Duke also came from a local family with deep roots in the region, and went to high school with Lucas. When he met Bob Duke, Blackburn said, “…great, he’s the future. We need to pull Bob in. He’s got the professional background. He’s got the local contacts.”

Bob Duke began managing the recently reopened Black Kettle Museum in 1994 and played a prominent role in cultivating awareness about Washita. Duke was born in Elk City, raised in Roger Mills County, and went to school in Reydon and Cheyenne. His wife was the daughter of Dale and Betty Wesner, and he had grown up knowing the Wesner family very well. While serving as the manager of the museum, Duke was President of the Washita Battlefield Historical Society, which served as a “support group….to help encourage the establishment of the National Historic Site. I think I was actually one of the first Presidents of the group.” They published *The Washita Newsletter* beginning in March 1994.

Bob Duke sometimes worked with Dorothy Alexander and the various local committees that cropped up in Roger Mills County. Her thoughts on the establishment of the Washita Battlefield Historical Society differed from Duke’s; she believed that it was established much

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162 Interview with Dorothy Alexander, 1-2  
163 Interview with Dorothy Alexander, 14.  
164 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 9-10.  
165 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 10.  
166 Interview with Bob Duke, 11 June 2012, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 4.
earlier in the 1960s in the wake of the 100th Anniversary of the Battle of the Washita. Regardless, Duke managed the museum, attended public meetings, educated the community on the history of the region, and served as a staunch advocate for the site. He also worked closely with Superintendent Sarah Craighead when she was hired in 1997. Their partnership was helped by the placement of the temporary headquarters for the new historical site in the Black Kettle Museum, where Duke had been working from for several years.

Revising the Bill and Refocusing Efforts

In late 1994 and early 1995 the proponents of the site had to rethink the bill that they had introduced to Congress in 1994. According to Bob Blackburn, 1995 was a time to lick their wounds and get reorganized. Blackburn worked with Lucas, the Oklahoma delegation to Congress, and other advocates to make considerable changes to the bill and their approach to the process. They decided to separate the Honey Springs Battlefield from the Washita proposal, reduce the size and scope of the historic site, solicit matching funds from the state of Oklahoma, solidify the partnership with the NPS, conduct more appraisals of the Wesner property, offer more public meetings, and withdraw any mention of condemnation proceedings. These adjustments would hopefully facilitate Congressional and popular support for the historic site.

As advocates pushed forward and discussed the scope and contents of a revised bill, a few controversial ideas bubbled to the surface. With the conservatism associated with the mid-term elections, Newt Gingrich, and a Republican House of Representatives, legislators had to rethink the use of funds to purchase property for the NPS. Supporters of Washita had to devise a mechanism for transferring land for the historic site. One option that sparked interest was the sale of land around Optima Lake in the Panhandle and the “trade” of the “credits” for land at Washita. Another element included the sale or exchange of land in the Black Kettle National Grasslands, where ranchers leased land and where hunters hunted quail and turkey. Lucas proposed the idea to Gingrich, who believed that Congress would support it.

The Optima Lake and National Grasslands ideas were controversial. The lake was not much of a lake and dated back to a failed 1970s federal reclamation project. According to Bob Blackburn, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers tried to “improve” a much smaller lake with a large dam below the lake in the hopes that water would build up behind the dam. This did not happen. Optima Lake contained less than 5% of the water predicted by engineers and it became a savannah-like federal wildlife refuge of roughly 13,000 acres. The idea involved the sale of Optima Lake land to private citizens and to use those funds to purchase the land around the Washita site. Lucas proposed a similar process for the National Grasslands. He believed that “the Secretary of Agriculture [could] sell the land comprising the Black Kettle National Grassland in Roger Mills County and the Rita Blanca National Grassland in Cimarron County” at fair market value, and use those proceeds to purchase land around Washita. He told the Daily Oklahoman that the plan would “address two primary concerns: landowners near Optima Lake believe the failed project should be abandoned and turned back over to private hands, and people

167 Interview with Dorothy Alexander, 18.
169 Bob Blackburn, Presentation of Washita Battlefield National Historic Site History, Washita Symposium, 12-14 November 1998, Cheyenne Oklahoma, DVD Recording, held in WBNHS, Cheyenne, Oklahoma.
170 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 11; Interview with Congressman Frank Lucas, 8.
in Roger Mills County want a national battlefield site but don't want the federal government taking over thousands of acres for one.” 171

With this new plan, Lucas convened public meetings in December of 1995 to discuss a revised Washita bill that he hoped to introduce. Some residents worried that the proposal would harm the Black Kettle National Grasslands. According to Lucas, “There was some concern that with a park in the area that potentially the park priorities would overtake the grassland priorities, which of course fired up the people who lease the grazing rights.” He received feedback from recreational hunters and businesses that took hunters to the National Grasslands. Quail and turkey hunters were especially worried. Lucas said that the potential legislation “…stirred up the quail hunters and the deer hunters and the turkey hunters because this national grasslands is not one contiguous unit. It’s kind of big and small pieces scattered all over the central part of the county, and it was a concern among the hunting and fishing community – not so much fishing community, but the hunting and sportsmen community – that if the part in effect absorbed control of the grasslands, would hunting – would the agricultural uses go away?”172 This meeting enabled Lucas to explain the processes and hear the concerns of the residents of the county. Above all else, he wanted folks in the region to listen to each other.

Lucas believed that by bringing people together, everyone would realize the complexity of opinions on the project. He hoped that this would calm concerns about his ulterior motives and encourage groups to compromise with each other. Lucas recalled:

The meeting was important to me because I needed for all of the factions to understand and hear each other because as an elected official, I was getting this, “I want it my way. Nothing else matters.” But I needed for everyone to hear that the sports use of the national grasslands was critically important, and the historical perspective and integrity of the site was incredibly important, and they needed to hear each other.173

On the one hand, the meeting seemed to be successful because it demonstrated his commitment to incorporating community comments into the legislation. On the other hand, the meeting was a disaster. As Lucas was learning, Optima Lake and the Grasslands were quite popular to quail hunters who flew in from Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Wichita, and Dallas. The public outcry was significant in opposition to these aspects of the bill.174

Opposition to the land swap idea grew exponentially in the days and weeks. Lucas held another meeting in Guymon, Oklahoma, where more than 150 people opposed the Optima Lake and Grasslands proposal. Lucas told the Daily Oklahoman, “By and large the crowd was overwhelmingly in favor of not selling Optima Lake…an incredible number of folks in Guymon and the Panhandle as a whole regard [it] as a very important hunting and recreation area.” Hunting and outdoor recreational groups were adamant against selling the land. The Oklahoma Wildlife Federation was vocally opposed to the plan. Dr. Doug Jester, the president of the Federation, said, "Oklahomans should be asked what they want before public land in Oklahoma is put up for sale. We also don't think any state should be forced to give up public land before

172 Interview with Congressman Frank Lucas, 4.
173 Interview with Congressman Frank Lucas, 5
174 Interview with Congressman Frank Lucas, 5.
another state could acquire any. We will be letting Oklahoma's congressional delegation know that." In short, Lucas walked into a wall of opposition that forced him to rethink his proposal.\textsuperscript{175}

Blackburn, who attended some of the meetings, recalled how after the land swap became public in December, "All of a sudden, the right people in the right corporations are calling saying you’re by God not selling our hunting land. So they had to drop that. That’s just kind of one of those little stories that didn’t quite work, but it showed that Frank was trying, and it encouraged me to kind of go forward."\textsuperscript{176}

