

Kit Carson monument

A sandstone obelisk sits in front of the south entrance of the U.S. Courthouse on Federal Place, next to the post office. The panel inscriptions on the monument reads: "He Led The Way," and "Kit Carson Died May 23, 1868; Age 59 years".

On May 30, 1885 a dedication ceremony was held with more than 5,000 people in attendance. Col. Wynkoop, who served with Carson during the Confederate battle in New Mexico, opened the ceremony with brief remarks. In Wynkoop's memoirs, he wrote, "Gen. Carson knew how to lead men into battle and keep them there."

Christopher "Kit" Houston Carson, was born December 24, 1809, Madison County, Kentucky, U.S. and died May 23, 1868. He was a famed fur trapper, guide, U.S. Indian agent and brigadier general of volunteers in the Civil War and Indian Wars. More than a tribute to a man, the monument is recognition of Carson's participation, leadership, and society's values that were upheld at the time significant events occurred. Events that impacted the communities of New Mexico and shaped the history of human occupation and land use in the region.

The history of the 19th century shows great changes in land use and governmental policies, and also illustrates the atrocities of war. Bitter battles continue to rage today across the Southwest, over human rights, freedom of religion, access to and protection of sacred sites, control of land and natural resources, environmental stewardship and development.

When General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at the Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865, the Civil War ended and The Union of States effectively began. Enlistment records and company musters for Colonel Christopher Carson's New Mexican Volunteer Regiments, shows more than 500 men participated in military efforts under his leadership.

Although President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, issued September 1862, officially ended the practice of slavery, human trafficking and slave labor continued to be practiced in New Mexico until the early 1900s. Union forces pushed Confederates out of New Mexico into Texas and down the Rio Grande into Mexico. Determined to eliminate Indian raiding in New Mexico, the United States government turned Civil War forces from fighting Confederate onto fighting what New Mexico deemed as "hostile" Indians. Governor Calhoun issued a second proclamation on March 18, 1851, which "authorized the attack on any hostile tribe of Indians that may have entered settlements for the purpose of plunder and depredation...and directed or ordered residents to capture the property from any hostile tribe of Indians".

On October 31, 1862 Congress authorized the construction of Fort Sumner. The fort was named for General Edwin Vose Sumner who had died on March 21, 1863 while still in service. The purpose and function of the fort was to afford protection to settlers in the Pecos River valley from the Mescalero Apache, Kiowa, and Comanche, and to house captured Mescalero Apache. Despite warnings that the site was unsuitability for a large human occupation, Carleton created a 40-square-mile (100 km²) area, known as Bosque Redondo, for the purpose of teaching the Mescalero Apache and the Navajo how to be self-sufficient modern farmers. "Bosque Redondo", means "round grove of trees," and likely referred to the location containing many cottonwood trees near the Pecos River in Fort Sumner, NM.

When Fall 1862 arrived and Navajos failed to surrender, "Kit" Carson, approving of the U.S. Army's "scorched earth policy," sent forces from Fort Defiance to burn Navajos' crops, destroy their food caches, raze their hogans, poison their water supply, and shoot their horses and sheep. As the first snows fell, Carson dispatched patrols to harass Navajo bands, preventing them from hunting game or gathering wild food plants.

Upon learning that Carleton intended for him to pursue the Navajos in an effort to relocate them to the Bosque Redondo reservation, Carson tendered a letter of resignation, dated February 3, 1863. Carleton refused his resignation and ordered Carson to engage in battle with the Chiricahua Apache band in the Gila Mountains of southwest New Mexico. Again, in the summer of 1863, Carson's troops destroyed Navajo crops, livestock, and homes. Thousands of Navajo were living in fear, stricken by starvation; many children and elderly died from exposure to the cold. Hundreds were lured by promises of protection from slave raiding, clothing, blankets, food and livestock and surrendered to the military at Fort Defiance and Fort Wingate.

General Carleton's Order No. 15 which allowed Kit Carson to strike Navajos:

"For a long time past the Navajoe Indians have murdered and robbed the people of New Mexico. Last winter when eighteen of their chiefs came to Santa Fe to have a talk, they were warned, -- and were told to inform their people, - that for these murders and robberies the tribe must be punished, unless some binding guarantees should be given that in [the] future these outrages should cease. No such guarantees have yet been given: But on the contrary, additional murders, and additional robberies have been perpetrated upon the persons and property of unoffending citizens. It is therefore ordered that Colonel CHRISTOPHER ["KIT"] CARSON, with a proper military force proceed without delay to a point in the Navajoe country known as Pueblo Colorado [now Ganado, Arizona], and there establish a defensible Depot for his supplies and Hospital; and thence to prosecute a vigorous war upon the men of this tribe until it is considered at these Head Quarters that they have been effectually punished for their long continued atrocities."

*Brigadier General, James H. Carleton,
General Order No. 15, June 15th 1863,
published in L. C. Kelly's book Navajo Roundup*

On July 20, 1863 General Carlton ordered all Navajos to surrender, after that date, every Navajo would be treated as hostile and dealt with accordingly. Carlton immediately enacted a "shoot-to-kill" policy; all Mescalero men, wherever and whenever found were to be shot, with women and children taken as prisoners though unharmed. As a result of Carlton's policy, Navajos and/or Mescaleros who refused to surrender unconditionally were instantly killed.

