

Oklahoma Archaeology Month

October 2016



PRESERVING A LANDSCAPE TO TELL A STORY
WASHITA BATTLEFIELD NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

PRESERVING A LANDSCAPE TO TELL A STORY

Archaeology at the Washita Battlefield

On the morning of November 27, 1868, the 7th Cavalry of the United States Army clashed with Black Kettle's band of Cheyenne on the banks of the Washita River in what is now Oklahoma. The bloody struggle resulted in the deaths of 80 Cheyenne people, including Chief Black Kettle himself. Today, this conflict is remembered by Southern Cheyenne and local Euro-American communities thanks to written records and oral histories. However, each community has differing accounts of the event. Using information from artifact analysis and systematic landscape studies, archaeologists can enhance our understanding of what occurred on that fateful day. The archaeological data have been collected over the course of several projects, some of which included representatives from the Cheyenne & Arapaho Tribes, the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, and volunteers from the Oklahoma Anthropological Society working alongside the professional archaeologists. It is through this contemporary evidence that archaeology can help unify the historical documents and oral histories to paint a picture of the past.

Tracing People through Archaeology

Imagine that your journal is the only written document that survives for the next 150 years. What would your journal say about our times? What would it include? What or whom would it leave out? Just like your journal, primary historical documents are like getting a telephone call from someone in the past. You can hear centuries' old thoughts and ideas as clearly as if they were sitting next to you. But such documents typically represent one perspective, and, inevitably, some groups of people and events are often left out. Through archaeology we can try to give a voice back to those who are missing from written accounts of the past. This is precisely what is happening at the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site in western Oklahoma.

Historical vs. Archaeological Evidence



Illustration of battle at Washita from *Pope's Weekly*, December 19, 1868. The caption reads, "Seven U.S. Cavalry charging into Black Kettle's village at Washita, November 27, 1868."

The image on the left is from a newspaper printed only four days after the conflict on the Washita River and depicts the events from the Euro-American perspective. It portrays a ragged 7th US Cavalry riding in to a large Cheyenne camp site, while the Cheyenne men hide in their tipis to pick off cavalry soldiers as they ride by. Who is missing in the picture? Do you think this is an accurate portrayal of the event? Why do you think the illustrator chose to portray the attack this way?

On the right is a picture of the battlefield site today. Among the many objects recovered during various archeological investigations at the battlefield were spent cartridge casings and bullets—most of which were from U.S. Army-owned Spanish rifles. By tracking the locations of these and other battle-related artifacts, archeologists were able to discern that at least 30 cavalry troopers had positioned themselves on the terraces and ridges overlooking and encompassing Black Kettle's village. Archeologists also recovered the remains of 700-800 horses, which likely represent evidence of the cavalry's slaughter of the Cheyenne horse herd as recorded in historical documents. What sort of picture does this paint of the event? Does it match the newspaper image? Does archaeological evidence give you a clearer understanding of the event?



The Red Hill at Washita Battlefield National Historic Site. Photograph courtesy of The Fort & Oklahoma Heritage.



Photograph of a handwritten journal entry by Captain John Smith, dated November 27, 1868, regarding the Washita River.



Photograph of a group of people, likely soldiers or settlers, standing in a line. This is a photograph of the Washita River, showing the site of the battle.

NHPA and Preservation

The national significance of the Washita Battlefield was acknowledged in 1965, when the site was designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL). Interestingly, this designation predated the passage of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966. Under the NHPA, all properties designated NHLs are automatically entered in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Indeed, on we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the NHPA, we honor the Act's efforts to protect and preserve the country's most significant historic resources—including the Washita Battlefield. This federal government's commitment to safeguard this site was further demonstrated in 1996 when the Battlefield became a unit of the National Park Service as the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site.