As public dissent grew, Lucas incorporated those concerns into his bill. After tinkering with the bill, he believed that they had reached a consensus. He would delete Optima Lake, decrease the size of the historic site to roughly 320 acres, and he would not alter the National Grasslands. True to his word, the bill that he introduced to Congress—and the bill that it approved in 1996—did not mention a land swap, Optima Lake or the National Grasslands.\textsuperscript{177}

\textit{Petitions and Grassroots Organizing}

As Lucas held community meetings and revised the Washita bill in late 1995, the NPS and OHS oversaw a series of archeology surveys and land appraisals at the Washita Site. These were the second series of survey geared towards collecting data in support of the importance of the site. The archeological team consisted of Doug Scott, who was greatly respected for his work at the Little Bighorn site; Bill Lees, a historical archeologist employed by the OHS; and Bob Rae, the OHS site manager at Fort Supply Historic Site State Park. They found enough objects to persuasively argue that the battle site was indeed located on the Wesner land, and that was sufficient enough for the purposes of federal legislation.\textsuperscript{178}

In early 1996 as the effort to protect the Washita site gained attention, it became clear that it was still a contentious issue. Local groups expressed their support for transferring the land to the NPS, but public meetings also revealed the concerns of county residents about the loss of private property and the growth of a federal presence. Building on the work done by Dorothy Alexander, Bob Duke, Gary Scott, and others, residents began a series of petitions and letter writing campaigns. These were important demonstrations of grassroots support for what had the potential to become a very polarizing issue, considering the skepticism of westerners towards the federal government. To quote Bob Blackburn, “If we don’t have the people of Cheyenne on board, who else is going to be on board?” The Methodist and Baptist churches supported the project, as did the county commissioners, and the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes.\textsuperscript{179}

The letter writing campaign and petition signaled to Congress that residents of Roger Mills and surrounding counties wanted Washita preserved. Regarding the petition, Dorothy Alexander said that they “literally got almost everybody in the county to sign the thing and sent it to Frank [Lucas].” She recalled that the core group consisted of Bob Duke, Archie Hoffman, Debbie Napier, Lawrence Hart, and Ed Black. Alexander was humble about her involvement, “I was not involved in that other than signing the petition and going around and getting some of the signatures but I say the momentum was extraordinary at that time and so it got done.”\textsuperscript{180}
Gary Scott, the son-in-law of Dale and Betty Wessner—and a longtime resident of Roger Mills County—helped to gather signatures and take them to Washington D.C. “I was one of five guys, we carried all them boxes on an airplane to Washington D.C. and lugged them up and down the halls of the Senate and House and took them there and browbeat these guys back to this bill.” He recalled that there were skeptics that did not believe they would gather very many signatures or persuade Congress with a petition. They gathered thousands of signatures from across Roger Mills and surrounding counties. They went to churches, community halls, grocery stores, and anywhere else they could find large groups of people. He recalled, “We organized, we were organized. We were about three hundred strong and we’d have a meeting once a month and we’d kick ideas around, how we were going to get the thing done.”

Gordon Yellowman, a respected Cheyenne chief and tribal member, also recalled his contributions to the campaign to create a historic site along the Washita. He noted with humility, “[I] kinda got involved in this process of the establishment of the park itself. Earlier on, as a chief, it was my role and responsibility to not only represent my people but also to represent the leadership as a chief – a voice of the Council of the Forty-Four. And as one of the four principal chiefs of the Cheyenne Chieftain Council, that allowed me voice and to voice my opinion and to get involved in this establishment of this park.” He said that the conversations within the tribe about the bill brought back complicated emotions and resurrected old wounds. He noted:

> So there was a lot of conversations going back and forth regarding this national park coming into this historic site of our people. And some felt it was very emotional, bringin’ back hurtful memories of the loved ones that were lost there during this engagement. It brought back all of the hurt, the pain, the sorrow, and a lot of the grieving of our loved ones. So when you think of the atrocity itself, the massacre, we all know what really and truly happened. And the Cheyenne people still deal with that today, it’s very painful.

Yellowman said that many of his people worried that a park designation would lead to recreational activities that seemed sacrilegious considering the sacred nature of the site. As it became clear that the goal was to create a historic site, not a park, some Cheyenne became more supportive. As Cheyenne opinion shifted, they became more vocal about consultation and creation of educational materials about the Indians on the Southern Plains. Yellowman was particularly hopeful that the NPS would respect the spiritual traditions of the Cheyenne. “We wanted to pay respects to Chief Black Kettle and his village and his band of people and other tribes that were there.” He asked that NPS think carefully about what it meant to preserve a site where his people died. “We ask that the park respect them. So being sensitive just to stand on hallowed ground; stand on where some of your relatives were killed. That’s very difficult.”

As the bill moved forward in 1996, the Cheyenne Business Council supported the site. Yellowman said that there were few Cheyenne tribal members actively of the bill, but he said that Lawrence Hart and Archie Hoffman were instrumental. Hoffman, the Cheyenne Tribal Council Business Representative, mediated between the tribe and the regional effort to preserve Washita. “He was the one that was the voice and really, really involved in engaging his efforts...”

182 Interview with Gordon Yellowman, 11 July 2012, Concho, Oklahoma, 2.
183 Interview with Gordon Yellowman, 11 July 2012, Concho, Oklahoma, 4.
to not only have the support of the tribal government elected officials but from the community itself. So his job as a business community representative was to provide that voice for his district. And that’s what he did. And he did it well.”

**HR 3099 and Congressional Testimony in 1996**

This public support—especially from the Cheyenne—bolstered the bill that Lucas introduced to Congress in March. Yet, Congress remained hesitant when it considered a new bill in the spring of 1996. Talking with the *Daily Oklahoman* about H.R. 3099, Lucas said, “I've decided establishing the Washita site is still in the best interest of the nation as a whole and Oklahoma, and we're going forward.” But, he added, "It's still going to be a tough sell in the Interior Committee, as tightfisted as my colleagues are.” Lucas told the *Tulsa World*, “This bill is the result of several town meetings and endless hours of discussions with my constituents in western Oklahoma on how to proceed with a proposal to create the park.” The new bill called for $5 million in initial operating costs, but the funds for purchase of the land had to originate from private donations, philanthropic organizations, and the state of Oklahoma.

The July 1996 Congressional hearings were a pivotal moment. Congressman Jim Hansen, R-Utah, oversaw the hearings. Many of those testifying had already spoken to Congress in 1994 and they reiterated the importance of preserving the site. The Oklahoma Historical Society reiterated its plans to purchase the land using state and private funds and transfer the land to the NPS. Bob Blackburn told the subcommittee, “Everyone involved in promoting this project is aware that the days of asking the federal government to step in and undertake a project alone are over.” Blackburn said “local residents have pledged to raise money for the park, and Governor Frank Keating and the state legislature have budgeted money for it.” Speaking for the NPS, Jerry Rogers extolled the features of the site. Rogers said the site possessed a "high degree of historical integrity. The site of the Cheyenne village has not been altered except by periodic flooding of the Washita River," he said. "The surrounding cultural and natural landscapes have not changed significantly since 1868." Incorporating the site into the national system of parks would enable Americans to remember an important moment in their history: “The Washita National Historic Site would preserve significant resources relating to one of the largest battles between Plains Indian tribes and the United States Army on the Southern Plains.”