In a letter (printed in L. C. Kelley's book, Navajo Roundup) to Adjutant General of the Army, dated February 27, 1864, Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas reported, "What with the Navajos I have captured and those who have surrendered, we have now over three thousand, and will, without doubt soon have the whole tribe. I do not believe they number now much over five thousand all told."

Not all of the Navajo surrendered, many evaded the U. S. Army by hiding in small groups near Navajo Mountain, the Grand Canyon, in the territory of the Chiricahua Apache, Mexico, and in parts of Utah and Colorado. General Carlton urged Victorio and the Warm Springs Apache band to surrender, but the leader declared that he'd rather die fighting rather than relocate. Believing many more Navajos would surrender if Navajo leader Manuelito agreed to relocate, Carson sent a company into Canyon de Chelly,

January 1864, in search of Manuelito. Captain John Thompson cut down Navajo peach orchards during July- August 1864. (New Mexican Lives, pg.187).

Many Navajos believe “Kit” Carson is the man who led the “scorched earth policy,” and feel that it was the most powerful weapon used against them. It was the final measure that broke the people into surrendering, and in doing so, brought tremendous suffering. An estimated 2,000 deaths, and unfathomable hardships were experienced by the Dine’ during the period of The Long Walk.

The incarceration of the Navajo and the Apache at Bosque Redondo serves as a reminder to all, that no people regardless of race, color, or beliefs, should have to face such harsh treatment as what they experienced. The families of the survivors of the Long Walk refer to this period as, “Hwééldi,” and have not forgotten the experience; their stories continue to be shared and passed down generation-to-generation.

In 2018, the Navajo Nation issued a proclamation recognizing the 150th year anniversary of the signing of Naalstoos Sáńi (The Treaty of 1868), it reads:

“Whereas, we have the strength as a people to maintain these ties throughout the Hwééldi, the forced removal of Diné in the Long Walk, when our people were rounded up and forced to walk three hundred miles to be interned at Bosque Redondo. Many were tortured, raped, and killed, including women in childbirth and children. Still, we persevered. Our ceremonies persevered the Dine as a people and a culture, until the signing of Naalstoos Sáńi created recognition of our Sovereignty by the United States.”

Although some regard Carson as a hero in the West, others consider him a war criminal. Several places have been named in honor of the frontiersman: the Carson National Forest in New Mexico, a river located in Dayton, Nevada, the Kit Carson Peak, a high mountain summit, Fort Carson military base, and a town in Cheyenne County Colorado were named after him. There is a Kit Carson Road located in Taos, and a highway named after Carson in Cimarron, New Mexico that connects to Colorado. An elementary school in the South Valley of Albuquerque bears his name, and a school in Colorado whose town was located near the site where Kit Carson traded with the Arapahoe and Cheyenne nations.

On July 8, 2014 the Taos Town Council voted 3-1, to separate the park into two parts, keeping the name Kit Carson Memorial Park for the cemetery where Carson and his wife Josefa are buried, and removing the name from the town’s central public park. The council suggested renaming the park Red Willow as a gesture of reconciliation toward Taos Pueblo; however, Taos pueblo officials were not consulted prior to the decision about the name change. A committee of representatives from the Taos pueblo, the town government and the public were supposed to form and help choose a new name for the recreational section of the park that hosts craft fairs, concerts and ball games. The committee never formed, and as of 2021, the name of the park remains Kit Carson Memorial Park.

On September 10, 2020, the Clark County School Board in Nevada voted to rescind the name of Kit Carson Elementary School. The board expressed concerns over Carson’s role in the death of hundreds of Native Americans during the colonization of the West, as well as his leadership in the Navajo Long Walk which forced Navajo people to walk from modern-day Arizona to New Mexico during the winter of 1864. The board renamed the elementary school after Helen Anderson Toland, who was the principal of the elementary school during the 1960s, when Las Vegas, Nevada schools were still segregated.

On November 18, 2021 the Navajo Nation Naabik'iyati' Committee passed legislation Bill 0213-21, sponsored by Delegate Mark Freeland; an action requesting the state of New Mexico to remove the name of Christopher “Kit” Carson from all monuments, state parks, government buildings, highways and streets within the state of New Mexico. This bill will likely be amended to include Arizona, Colorado and Utah.

From 1864 - 1868, an estimated 8,500 Navajo people endured what Freeland’s legislation described as “brutal” methods of pillaging and destroying livestock and crops which were successful. In March 1864, the Navajo people began the “Long Walk” to the military concentration camp at Bosque Redondo.

Bill 0213-21 says:

“Carson and his troops terrorized the Navajo people by burning crops, destroying homes, and slaughtering and killing livestock. While imprisoned at Fort Sumner, Navajos experienced slavery, starvation, prostitution, and disease. It is estimated that between 1864 and 1868, more than 2,000 Navajos died at Fort Sumner. Kit Carson’s troops placed the deceased’s remains in unmarked graves and prohibited Navajos from following their traditional burial practices.”

