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When Native Americans Were Slaughtered in the Name of 'Civilization'

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On a cool [May day in 1758](#), a 10-year girl with red hair and freckles was caring for her neighbor's children in rural western Pennsylvania. In a few moments, Mary Campbell's life changed forever when Delaware Indians kidnapped her and absorbed her into their community for the next six years. She became the first of some 200 known cases of white captives, many of whom became pawns in an ongoing power struggle that included European powers, American colonists and indigenous peoples straining to

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From the time Europeans arrived on American shores, the frontier—the edge territory between white man’s civilization and the untamed natural world—became a shared space of vast, clashing differences that led the U.S. government to authorize over 1,500 wars, attacks and raids on Indians, the most of any country in the world against its indigenous people. By the close of the [Indian Wars](#) in the late 19th century, fewer than 238,000 indigenous people remained, a sharp decline from the estimated 5 million to 15 million living in North America when Columbus arrived in 1492.

The reasons for this racial genocide were multi-layered. Settlers, most of whom had been barred from inheriting property in Europe, arrived on American shores hungry for Indian land—and the abundant natural resources that came with it. Indians’ collusion with the British during the [American Revolution](#) and the [War of 1812](#) exacerbated American hostility and suspicion toward them.

Even more fundamentally, indigenous people were just too different: Their skin was dark. Their languages were foreign. And their world views and spiritual beliefs were beyond most white men’s comprehension. To settlers fearful that a loved one might become the next Mary Campbell, all this stoked racial hatred and paranoia, making it easy to paint indigenous peoples as pagan savages who must be killed in the name of civilization and Christianity.

Below, some of the most aggressive acts of genocide taken against indigenous Americans:

The Gnadenhutten Massacre

In 1782, a group of militiamen from Pennsylvania killed 96 Christianized Delaware Indians, illustrating the growing contempt for native people. Captain David Williamson ordered the converted Delawares, who had been blamed for attacks on white settlements, to go to the cooper shop two at a time, where militiamen beat them to death with wooden mallets and hatchets.

Ironically, the Delawares were the first Indians to capture a white settler and the first to sign a U.S.-Indian treaty four years earlier—one that set the precedent for 374 Indian treaties over the next 100 years. Often employing the common phrase “peace and friendship,” 229 of these agreements led to tribal lands being ceded to a rapidly expanding United States. Many treaties negotiated U.S.-Indian trade relations, establishing a trading system to oust the British and their goods—especially the guns they put in Indian hands.

Battle of Tippecanoe

In the early 1800s, the rise of the charismatic Shawnee war leader, [Tecumseh](#), and his brother, known as the Prophet, convinced Indians of various tribes that it was in their interest to stop tribal in-fighting and band together to protect their mutual interests. The decision by Indiana Territorial Governor (and later President) [William Henry Harrison](#) in 1811 to attack and burn Prophetstown, the Indian capital on the Tippecanoe River, while Tecumseh was away campaigning the Choctaws for more



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In the South, the War of 1812 bled into the Mvskoke Creek War of 1813-1814, also known as the Red Stick War. An inter-tribal conflict among Creek Indian factions, the war also engaged U.S. militias, along with the British and Spanish, who backed the Indians to help keep Americans from encroaching on their interests. Early Creek victories inspired General [Andrew Jackson](#) to retaliate with 2,500 men, mostly Tennessee militia, in early November 1814. To avenge the Creek-led massacre at Fort Mims, Jackson and his men slaughtered 186 Creeks at Tallushatchee. "We shot them like dogs!" said [Davy Crockett](#).

In desperation, Mvskoke Creek women killed their children so they would not see the soldiers butcher them. As one woman started to kill her baby, the famed Indian fighter, Andrew Jackson, grabbed the child from the mother. Later, he delivered the Indian baby to his wife Rachel, for both of them to raise as their own.

Jackson went on to win the Red Stick War in a decisive battle at Horseshoe Bend. The subsequent treaty required the Creek to cede more than 21 million acres of land to the United States.

Forced Removal

One of the most bitterly debated issues on the floor of Congress was the Indian Removal Bill of 1830, pushed hard by then-President Andrew Jackson. Despite being assailed by many legislators as immoral, the bill finally passed in the Senate by nine votes, 29 to 17, and by an even smaller margin in the House. In Jackson's thinking, more than three dozen eastern tribes stood in the way of what he saw as the settlers' divinely ordained rights to clear the wilderness, build homes and grow cotton and other crops. In his annual address to Congress in 1833, Jackson denounced Indians, stating, "They have neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire of improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition. Established in the midst of another and a superior race...they must necessarily yield to the force of circumstances and ere [before] long disappear."