During these hearings the context had changed due to the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April of 1995. This national tragedy was a source of tremendous grief and sadness for Oklahomans, but it allowed comparisons with Washita. It highlighted the processes of memory, historical trauma, and commemoration that were at the heart of the Washita campaign. Done with sensitivity, one could make the case for preserving Washita by appealing to Americans’ understanding of loss and death associated with the Murrah tragedy. Done incorrectly, it would look like crass opportunism and political grandstanding.

Chief Lawrence Hart was the perfect person to make those connections, and he situated the deaths along the Washita within the context of the recent deaths in Oklahoma City. Hart recounted the events in November of 1868. He narrated what his ancestors had told him and he explained how an event from more than a century ago caused pain and anguish among his

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187 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 14; Interview with Congressman Frank Lucas, 13.
people. He conveyed the trauma felt by the Cheyenne when remembering the invasion of Black Kettle’s camp and compared that massacre with the deaths at the Murrah bombing. He said that Washita was an attack on his family, his people, his community, much like the bombing was an attack on the families in Oklahoma. Parts of his testimony deserve extensive quotation:

I want to reiterate the fact that we Cheyenne people consider the grounds at the site as a place apart from the ordinary. I want to talk briefly about the actual site, the very ground on which the Cheyenne village of Black Kettle's band once stood. The view we hold about that ground can be best understood in the context of the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995. The ground on which the Murrah Federal Office building once stood has a sacredness about it. Oklahoma City Assistant Fire Chief Jon Hansen put it best when he said that the site is “a kind of holy place, for so many died there.

On the first anniversary of the April 19 bombing I participated in a service conducted for families of the victims killed in that awful tragedy. That morning, as the families of victims were gathering for the special service, I went on the actual site, knelt on the ground and touched the earth four times. When the service began, I read the first 42 of 168 names of victims. In the never to be forgotten experience that particular day, I sensed that the Murrah Federal Office Building site and the Washita site to have similarities. First, the site in Oklahoma City is hallowed ground just as the site where the village stood at Washita. It too is a holy place for our ancestors died there. Second, both events were highly traumatic. A discussion of the bombing in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 is highly emotional. It is the same when our people discuss November 27, 1868. 188

It was a stirring and deeply emotional speech. The text was circulated widely and, according to Chief Hart, “it was only then that Congress was able to grasp what we were trying to say…that the Oklahoma City bombing was like the battle at the Washita.” 189

Proponents initially failed to get a hearing in the Senate, but Senator Don Nickles (R-Oklahoma) remained confident that the bill by pass both chambers of Congress. According to Bob Blackburn, Nickles told him “Bob, don’t worry about the Senate. Get it to the House and I’ll get it to the Senate.” That year the Republicans gained control of the Senate, but this improved its chances for passage of the bill because Nickles was a Republican. When Blackburn informed Jerry Rogers about Nickles’ assurance, Rogers was doubtful. Rogers was closely involved with the process and had been Blackburn’s closest associate in the NPS. He believed that it would take Nickles several years to move the bill through a Republican Congress. 190

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188 Federal News Service, 26 JULY 1996, PREPARED TESTIMONY BY LAWRENCE H. HART BEFORE THE HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS ON "WAHITA BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE ACT OF 1996."
189 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 14; Interview with Chief Lawrence Hart, 14 November, 2011, Clinton, Oklahoma, 22; Chris Casteel, “Washita Battlefield Bill Praised,” Daily Oklahoman, 26 July 1996.
190 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 14-15.
The Bill is Passed and Washita is Created

Approval by the Congress of Public Law 104-33 came surprisingly fast considering the initial lukewarm response. Blackburn received the good news in October of 1996, when Jerry Rogers contacted him. Rogers said that Senator Nickles held up passage of an Omnibus Land Bill (a National Park Service Omnibus bill) until the Senate approved authorization for Washita on October 4. Both Rogers and Blackburn were astonished. When Lucas heard the good news, he told reporters from the Daily Oklahoman, "I'm pleased to see that the U.S. Senate agreed with the importance of honoring the memory of that solemn event that occurred at the Washita River." He added, "Perseverance pays." Senate Majority Whip Don Nickles told the Daily Oklahoman that Lucas was integral to the passage of the bill and praised the effort to create the historic site, "It will be good for the state, it will be good for history buffs." 191

President Clinton signed the Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act of 1996 on November 12 in a ceremony attended by two dozen members of Congress. "I hope we can see more legislation like this over the next four years," Clinton said. "We said we were going to put our national treasures beyond partisan politics. I ask Congress to continue to work with me in the same spirit." The new law expanded and altered boundaries in numerous parks, authorized land swaps, and created new heritage areas, historic trails, and scenic rivers across the country. Clinton believed that the law would ensure that "we will be good stewards of the land God has given us." The federal government had approved the creation of the Washita site and opened the door for the NPS to manage the 320 acres. This shifted responsibility back to the state of Oklahoma to find the money and craft the mechanism for the transferal of land. 192

Although Congress and the President approved the site, maneuvering continued throughout late 1996 and 1997 to transfer the land to the federal government. This required a large amount of money to purchase the properties at the site, and those funds would come from philanthropic organizations and the state of Oklahoma.

In the spring of 1997, Bob Blackburn learned that Frances Kennedy, the wife of Roger Kennedy, wanted to help raise money for the purchase of land associated with Washita. Through her connections with philanthropic organizations, she found potential donors in the Mellon Foundation. She said that the Mellon Foundation would give money to the Conservation Fund, which would purchase the land and donate it to the federal government. This seemed feasible but Blackburn worried that the costs would spiral when the Conservation Fund said that it would pay the amount asked for by property owners, rather than the appraisal value. This meant that landowners were asking for $1,000 per acre for land appraised at $250. Kennedy told him to set up the meetings and stay confident. 193

Blackburn organized meetings that August in Cheyenne, and Kennedy flew out to visit the site and discuss the details of purchasing the land. Although the stars seemed to be aligning in favor of the Washita site, the weather was threatening to intervene with the visit to Cheyenne. As Blackburn went to Wiley Post Airport in Oklahoma City to meet the group from the Mellon Foundation, a large summer monsoon—complete with hail and potential tornados—was rumbling in from the panhandle. It was moving quickly towards Cheyenne, and the pilot of the small plane that was going to fly them from Oklahoma City to the Cheyenne airport was nervous. Kennedy and two representatives from the Mellon Foundation landed in Oklahoma

191 Interview with Bob Blackburn; Chris Casteel, Senate Approves Parks Bill Creating Washita Memorial, The Daily Oklahoman, 4 October 1996, 1.
193 Interview with Bob Blackburn, 15.
City, and Blackburn quickly shuttled them into the new, smaller plane. Despite the concerns of the pilot, the group took off and flew directly into the oncoming storm.\textsuperscript{194}

With the large storm approaching Roger Mills County, they landed in Cheyenne and Bob Duke met them at the airport. The group jumped into his car and drove to the overlook adjacent to the site. Blackburn was able to give them his “sales pitch” while on the plane but visiting Washita was incredibly significant. While at the site the group marveled at an unusually lush and green Washita Valley. The area was quite, almost solemn, as Duke and Blackburn recounted the incident nearly 125 years ago. As they tried to recreate the event, the storm clouds moved in and the pilot urged them to wrap things up. Duke drove them back to the airport, they hopped in the plane, and took off just in time. As the small craft gained altitude, the rain, hail and winds trailed behind them. When they made it back to Oklahoma City, Blackburn had his $200,000.\textsuperscript{195}

Support for Washita spiked quickly in the Oklahoma state legislature. Randy Beutler moved into a leadership position in the House of Representatives and worked with Speaker Lloyd Benson to secure a special appropriation for Washita. This was in addition to the legislation passed by the state in 1996. Beutler told Benson about the donations from the Mellon Foundation and the Conservation Fund, and told him that they had to act quickly. The state approved $262,000. This enabled Blackburn and the OHS to purchase the land and two buildings. At this point the Washita site had officially become the property of the state of Oklahoma. During the early fall of 1997 the OHS was teamed up with the Conservation Fund and the Mellon Foundation, and the time had come to transfer the land to the NPS.\textsuperscript{196}

The Wesner Family and the Land

Although the final stages of the sale and transfer of the land to the federal government seemed to jump forward quickly, it was complicated process that required the cooperation of several groups and individuals from the local to national level. This process unfolded over a several year period and involved public and private conversations about the use of the property, its value, and personal and familial ties to the land. The decision to sell land was not simply an economic one; it was influenced by memories of childhood, generational roots associated with place, and the emotional bonds of working on the landscape. Cutting ones ties with land that has been owned by the family, especially for many Westerners, could be a difficult experience.