On November 19, 2021, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland formally established a process to review and replace derogatory names of the nation’s geographic features. She also declared “squaw” to be a derogatory term and ordered the Board on Geographic Names – the federal body tasked with naming geographic places – to implement procedures to remove the term from federal usage. The term has historically been used as an offensive ethnic, racial, and sexist slur, particularly for Indigenous women. In 2021, there were more than 650 federal land units that contain the term, according to a database maintained by the Board on Geographic Names.

A **Derogatory Geographic Names Task Force** that includes representatives from federal land management agencies, as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion experts will engage in Tribal consultation and consider public feedback on proposed name changes starting in 2022. Additionally, Secretarial Order 3405 created a Federal Advisory Committee to broadly solicit, review, and recommend changes to other derogatory geographic and federal land unit names.

The **Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names** includes representation from Indian Tribes, Tribal and Native Hawaiian organizations, civil rights, anthropology, and history experts, and members of the general public. The purpose of the committee is to establish a more expedient process to solicit and assist with proposals to the Secretary to change derogatory names, and will include engagement with Tribes, state and local governments, and the public.

If the name of Kit Carson on federal land units is reviewed by the Department of Interior’s Task Force, then the Federal Advisory Committee would then be responsible for the review of renaming proposals, in consultation with local community representatives.

Sources:

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2. Simmons, Marc. Kit Carson and His Three Wives: A Family History. University of New Mexico Press, May, 2011.
3. [Letter, Captain Lafayette McLaws to Lieutenant Lucius L. Rich, December 16, 1860 | Western Waters Digital Library | J. Willard Marriott Digital Library \(utah.edu\)](#)
4. Taylor, James. Bloody Valverde: A Civil War Battle on the Rio Grande, February 21, 1862. University of New Mexico Press, March, 1999.
5. [Diary of Christopher Carson's Navajo Campaign, first part - UNM CSWR William G. Ritch Papers Collection - CONTENTdm Title](#)
6. Carleton's quote on Mescalero Apache. Eigen's Political and Historical Quotations
7. [Santa Fe's forgotten monument to Kit Carson | Local News | santafenewmexican.com](#)
8. [Kit Carson Elementary to be renamed after Black principal | AP News](#)
9. [Rename Kit Carson Park? | Opinion | taosnews.com](#)
10. [Delegate to request getting rid of Kit Carson's name - Navajo Times](#)
11. [Secretary Haaland Takes Action to Remove Derogatory Names from Federal Lands | U.S. Department of the Interior \(doi.gov\)](#)

For Navajo perspectives on the Long Walk:

1. Denetdale, Jennifer Nez. Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita 3rd ed. Edition. University of Arizona Press; 3rd ed. edition (June 1, 2007).
2. Johnson, Broderick H. ed., Navajo Stories of the Long Walk Period (Tsaile, AZ: Diné Press, 1973), 274.
3. Carleton, James Henry. 1814-1873. To the people of New Mexico. This paper sets forth some of the principal reasons why the Navajo Indians have been located upon a reservation at the Bosque Redondo. [Catalog Record: To the people of New Mexico. This paper sets... | HathiTrust Digital Library](#)
4. Oral history stories of the Long Walk = Hwéeldi Baa Hané / by the Diné of the Eastern Region of the Navajo Reservation ; stories collected and recorded by the Title VII Bilingual Staff. Crownpoint, N.M. : Lake Valley Navajo School, 1991. [LC Catalog - Item Information \(Full Record\) \(loc.gov\)](#)
5. Bighorse. Tiana. Bighorse the Warrior. University of Arizona Press; Reissue edition (May 1, 1994).
6. [History » New Mexico Historic Sites \(nmhistoricsites.org\)](#)
7. [150 Years After the Long Walk \(newmexicomagazine.org\)](#)
8. [The Navajo Nation Treaty Proclamation.pdf \(navajonationcouncil.org\)](#)
9. [Fort Sumner Historic Site/Bosque Redondo Memorial » New Mexico Historic Sites \(nmhistoricsites.org\)](#)

Learn more about the culture and history of the Mescalero Apache

1. [Our Culture - Official Website of the Mescalero Apache Tribe](#)
2. Navajo Nation: [History \(navajo-nsn.gov\)](#)

[Interview with Oakee James - UNM CSWR American Indian Oral History Navajo Transcripts - CONTENTdm Title](#)

[Map of the route pursued in 1849 by the U.S. Troops - New Mexico Waters - CONTENTdm Title \(unm.edu\)](#)

Map of the route pursued in 1849 by the U.S. Troops under the command of Bvt. Lieut. Col. JNO. M. Washington, Governor of New Mexico in an expedition against the Navajos [sic] Indians, by James H. Simpson, 1st Lieut. T. Engrs., assisted by Mr. Edward M. Kern, constructed under the general orders of Col. J. J. Abert. Chief Topl. Engrs. Kern, Edward M. (drawn by, Santa Fe, N.M.); P.S. Duval's Steam Lith. Press, Philadelphia; Shoemaker, J. G. (engr.), Senate Ex. Doc. 1st Sess. 31st. Cong. No. 64, 1849.