

General George Armstrong Custer

(1839-1876)

Custer was born in New Rumley, Ohio, and spent much of his childhood with a half-sister in Monroe, Michigan. Immediately after high school he enrolled in West Point, where he utterly failed to distinguish himself in any positive way. Several days after graduating last in his class, he failed in his duty as officer of the guard to stop a fight between two cadets. He was court-martialed and saved from punishment only by the huge need for officers with the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.

In 1873, Custer was sent to the Dakota Territory, the northernmost part of the land acquired in the Louisiana Purchase, to protect a railroad survey party against the Lakota Sioux Indians. On August 4, 1873, near the Tongue River, Custer and the 7th U.S. Cavalry clashed for the first time with the Indians. Only one man on each side was killed.

In 1874, Custer led an expedition into the Black Hills, called Paha Sapa by the Lakota Indians, and announced the discovery of gold on French Creek near present-day Custer, South Dakota. Custer's announcement triggered the [Black Hills Gold Rush](#) and gave rise to the lawless town of [Deadwood, South Dakota](#). The **Black Hills Gold Rush** took place in [Dakota Territory](#) in the [United States](#), and is generally considered to have started [1860-70](#). It reached a peak in 1876.

In 1876, Custer was scheduled to lead part of the anti-Lakota expedition. He almost didn't make it, however, because his March testimony about Indian Service corruption so infuriated President Ulysses S. Grant that the president relieved Custer of his command. Popular disgust, however, forced Grant to reverse his decision. Custer went West to meet his destiny.

The original United States plan for defeating the Lakota called for three cavalry forces, one under the command of Custer, to trap the bulk of the Lakota and Cheyenne population between them and deal them a crushing defeat. Custer, however, advanced much more quickly than he had been ordered to do, and neared what he thought was a large Indian village on the morning of June 25, 1876. Custer's rapid advance had put him far ahead of the other two slower-moving infantry brigades. Unbeknownst to Custer, one of the other forces had been turned back by [Crazy Horse](#) and his band at Rosebud Creek in what is now known as Montana.

On the verge of what seemed to him a certain and glorious victory for both the United States and himself, Custer ordered an immediate attack on the Indian village. Contemptuous of Indian military prowess, he split his forces into three parts to ensure that fewer Indians would escape. The attack was one of the greatest fiascos of the United States Army, as thousands of Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors forced Custer's unit back onto a long, dusty ridge parallel to the [Little Bighorn](#), surrounded them, and killed all 210 of them.

Today the site of the battle is known as Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument, under the U. S. National Park Service. It is located in eastern Montana.

Custer's blunders cost him his life but gained him everlasting fame. His defeat at the Little Bighorn made the life of what would have been an obscure 19th century military figure into the subject of countless songs, books and paintings. His widow, Elizabeth Bacon Custer, did what she could to further his reputation, writing laudatory accounts of his life that portrayed him as not only a military genius but also a refined and cultivated man, a patron of the arts, and a budding statesman.

Countless paintings of "Custer's Last Stand" were made, including one mass-distributed by the Anheuser-Busch brewing company. All of these paintings -- as did the misnomer "the Custer massacre" -- depicted Custer as a gallant victim, surrounded by bloodthirsty savages intent upon his annihilation. Forgotten were the facts that he had started the battle by attacking the Indian village, and that most of Indians present were forced to surrender within a year of their greatest battlefield triumph.

An excerpt from resources presented in *The West*, a PBS documentary series.

http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/a_c/custer.htm

New Perspectives on THE WEST, a PBS documentary series by WGBH

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/>

Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument <http://www.nps.gov/libi/>

Photos: <http://www.nps.gov/archive/libi/photos.htm>

Dakota Territory http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dakota_Territory

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Hills