Such must have been the case for the landowners involved with the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. It is well-known that the land held by Dale and Betty Wesner formed the core of what became the Washita site. Jeannette Scott, the daughter of Dale and Betty, recalled that her family had lived in the area for generations, “the Wesner family had lived on what is now the park for years, well as long as I could remember and my grandparents lived there and when they moved away from the farm, well my dad bought it and then they lived there ‘till mother finally sold the [land] to the Park Service.” Her grandparents, John and Laura Wesner, moved to the area in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Dale Wesner was a rural mail carrier and raised cattle on the side, while Betty Wesner worked at a bank and hospital. For as long as Jeannette could remember, her mother talked about creating a park to commemorate the events along the Washita. “It seems like our family was always talking about it….someone would always say, ‘you know, one of these days…they’re going to have a park here.’”\textsuperscript{197}

\textsuperscript{194} Interview with Bob Blackburn, 16.
\textsuperscript{195} Interview with Bob Blackburn, 17.
\textsuperscript{196} Interview with Bob Blackburn, 17.
\textsuperscript{197} Interview with Gary and Jeannette Scott, 10 July 2012, 2.
The Scotts could not recall the first time Jeanette’s family discussed selling the land to the state or federal government. Dale remembered Bob Blackburn bringing three representatives from the NPS to visit the property, search for and catalogue potential archeological remains, and conduct an initial cost assessment of the land. That was probably 1992 during one of the meetings at the property when several Cheyenne and Arapaho joined Blackburn and NPS officials. Neil Mangum was also at several of the meetings.198

When the parties began talking about numbers and land values, Betty Wesner did not ask for a lot of money. Gary recalled that the NPS offer was small, so Betty pressed them for a little more and they agreed. Gary thought she should have held out for a higher offer considering the historical and agricultural value of the land and that she wanted to have a comfortable retirement, but she was more dedicated to preserving the site. To quote Jeanette, “right at the end, Betty wanted to sell it. She wanted to sell it. She wanted it to be a park.”199

The final purchase of land by the Mellon Foundation, the use of the Conservation Fund as a mediator, and the contributions of the OHS and Bob Blackburn would not have been feasible had it not been for support of the Wesner family. In particular, Betty Wesner was the central person to the entire process. Outside of the Cheyenne tribe, her approval was the most important to the creation of the site. She wanted the site protected because of its historical value, because it could educate the public, and because she seemed to worry that no one else would do it. Had she opposed the concept or rejected the financial offers, the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site would not exist today.200

The Dedication of the Site

Betty Wesner attended the formal ceremonies dedicating the creation of the site in November of 1997. She joined several dozen individuals that played a role in creating the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. Some of the attendees included Oklahoma Lt. Governor Mary Fallin, Cheyenne Chief Lawrence Hart, U.S. Rep. Frank Lucas (R-Cheyenne), Oklahoma Historical Society Deputy Executive Director Bob Blackburn, National Park Service Intermountain Regional Director John Cook, and State Rep. Randy Beutler (R-Elk City). The first Superintendent of the site, Sarah Craighead, was Master of Ceremonies.

Chief Lawrence Hart gave a moving speech about the site for his people. Hart talked about his own ancestor’s survival when Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer and his 7th Regiment of the U.S. Calvary attacked the sleeping Cheyenne village. Hart’s great-grandfather, Afraid-of-Beavers, was wounded after the cavalry charged their village. He recounted how Magpie was shot in the leg but escaped with his life while Cheyenne men, women and children died that day. As his voice cracked, Hart said, "Never again." Hart also talked about a reenactment his family took part in during the 100th anniversary of the Washita attack. "As the Grand Army of the Republic - the grandsons of the U.S. Calvary - rode over the hill, they began shooting at our people, including my children," Hart said as his voice waivered. "Suddenly, it became all too real to me." He traced his involvement in the creation of the site to that reenactment in 1968.201

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198 Interview with Jeannette and Gary Scott, 10 July 2012, 3.
199 Interview with Jeannette and Gary Scott, 10 July 2012, 3.
200 Interview with Jeannette and Gary Scott, 10 July 2012, 3; Interview with Congressman Frank Lucas, 16.
201 Ron Jackson, “Cheyenne Dedicate Historic Site In Memory of Massacre Victims,” Daily Oklahoman, 2 November 1997, 1. DVD recording of the ceremony commemorating the opening of Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, 1 November 1998, DVD held in offices of WNBHS. These were the words of Chief Hart when describing the reenactors participating in the 1968 event.
Several Cheyenne Peace Chiefs attended the dedication. Lucien Twins shared the views of Hart regarding the nature of the violence over a century ago. He did not believe the attack by Custer and his troops was a battle because it was so obviously one-sided. He told reporters, “I don’t call it a battle, I call it a massacre, when Custer and his trained military men attacked women and children.” Archie Hoffman, the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribal secretary, also compared the attack to the Oklahoma City bombing due to its significance for the Cheyenne people. 202

Other attendees spoke about the significance of the historic site, its preservation, and the legislative process. Congressman Frank Lucas recalled the various pitfalls and obstacles that proponents encountered. "Three different legislative bills, angry hunters, angry neighbors ... we overcame a lot," Lucas said. "But we got a bill everyone could support and a bill that fulfills everyone's goals." Lucas attended the ceremony to present Peace Medals to 37 Peace Chiefs of the Cheyenne-Arapaho government. 203 Bob Duke, the manager of the Black Kettle Museum, was relieved at the conclusion of the Congressional process and the land sales. "This is exciting," Duke said. "Not only for western Oklahoma, but for all of Oklahoma. It's important to remember it for its significance. My personal feelings have always leaned toward the Cheyenne people and the pain they have experienced." 204

The event involved a daylong celebration that was both somber and inspiring. Attendees gathered to talk about history, Washita, and the responsibilities of the NPS to protect and preserve the collective cultural heritage of all Americans. James Black Bear, Jr., a full-blood Cheyenne, worked with relatives to erect three teepees along the banks of the Washita River. These were the first teepees on the site in more than a century since the end of the Indian Wars and the removal of the Cheyenne and Arapaho onto reservations. 205

After the opening remarks and moving speeches at the overlook, the event moved to a luncheon at the Roger Mills Agricultural Pavilion, where buffalo stew was donated by the Cheyenne-Arapaho Business Committee. A powwow also entertained attendees. The event concluded at the nearby Coyote Hills Ranch. Speaking to the Daily Oklahoman, the new Superintendent of the site, Sarah Craighead, said "We are also here to let the healing process begin for a people whose life changed forever here...this dedication is only the beginning." 206 It was a new beginning indeed. The site represented the hard work of generations of people and the high hopes of everyone who had worked so diligently for its creation.

