

On Guard (Denver, CO)

By Jillian Spivey Caddell



*On Guard at History Colorado. Photo
Credit: Lisa Bain*

Among the many Civil War monuments toppled in 2020 was *On Guard*, a monument to Union soldiers then located on the grounds of the Colorado State Capitol building in Denver. Dedicated in 1909, the bronze statue depicted a soldier holding a rifle and was designed by a Union veteran, Captain John “Jack” Howland. The monument was also called the Colorado Soldier’s Monument or the Denver Civil War Monument, and it showed the soldier, in sweeping overcoat and kepi hat with rifle at hand, active and watchful as it stared toward the western mountains. On the granite plinth were several tablets with inscriptions describing Colorado’s role in the American Civil War.

Colorado was organized as a territory during the first year of the conflict and was credited (according to the inscription) with enlisting nearly 5,000 volunteer soldiers in the war efforts—the “highest average of any state or territory with no draft or bounty,” the tablet boasts. The tablets then went on to list the battles and engagements participated in by Colorado soldiers. The last battle listed was “Sand Creek, Colo. 1864.”

Infamously, Sand Creek was not a battle but a massacre of Native Americans at the hands of Colorado troops led by Colonel John Chivington. An 1864 order required “friendly” Native Americans to report to Fort Lyon for their own safety. Standing orders within the territory, however, held that any Native American approaching a fort should be shot. A group of around 750 Arapaho and Cheyenne people camped on the banks of Big Sandy Creek while their leader Chief Black Kettle attempted to broker peace. Chivington’s command opened fire on the encampment on November 29, 1864, killing an estimated 230 people, many of whom were women, children, and the elderly.

The brutality of the massacre was not a fact of history lost to time or obfuscated by its perpetrators; on the contrary, the U.S. Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War called the event a “massacre” in 1865 and recommended that the then-Colorado territory governor be removed from office and Chivington and another major brought to trial for violating the usages of civilian warfare. Yet by the time “On Guard” was dedicated, Civil War nostalgia was at a fever pitch as the nation approached the conflict’s fiftieth anniversary, while the decades since 1865 had seen western Native American populations decimated by ongoing persecution by the U.S. Government. This systemic persecution was perhaps exemplified by the 1890 massacre of some three hundred Lakota by the U.S. Army at Wounded Knee – an event that shared many terrible resonances with the Sand Creek Massacre. Yet unlike the government’s censure of its troops’ actions at Sand Creek, after Wounded Knee the commanding officer was exonerated of responsibility, and twenty U.S. soldiers received Medals of Honor. Thus in 1909, amidst this atmosphere of anti-Indian sentiment and outright slaughter, Sand Creek could be considered a “battle or engagement,” along with several other “battles” between Native Americans and Colorado troops recorded on the statue’s inscriptive tablets, including Fremont’s Orchard and Smokey Hill.

Chair of the monument committee, Captain John (“Jack”) D. Howland, presided over the unveiling of those inscriptive tablets on the monument’s plinth. The dedication ceremony saw old soldiers gather from all parts of the state and the First Regiment band play “patriotic airs.” As the unveiling committee pulled the cords that removed the American flags that had been sheltering the statue, there was applause and a twenty one-gun salute. Then, according to newspaper reports, heavy rain halted the dedication ceremony and drove the crowd indoors to the chamber of the House of Representatives. The weather also led many of the planned speakers to miss the ceremony, including Colorado State Governor John F. Shafroth and General John Wingate. Frank C. Goudy, however, gave a “stirring patriotic address in which he said from the inspiration of the Civil war soldiers, Coloradans in the Spanish war drew inspiration.”

Thus, despite being a Union memorial, the Colorado Soldier’s Monument had long courted controversy. In 2002, in response to this controversy, a disclaimer plaque (authorized by the state senate) was placed on a low wall surrounding the monument and its landscaping. It acknowledged that “the controversy surrounding this Civil War Monument has become a symbol of Coloradans’ to understand and take responsibility for our past.” The plaque then went on to describe the events at Sand Creek, the genesis of the monument in 1909, and how its designers “mischaracterized” the massacre.

The years and decades following the 2002 addition saw progress made in recognizing the horrors of Sand Creek. In 2007 the Sand Creek massacre site was opened to the public as a national historic site, while the 150th anniversary of the massacre in 2014 was marked with a series of commemorative events and a 4-day spiritual healing run, which ended at the Capitol building in Denver. There, those remembering the massacre would have encountered the statue symbolizing Indigenous oppression and genocide at the hands of White colonizers. The statue stood another six years until protesters toppled and defaced it during protests for racial justice in the wake of George Floyd's killing by police.

After it was pulled down, the soldier statue was loaned to History Colorado, a museum in Denver, for one year. The museum displayed the statue alongside placards explaining its history and quotes from community leaders giving their thoughts on the monument. The exhibit also asked museum visitors to give their own thoughts on monuments and whether they are necessary. According to a report on the exhibit produced by History Colorado, "by far the most common sentiment our visitors left behind was that monuments are critical pieces of social memory. Visitors overwhelmingly agreed that statues and other monuments should remind Americans of both the good and bad aspects of our history, and that in remembering, we can avoid repeating bad choices." Since the exhibition's closure, the Capitol Building Advisory Committee has approved a plan to loan the statue to the state's Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, which will prepare a site for it that will be publicly accessible.

For now, a plinth covered in wooden boards sits outside the Colorado State Capitol's west end, but perhaps not for long. The state has planned to erect a monument to the Sand Creek Massacre based on a sculpture of a crying woman holding an empty bassinet by Cheyenne and Arapaho artist Harvey Pratt. Many have suggested that the former site of the Colorado Soldiers' Monument would be an ideal setting for the monument. A state government representative noted that after the massacre in 1864, Chivington and his troops returned to Denver bearing trophies of the massacre, including animals and buffalo robes. They carried the gruesome trophies through the city, ending up at the site of the future Capitol building. This is why the annual 173-mile Sand Creek spiritual healing run ends at the steps of the west side of the Capitol.

As of 2022, the wooden boards covering the wooden plinth that once supported *On Guard* have been posterized over with the words "Colorado For All," a phrase used by the current governor in his political campaigns. At its dedication in 1909, the plinth and the statue upon it were tools for political messaging, too, erasing the true nature of the Sand Creek massacre from Colorado history by framing it as a battle. If a monument to Sand Creek is eventually raised there, it will represent the

culmination of more than a century of struggle for Indigenous autonomy and representation in the wake of government-sponsored violence, enshrined as history for all to see.

Resources and Further Reading

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