From 1830 to 1840, the U.S. army removed 60,000 Indians—Choctaw, Creek, Cherokee and others—from the East in exchange for new territory west of the Mississippi. Thousands died along the way of what became known as the "[Trail of Tears.](#)" And as whites pushed ever westward, the Indian-designated territory continued to shrink.

Mankato Executions

Annuities and provisions promised to Indians through government treaties were slow in being delivered, leaving Dakota Sioux people, who were restricted to reservation lands on the Minnesota frontier, starving and desperate. After a raid of nearby white farms for food turned into a deadly encounter, Dakotas continued raiding, leading to the Little Crow War of 1862, in which 490 settlers, mostly women and children, were killed. [President Lincoln](#) sent soldiers, who defeated the Dakota; and after a series of mass trials, more than 300 Dakota men were sentenced to death.

While Lincoln commuted most of the sentences, on the day after Christmas at



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Indians fighting back to defend their people and protect their homelands provided ample justification for American forces to kill *any* Indians on the frontier, even peaceful ones. On [November 29, 1864](#), a former Methodist minister, John Chivington, led a surprise attack on peaceful Cheyennes and Arapahos on their reservation at Sand Creek in southeastern Colorado. His force consisted of 700 men, mainly volunteers in the First and Third Colorado Regiments. Plied with too much liquor the night before, Chivington and his men boasted that they were going to kill Indians. Once a missionary to Wyandot Indians in Kansas, Chivington declared, "Damn any man who sympathizes with Indians!...I have come to kill Indians, and believe it is right and honorable to use any means under God's heavens to kill Indians."

That fateful cold morning, Chivington led his men against 200 Cheyennes and Arapahos. Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle had tied an American flag to his lodge pole as he was instructed, to indicate his village was at peace. When Chivington ordered the attack, Black Kettle tied a white flag beneath the American flag, calling to his people that the soldiers would not kill them. As many as 160 were massacred, mostly women and children.

Custer's Campaigns

At this time, a war hero from the Civil War emerged in the West. [George Armstrong Custer](#) rode in front of his mostly Irish Seventh Cavalry to the Irish drinking tune, "Gary Owen." Custer wanted fame, and killing Indians—especially peaceful ones who weren't expecting to be attacked—represented opportunity.

On orders from [General Philip Sheridan](#), Custer and his Seventh attacked the Cheyennes and their Arapaho allies on the western frontier of Indian Territory on November 29, 1868, near the Washita River. After slaughtering 103 warriors, plus women and children, Custer dispatched to Sheridan that "a great victory was won," and described, "One, the Indians were asleep. Two, the women and children offered little resistance. Three, the Indians are bewildered by our change of policy."

Custer later led the Seventh Cavalry on the northern Plains against the Lakota, Arapahos and Northern Cheyennes. He boasted, "The Seventh can handle anything it meets," and "there are not enough Indians in the world to defeat the Seventh Cavalry."

Expecting another great surprise victory, Custer attacked the largest gathering of warriors on the high plains on [June 25, 1876](#)—near Montana's Little Big Horn river. Custer's death at the hands of Indians making their own last stand only intensified propaganda for military revenge to bring "peace" to the frontier.

Wounded Knee

Anti-Indian anger rose in the late 1880s as the Ghost Dance spiritual movement emerged, spreading to two dozen tribes across 16 states, and threatening efforts to culturally assimilate tribal peoples. Ghost Dance, which taught that Indians had been defeated and confined to reservations because they had angered the gods by



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For their mass murder of disarmed Lakota, President [Benjamin Harrison](#) awarded about 20 soldiers the Medal of Honor.

Resilience

Three years after Wounded Knee, Professor Frederick Jackson Turner announced at a small gathering of historians in Chicago that the "frontier had closed," with his famous thesis arguing for American exceptionalism. James Earle Fraser's famed sculpture "End of the Trail," which debuted in 1915 at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, exemplified the idea of a broken, vanishing race. Ironically, just over 100 years later, the resilient American Indian population has survived into the 21st century and swelled to more than 5 million people.

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