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Section V: The Early Years of Washita Battlefield National Historic Site

The Historic Site Becomes Reality

After Congress approved the site and the OHS facilitated the sale and transfer of the land, one of the most important decisions during the early years of Washita was the appointment of Sarah Craighead as Superintendent. During her five years at Washita (1997-2002) Craighead helped design the site; secure funds for management, utilities, and staffing; and she oversaw community outreach efforts. She also played a central role in the construction of the Visitor’s Center and Headquarters. According to nearly everyone consulted, Superintendent Craighead was a superb leader, a visionary educator, and an open-minded administrator. Few could have imagined the start of Washita without her work.

Sarah Craighead was a seventeen year veteran of the National Park Service when she began her new role on October 12, 1997. She was born in Cave City, Kentucky, and started her career with the National Park Service in the late 1970s working at Mammoth Cave National Park, in Kentucky. Her first permanent position began in 1980 at Independence Historic Site, in Pennsylvania, as a park ranger. She went on to work as a ranger at Acadia National Park, in Maine; Ocmulgee National Monument, in Georgia; and at Carlsbad Caverns National Park, in New Mexico. Additionally she served as a district interpreter at Grand Canyon National Park, in Arizona, management assistant at Manassas National Battlefield Park, in Virginia, and management analyst at National Capital Region, in Washington, D.C. During the summer of 1994 she moved to Mesa Verde National Park, in Colorado, where she worked as assistant chief of interpretation.

When questioned about her new position as Superintendent, Craighead said she was excited to start a historic site from the ground up, but she was fully aware of the seriousness of the history she was charged to protect and interpret. “Our job is to preserve and protect and provide for the public. I’m more concerned about how to tell the story in a balanced way. My role is to help people be able to form their own opinions about what happened.” Craighead understood that there were interpretations of the event in 1868 and she was cognizant of the emotionalism of the attack for descendants.

Craighead said that her management philosophy was guided by the desire to bring people into the past so that they could imagine what life might have been like in the nineteenth century. “I want people to know what it was like to wake up in the morning in one of those teepes and what it was like to be a soldier standing in the snow all night.” Considering the levity of these events, she admitted that one could get swept away in the past. She noted, “you become emotionally involved with stories,” but she recognized the need to remain grounded when interpreting historical events. “You have to make sure you balance those emotions whenever dealing with the park.”

“Battle” or “Massacre”

Superintendent Craighead’s best efforts at balancing multiple perspectives could not contain the flood of commentary about the name of the site. As word of Washita’s establishment spread, so did discussions about the nature of the event in 1868 and the appropriate name of the site along the Washita. Groups split into two camps: a faction believing that “massacre” best described the event, and a faction believing that the word “battle” best described the event.

During the fall of 1997 and in the years thereafter, the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes had become more vocal in expressing their opinions about the event in 1868 and thus the naming of the site in 1997. According to the Watonga Republican, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Business Council released an official statement in opposition to the term “battlefield”, preferring instead the description of “massacre.” The resolution stated, in part, that “the word ‘battle’ is grossly misleading and should not be utilized in conjunction with the surprise attack on Chief Black Kettle’s peaceful encampment along the Washita.”

Chief Lawrence Hart was one of the most vocal opponents against the word “battle.” After the dedication ceremony, Hart repeated the comments he made about the name. “We as the traditional people want to minimize the use of the word ‘battle’ because it is unacceptable to us.” He looked forward to working with the NPS to develop educational materials and museum exhibits that narrated the culture of the Plains Indians, particularly the Cheyenne; as well as the causes, course and consequences of the attack in 1868. “We have many stories to tell,” and the historic site was an important component of that desire to teach the world about his people. Hart was particularly concerned about the naming of the site because his great-grandfather, Afraid of Beavers, was camped along the Washita when Custer and his men attacked. Although Hart was not bitter about the past, he was concerned that the mandates of the NPS and the policies of the U.S. government would thwart tribal efforts to change the name. He hoped that everyone could work “in the spirit of peace and friendship” to respect the Cheyenne and Arapaho people.

Nearly a year after the opening of the site, the controversy over terminology and public memory had escalated to include state and federal legislators, the Oklahoma Historical Society, the Cheyenne-Arapaho tribal government, and myriad academicians and community members. On 19 September 1998 tribal members held a special council meeting in Elk City to discuss the name of the site and to talk with Democratic Party officials. Gubernatorial candidate Laura Boyd and congressional candidate Paul Barby listened to tribal officials who alleged that Congressman Lucas and others misled them about eventually changing the name. Lucille Youngbull asked if the candidates could help them change the name if they were elected to their respective positions. Youngbull said in reference to Washita, “the Cheyenne people were not at war; they were massacred.” Several in attendance believed that Lucas lied to them about the potential to change the name, but when reporters contacted him, he said that the NPS named the site. Superintendent Craighead said that the process was more complicated than a simple series of misleading comments. She said that the NPS did not have the jurisdiction to name a site because the Department of Interior and Congress approved the names of federal sites from a limited array of categories. Bob Blackburn believed that the decision had always been a “political one” considering the conservative nature of the Congress at the time of passage. He believed that Congress—especially one controlled by Republicans—would have never approved a national historic site titled a “massacre,” especially one involving the U.S. military. Blackburn

209 “Battlefield?” Watonga Republican, 29 October 1997, Mary Jane Ward Files, OKC
also noted that historians had always referred to the site as the “Battle of the Washita,” even though most considered it a massacre. He believed that changing the name would have also created confusion in the legislative process, but he personally believed that it was a massacre.211

Debate about the name of the site could not quell the optimism of many locals about the impact of Washita on tourism in Cheyenne. Business leaders, owners of local restaurants, and others dependent on visitors from out of town had high hopes for the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. Donna and Bob Moss owned the Black Kettle Trading Post en route to the site and they had dreams that bus-loads of tourists would flock to the site to learn about the attack in 1868 as well as the history of the Plains Indians. They opened their store in the center of Cheyenne’s business district in anticipation of the historic site: they even sold their ranch in Crawford so that they could afford the new business venture. Although attendance at the Black Kettle Museum peaked at roughly 7,500 in 1998—largely due to the opening of the Washita site, the Moss’s were worried about stagnant visitation the following year. Other local business hoped to capitalize on the new unit of the NPS. A coffee and tea shop opened nearby and it was connected to a workshop of Cheyenne artist Imagene Herndon. The Black Kettle Museum was even waiting for a state grant to renovate its exhibits. Roger Mills County's historical society also joined in. Members raised $75,000 to build a new county museum. Organizer Casey Paxon said, "I'm just waiting for the park to get a few displays up at the site. That's the only thing really holding us back. When they get that (visitor's center) up I think this place is going to boom."212

This optimism pervaded Cheyenne in the first years of the historic site’s opening. In tandem with local volunteer groups and businesses, the Oklahoma Tourism Department established a bus route and visitation package that would bring people to the Cheyenne Cultural Center in Clinton, the Washita Battlefield site in Cheyenne, Fort Supply and Fort Reno, and Roman Nose State Park. Barbie Elder, the Tourism Department’s travel package manager said, "I think Cheyenne is going to boom. It's going to be a great stop for tourists. Just the national historic site alone has already brought more people there." Bob Duke, the President of the Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce, was more temperate in his assessment. "It's really promising," said Duke, but he was “taking a wait-and-see attitude right now.”213

**Building and Managing the Historic Site**

As locals imagined a tourist mecca unfolding before them, and as the name of the site continued to draw controversy, the staff of the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site had to move forward with the daily operations of a unit of the NPS. This work involved a lot of attention to finances and budgets, overhead and capital costs, management goals and philosophy, and educational programming. These issues were less sensational than the name of the site itself but they were important. In fact, these quotidian details constituted some of the most critical realities faced by all NPS staff. Without attention to these details the Washita site would have failed in its mission to preserve and protect American history and our shared cultural resources.

When Sarah Craighead began her position, there were numerous immediate challenges facing her. The only indication that a historic site existed was the small overlook, picnic table,

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and stone engraved monument on the side of the road. Nothing clearly distinguished the new park from the country side. Moreover, visitors were not sure where to go to find interpretive materials or to speak with a park ranger. Craighead and her small staff had to tackle these issues. She tasked Steve Black, the site historian and chief of interpretation, an administrative assistant, and various volunteers to work with the regional director in Denver to get the site up and running. Bob Duke was especially helpful as he provided historical research and assisted with various educational materials. He also led tours around the historic site. Craighead hired a resource specialist to assist with the landscape, tend to the crops planted on the Wesner farm, and reduce the growth of exotic species. The Black Kettle Museum, and later a small space in downtown Cheyenne, served as the offices until the construction of a headquarters.

Their budget was too small to address infrastructure but it was adequate enough for their immediate needs. Craighead developed a new brochure to help advertise the site, and she enlisted volunteers to help mark a trail from the old overlook to the river, around the site, and back to the overlook. They also drafted pamphlets that interpreted the history of the site for visitors walking along the trail. They conducted archeological surveys and landscape studies, and they did a lot of historical research, all of which would prove beneficial when they opened the visitor’s center.

She and her small staff—the group slowly grew to four permanent employees—worked under the supervision of the Denver Service Center, which oversaw much of the federal land and properties throughout the American West. Staff out of Denver and Santa Fe planned, designed, and built the Washita site in Cheyenne according to federal guidelines and stipulations. The planning and design phases included public scoping meetings and meetings with the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. Craighead said that the staff and the NPS tried to develop a site that was “appropriate” and that respected the history of the Cheyenne and Washita.

Washita staff tried to meet a range of public expectations as they managed and protected the historic site. During the first years of her tenure, Superintendent Craighead faced sometimes contradictory hopes and demands from the citizens of western Oklahoma. She recalled some individuals who believed that the Park Service had promised to build a “Smithsonian style” museum in Cheyenne, but she could not pinpoint the origins of that idea. It may have emerged during meetings when the NPS talked about the style of the museum and museum philosophy, rather than the size of the Smithsonian. Additionally, Craighead had to respond to the demands of Cheyenne and Arapaho for a protected section of the site where they could go for prayer and religious ceremonies. She explained to tribal members that the enabling legislation did not contain language for such a space. She dealt with it by “setting aside an area for them that we didn’t actually officially close but we also didn’t advertise so that if they went to that area they would be – it would be pretty much protected.” This was her attempt protect the sacredness of the history and maintain openness to the public.

Interpreting and presenting that history was a complicated process that reflected the diversity of viewpoints and opinions that emerged in the years leading up to the creation of the site. Craighead summarized what she encountered while holding public meetings, designing the visitor’s center, and developing educational materials for the museum. She recalled,

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214 Interview with Bob Duke, 11 June 2012, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
215 Interview with Superintendent Sarah Craighead, 10 September 2012, interview via phone.
216 Interview with Superintendent Sarah Craighead, 10 September 2012, interview via phone.
217 Interview with Superintendent Sarah Craighead, 10 September 2012, interview via phone.
218 Interview with Superintendent Sarah Craighead, 10 September 2012, interview via phone.
Well sure, the tribe really considered the site to be a massacre site. The site had been named a battlefield by park service folks because, you know, that was part of their naming convention. And so, that always provided a little bit of tension between the park service staff and the tribe, and then there was a local community that had somewhat of a stake in how we developed the site and how we told the stories there and they didn’t really want the site known as a massacre site. They felt like that was sort of an insult.219

A range of viewpoints emerged during the scoping meetings with community members. The resulting narrative that guided the museum exhibits and educational materials reflected an attempt by the NPS to stand on neutral ground in the debate over whether or not it was a massacre or battle. Craighead noted that they tried to “tell the story as best we knew it from historical documents and people’s memories.” This was not an easy position to take, but Craighead’s philosophy was sophisticated. She and her colleagues wanted to “connect people to the story and help them understand it, but we also wanted to help them understand it…in a historical context…although everyone brings their modern day understandings and experiences to that story, we tried to help them understand it in a historical context of what was happening at the time and why people might have been doing what they were doing.”220

The relationship between the Cheyenne and the Arapaho tribes and the NPS was not perfect, but Craighead and her staff tried to remain in communication. She recalls going to several powwows with Steve Black so that the tribal members knew them personally. They also went to the schools, met with tribal members, and “tried to be good community members.” Craighead was particularly proud of the decision to hire tribal high school and college students to work as summer seasonal employees. Although they could not pay them much—some simply did internships—they tried to include them in the planning meetings, tribal council meetings, and other aspects of the park’s management. In addition to the students and seasonals, Craighead worked with the tribe and split the costs to hire a Cheyenne to serve as a liaison between the tribe and the NPS. This created a constant point of contact between the tribal government and the staff at Washita, and it facilitated meetings between the NPS and tribal members and it contributed to the spirit of good will and cooperation that Craighead hoped to build.221

The efforts of Craighead and her staff to narrate a complicated story surrounding the attack on Black Kettle’s camp in 1868 reflected a larger series of challenges faced by superintendents across the U.S. Each park, monument, and historic site follows a series of educational and interpretive objectives. These objectives are tied to the reasons and rationales for the creation of the sites. As a historic site dedicated to a violent attack and the remembrance of tragedy, it was significant for several reasons, most of which have been noted previously. According to the NPS, Washita represented a “turning point in strategy” used by the U.S. government in the Plains Indian Wars. For “one of the first times ever” troops mounted a large-scale winter campaign against the Plains Indians.” Because of this shift, Washita represented a “military philosophy of total warfare—that of subjecting the entire Indian population, both

219 Interview with Superintendent Sarah Craighead, 10 September 2012, interview via phone.
220 Interview with Superintendent Sarah Craighead, 10 September 2012, interview via phone.
221 Interview with Superintendent Sarah Craighead, 10 September 2012, interview via phone.
combatants and non-combatants, to a war of total destruction.” Preserving this history and telling a narrative about this violent event was the central mandate of Washita.

As Craighead noted in her discussion of meetings, appointments with the tribal council, and the tour guide materials, educating the public was not always easy. An important event associated with educational outreach and historical interpretation was the Washita Historic Site Symposium, held on 12-14 November 1998, roughly one year after the dedication of the site. The symposium convened at the Cheyenne High School auditorium and brought together the NPS, educators and researchers, and tribal members, for a three day conversation about the significance of the attack on the Washita in 1868 and the establishment of the site in 1997. Hundreds of people attended the event that included an array of guest speakers, including Saul Birdshead Jr., Arapaho chief; Bob Blackburn; Sara Craighead; Lawrence Hart; Paul Hutton, professor of history at the University of New Mexico; Dr. William Lees, director of the Historic Sites Division of the OHS; Dr. Edward Linenthal, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh; Neil Mangum, past Superintendent of Little Bighorn National Monument; Dr. Henrietta Mann, professor of history at the University of Montana; Dr. Douglas Scott, from the NPS; Martha Perez, Kiowa traditional consultant; and Jake Walker, Osage tribal member. The presentations resulted in some of the most thoughtful discussion of Washita, as well as a series of deeply moving reflections on relations between Indians and non-Indians in Oklahoma. Henrietta Mann and Lawrence Hart offered especially important commentaries on historical memory and the challenges faced by Cheyenne and Arapaho since the attack.

The NPS and Superintendent Craighead also worked with the OHS to conduct an oral history and ethnohistory project on the Native Peoples associated with Washita. The interviews helped the NPS and Craighead create the museum exhibits in the new Visitor’s Center. The NPS contracted Roger Harris, the oral historian for the OHS, and Mary Jane Warde, to conduct the first phases of the project. These phases included interviews with Cheyenne, Arapaho, and members of other tribes with ties to Washita. Additional phases included ethnohistorical research and an additional series of interviews conducted by Loretta Fowler, a specialist on the histories of Plains Indians. Mary Jane Warde recalled that she began working on this project in September 1998, a few months after being hired by the OHS, and she submitted the final product in 2003. She worked closely with a Kiowa named Jim Anquo, who married into the Cheyenne tribe. The five year contract resulted in dozens of interviews about Cheyenne and Arapaho history and culture, patterns of land use, perceptions of the event along the Washita, and reflections on its contemporary meaning. It served the important function of assisting Craighead, her staff, and the Denver Service Center, with building a high quality exhibit on the attacks in 1868 as well as the ensuing histories associated with western Oklahoma. The project also resulted in Mary Jane Warde’s, Washita, which was a popular version of the OHS report.

The ethnohistory and oral history project, the book Washita, the history symposium, and the many debates about the name of the historic site, were just a few of the key events and issues confronting staff at Washita in the first few years of the existence of the site. These debates about history and public memory, commemoration and naming, reflected divergent viewpoints about the “facts” associated with Washita and the ways in which a multi-cultural society should

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223 Pamphlet advertising symposium, Washita Battlefield National Historic Site, archives.

224 Interview with Mary Jane Warde, 1 August 2012. Interview conducted via phone.
remember its collective past. Whether one viewed Washita as a “battle” or a “massacre,” the
event provoked passions and interest that fueled debates about history, culture, and identity.

The complexity of these debates about history and memory kept the new staff of the
Washita Battlefield National Historic Site extremely busy during its early years. As Craighead
tried to walk a fine line on interpreting the event in 1868, she did a commendable job of reaching
out to a diverse and sometimes divided community. Outreach efforts, public talks, and scoping
meetings were crucial expressions of goodwill that strengthened the bonds of trust between the
NPS, the Cheyenne and Arapaho, and the non-Indian residents of Roger Mills County. And yet,
for all overwork as an ambassador to these constituencies, Craighead had to build a new historic
site, manage a growing number of employees, and ensure the continuity of operations during
years of budget cuts and fiscal conservatism. The new visitor center, which was completed in
2002, serves as a fitting testimony to her hard work and the dedication of her staff. Due to her
hard work, along with individuals such as Congressman Frank Lucas, Mrs. Betty Wesner, Dr.
Bob Blackburn, Chief Lawrence Hart, and a small cadre of dedicated individuals at the local,
state, and national levels, we are able to learn about the tragedy that occurred along the Washita
in 1868. We are also able to learn about the perseverance of the survivors and the peoples and
the cultures of Oklahoma and the Southern Plains.
Conclusion: Protecting the Legacies of Washita

The establishment of the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site was the result of generations of dedicated individuals and organizations working at the local, state, and national level. Before the more well-known efforts of the 1990s, there were civic groups, ladies clubs, and Cheyenne tribal members who believed that the deaths along the Washita in 1868 deserved commemoration. This support for preserving Washita as a sacred site and as a place of historical significance and cultural remembrance set a firm foundation for the fundraising, community meetings, petitions, lobbying, Congressional testimonies, and legislation in the 1990s. Understanding the history of this desire to protect the Washita site is crucial to piecing together the establishment of Washita Battlefield National Historic Site in the 1990s.

During the late nineteenth century, one generation after the attack along the Washita, citizens in Oklahoma Territory began a conversation about history that tells us a lot about public memory and commemoration. The debates began as the Cheyenne survivors of Washita faced allotment, land runs, and non-Indians establishing schools, churches, businesses and other institutions of “civilization.” These non-Indians crafted histories that emphasized frontier conflict, Indian Wars, and the heroic settlement of the West. These narratives revealed nostalgia for “battles” against “savage Indians,” and the rugged life of the Wild West, but they took root in modern institutions such as historical societies, newspapers, and magazines that contributed to dispossession. In doing so, these new associations crafted public memories about Indians in the past, while ignoring Native people in the present.225

These groups nonetheless sparked debates about the importance of Washita. The Oklahoma Historical Society collected interviews, memoirs, archival documents, and myriad materials that reflected the colorful tapestry of life in the nineteenth century. Its publication, Chronicles of Oklahoma, taught Oklahomans about the history and culture of the region. The women’s clubs that tried to establish a park in honor of those who died at Washita perpetuated an idea that groups in the post-WWII years would elaborate upon. Even the popular dime novels about the Wild West, the lurid accounts of predatory Indians in Sturm’s Oklahoma Magazine, and sensationalistic newspaper reports that opined about an imagined past of frontier lawlessness served a purpose. Although these efforts to commemorate Washita were sidetracked by the Great Depression and World War II, the residents of Roger Mills County and the citizens of Oklahoma remained interested in Washita during these tumultuous years.

Protection of Washita garnered more attention after World War II. Many Americans partook in the post-War economic growth, prosperity, and leisure. By the early 1950s, suburbs attracted new middle class families with disposable income, the federal government linked the states with the Eisenhower National Highway System, and summer-time vacationers explored national parks and monuments. While many embraced the new economic opportunities, they were also startled at the impact of wartime industrialization and postwar development. Historical buildings, homesteads, and memories of important events were being swept away in the name of progress. Some citizens began to fear the loss of the historical identity associated with the disappearance of these cultural resources, so they initiated efforts to preserve them.

The state and federal government supported several programs during the 1950s and 1960s that reflected the growing interest in historic commemoration and the history of Custer’s attack on the Cheyenne. The state placed historical markers on highways, and it built the Black Kettle Museum in 1958. Secretary of the Interior Stuart Udall twice visited Oklahoma to discuss

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225 These trends were common across the U.S. West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.
potential sites for nomination as national parks, monuments, or historic sites. During these visits he supported the preservation of Washita. In 1964, William E. Brown completed an important report detailing the historical significance of Washita and recommended it for park status. In 1965 Washita gained status as a National Historic Landmark and it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Several key events in 1968 also raised the status of Washita. In 1968 the state of Oklahoma enhanced the rest stop adjacent to the large stone engraved monument dedicated to the battle with the addition of a circular covered memorial. The One Hundredth Anniversary commemoration of Washita attracted visitors from across the Southern Plains, as the Grand Army of the Republic Seventh Cavalry and the ancestors of Black Kettle reenacted the attack in 1868. It was a moving experience that galvanized individuals such as Chief Lawrence Hart to preserve the site. Lastly, the residents of Roger Mills County held a special burial ceremony for the internment of the bones of a Cheyenne who had died at Washita in 1868. These events raised awareness Washita as a national treasure.

The 1970s and 1980s were much less productive for advocates Washita. The Vietnam War, the Watergate Crisis, social and cultural upheaval, and a persistent economic recession diverted attention away from historic preservation. There were nonetheless a few steps forward. The Bicentennial Celebration in 1976 sparked interest in historical reenactment, and the Cheyenne tribe became interested in cultural preservation in the 1980s. The oil and gas crisis bankrupted businesses across the state, but it introduced farmers and ranchers to the idea that they might convert their land into sites of historical tourism. The potential for national parks and monuments to attract tourists and grow in tandem with sites such as Coyote Hills Ranch offered Oklahomans some optimism about a stagnant economy. The decade ended on a high note for preservation efforts with the reenactment of the Civil War era Battle of Honey Springs in 1988. Though located in eastern Oklahoma, the reenactment sparked interest in Civil War preservation and battles from the Indian Wars.

Thus, with the beginning of the 1990s, Oklahomans had experienced several generations of interest in protecting Washita. This historical context was important when Congressman Lucas, Dr. Bob Blackburn, and Chief Lawrence Hart testified in Washington D.C. in favor of preserving the historic site. This historical context was also responsible for the near universal awareness of Washita in western Oklahoma. When Dorothy Alexander, Bob Duke, and Gary Scott went door-to-door seeking signatures for a petition to send to Congress, thousands of people gladly put pen to paper. The work of the Oklahoma Historical Society to seek political and financial support for land purchases was facilitated by its long history with Washita, particularly its efforts dating back to the 1920s to educate Oklahomans about their history.

The result of these groups’ efforts could be seen in the speedy passage of legislation establishing the site. Most monuments, parks, and historic sites can take more than a decade to receive Congressional approval. In short, the successes of the 1990s must be understood within the context of the previous decades of organizations and individuals dedicated to remember, preserve, and protect the Washita site.

The establishment of Washita rests on more than historical context, however. First, a small cadre of supporters committed themselves to the goal of passing legislation in favor of including Washita in the National Park Service. These individuals cooperated at the local, state, and national levels to demonstrate to Congress that the preservation of Washita was a popular objective. They looked beyond political differences—even though they did not agree on every method or strategy—and embraced the common belief that the events of 1868 were important for all Americans to remember. Together they created an organized system of communication based
on a division of labor that emphasized the strengths of each individual or group. Locals such as Bob Duke, Dorothy Alexander, and Gary Scott helped gain grassroots support for the project, while individuals such as Bob Blackburn from the OHS convinced the state legislature and philanthropic organizations of the site’s importance. His work as a “middle man” was crucial. Legislators such as Randy Beutler drafted and presented bills to the House of Representatives and Senate in Oklahoma City. Tribal members such as Lawrence Hart and Gordon Yellowman, despite concerns about the title, persuaded the Cheyenne to support it. Representatives from the NPS, such as Larry Rogers and Neil Mangum, helped convince Congress that the Park Service wanted to manage the site. And lastly, Congressman Frank Lucas, a junior member of the U.S. House, indefatigably argued in favor of the site.

A second factor was the network of personal and professional relationships that bound together supporters at the local, state, and national level. Nearly all of the key proponents either knew each other from childhood or college, or they crafted professional relationships that facilitated cooperation. Dorothy Alexander, Bob Duke, Frank Lucas, and Gary and Jeannette Scott had grown up together or met each other in high school. Roger Mills and surrounding counties did not have very many families, so those that did live in the ranching communities were familiar with one another. Alexander, Lucas, and the Scotts were especially close, and Bob Duke was related to Jeannette through marriage. Frank Lucas and Bob Blackburn attended Oklahoma State University. These personal ties proved crucial when, for instance, Frank Lucas needed local support for the legislation he introduced in Congress. He could return home, draw upon his personal connections, and typically receive respect and support. Moreover, he suggested that his old friend, Bob Duke, manage the Black Kettle Museum; and he noted his status as an OSU alumni to get his foot in the door with Bob Blackburn and the OHS.

Professional ties helped, as well. Bob Blackburn had worked with the National Park Service through people such as Larry Rogers, who, in turn connected him with Roger Kennedy. The wife of Roger was Frances Kennedy, who worked in the Conservation Fund. Larry Rogers and the NPS had been working with tribes to develop Tribal Historic Preservation Offices, so individuals such as Lawrence Hart, Archie Hoffman, and Gordon Yellowman were familiar with the Park Service and their experience with cultural sites. Moreover, Hart and Bob Blackburn had a professional history that predated efforts to protect Washita. Finally the political ties between Congressman Lucas and Don Nickles (R-Oklahoma), the Senate Majority Whip proved crucial during the final stages of the process. The fact that the Senator from Oklahoma held such a position in the Republican Party surely helped the process.

The third and final factor that was crucial to the creation of Washita was the persistence, flexibility, and creativity of the groups and individuals behind the project. The first bill that Lucas sent to the House of Representatives in 1994 entailed over 3,000 acres of land and a protected viewshed of 5,000 acres. It also contained provisions to preserve Washita and Honey Springs Battlefield. The bill allowed the federal government to implement condemnation proceedings to obtain parcels of land or to remove structures on the proposed site. This was unacceptable to members of Congress and the residents of Roger Mills County, and the bill failed. Exhibiting their characteristic persistence, Lucas, Blackburn, and others offered a new bill. Initially the bill called for swapping land around Optima Lake and in the Black Kettle National Grasslands, for land at the Washita site. It also dropped provisions for Honey Springs. Public scoping meetings revealed massive opposition, so Lucas dropped the land swaps. He also reduced the site to 320 acres. This flexibility was crucial for reviving support for the project.
Proponents of the second bill also had to be creative in a new political landscape. The 1994 mid-term elections enabled Republicans to gain control of Congress. Their ascension forced supporters of Washita to develop new mechanisms to fund the purchase of the land. Supporters at the local and state level convinced the Oklahoma legislature to appropriate funds to purchase the land as a supplement to funds secured by Bob Blackburn in meetings with the Conservation Fund. Rather than trade or sell land, or request federal monies, advocates for Washita purchased the land through donations and state assistance. This was a creative response to a fiscally conservative U.S. Congress.

Taken cumulatively, the historical context of campaigns to protect Washita; the array of advocates at the local, national, and federal level; the personal and professional connections of supporters, and the flexible and creative strategies of proponents, all helped to make the old dream of preserving the site a reality. The absence of any one of these elements would have delayed indefinitely the passage of the bill creating the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. The confluence of these factors stands as a fitting testimony to the enduring significance of the site as a place of mutual death and loss.

The fact that Anglos and Natives, Democrats and Republicans, cooperated to create the site confirmed that Washita was significant for many people and cultures. From this cooperation we learn several lessons. Consulting with tribal and European-Americans for their memories helps us understand the importance of the site for their cultures and identities. Respecting the regional historic context helps us grasp the significance of Washita as a kind of cultural frontier or meeting ground for myriad peoples. Listening to Cheyenne tribal members tell their stories about the attack reminds us that the descendants of the victims at Washita continue to deal with the pain of the event. Through their eyes we see that the site is a burial site, a place of death and suffering. It is truly a sacred place. We also learn that although many Anglos saw the historic site in terms of economic development and military sacrifice, they also respect the hallowed nature of the landscape. Non-natives also died at Washita, and though they may have been the aggressor, their descendants mourn their deaths.

In short, visitors understand that Washita is a sacred place that they should respect and learn from. The National Park Service knows this intimately. The NPS deals with the narratives of war, conflict, and misunderstanding on a daily basis as it strives to educate the public and protect a treasured site. Through their tireless efforts, we learn more about who we are as a people and a nation.

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