

THE SAND CREEK MASSACRE

In 7 hours, the Sand Creek Massacre changed American history.

SILAS SOULE



“The Captain”, a feature film about Silas Soule.

A Donald L. Vasicek Film – <http://captainmovie.weebly.com/>

Forgotten Colorado Hero

Provided by: Colo. & Kansas Hist. Societies

Contributed by: Larry French on 10/30/2006

As a child I was an avid student of history. In school I would take my history textbooks home the first day of class and read them cover-to-cover. I was unable to put the books down, enthralled by the details of what had happened in years gone by. My interest in history has always been keen. I have read many history books.

A few years ago I read for the first time about a true hero in Colorado history. I was surprised that in all my schooling, in all my reading to that point, I had never heard of this man before.

He was a man of strong character and moral courage. He was a man of conviction. He was a man who knew the right thing to do and had the will to do it, no matter what the personal consequences. I was stunned that most Americans had never heard of him.



*SILAS
SOULE*

Only a few were aware of his heroic efforts on behalf of oppressed peoples in our country, both slaves and Indians. He only received brief mention in texts and articles that dealt with abolition, “bleeding Kansas,” the Battle of Glorieta Pass, and the Sand Creek Massacre. That man was Silas S. Soule.

The more I read about this man, the more I wanted to know. I went to the Western History/Genealogy Department of the Denver Public Library, the Stephen H. Hart Library of the Colorado Historical Society, the National Archives at the Denver Federal Center, and the Penrose Library at the University of Denver to find and read everything that was available on him. What I found included not just articles and brief mentions in books, but also his original letters, notes, affidavits, invoices, and orders, as well as articles from the 1861 through 1865 Rocky Mountain News.

Again I was stunned to find that there was not one book available that focused on him: his life, his accomplishments, his courage, his story. Most of our well-known American heroes are featured in many books that bear their names. This relatively unknown, forgotten, true Colorado hero was featured in none.

I visited his grave in the Riverside Cemetery in northeast Denver, marked by a simple gravestone not unlike those of his military brethren crowded around him. The surface of his grave was covered in dirt, sand, and clumps of parched grass, an ironic similarity to the ground of Sand Creek. A simple fist-sized rock lay upon the top of his gravestone – the

only thing that distinguished this courageous man from those around him. I assumed that it was placed there as a sign of respect by the Cheyenne and Arapaho descendants of Sand Creek who had come there on Nov. 29, 2003 as part of the “139th Anniversary of the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre” to honor Captain Silas Soule with a Sunrise Ceremony and a Four Mile Spiritual Healing Run to the State Capital.

They knew and appreciated what this man had done. Most of us do not. As I walked away from his grave I was beset with a powerful feeling that his lying there in relative anonymity was somehow very wrong. What follows is my humble attempt to redress that wrong.

Silas Soule was born into an ardent abolitionist family in Maine in 1838, the second son of Amasa and Sophia Soule. Early in Silas’ life the family moved to Massachusetts. Silas then moved in 1855 with his mother and two younger sisters Annie and Emily to join their father and older brother William on a farmstead just south of Lawrence, Kansas. Lawrence was at that time the center of the conflict between “Free Staters” and pro-slavery forces. The conflict, known as “Bleeding Kansas” was to determine whether Kansas would enter the Union as a Free State or Slave State.

Inspired by their reading of Uncle Tom’s Cabin Soule’s family became active as leaders of the Underground Railroad. Silas as a young lad of 17 was already assisting escaped slaves to find their freedom. In 1859 he helped to plan and execute the escape of abolitionist Lawrence physician John Doy from a St. Joseph, Missouri jail. Pro-slavery forces from Missouri had illegally incarcerated Dr. Doy there. They had crossed into Kansas and chanced upon Dr. Doy on the open road near Lawrence as he was trying to help a group of escaped slaves.

Doy’s escape from the St. Joseph jail was successful. It was accomplished quite cleverly without violence by 10 men from Lawrence who came to be known as the Jayhawker 10. Silas Soule was one of the ten. Due to his key role in the success of this escape, Soule was asked to assist in the planned escape of well known abolitionist John Brown from the Charlestown jail in Virginia (now West Virginia.)

Brown had been incarcerated there after his ill-advised attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, part of an effort to lead and arm a slave rebellion. That escape failed because Brown refused to cooperate. Brown felt he could better serve the cause as a martyr.

Upon Soule’s return to Lawrence he found that many of his friends had been drawn by the lure of gold to the mountains west of Denver City in the territory of what would become

Colorado. Silas determined to join them. He worked claims in the mountains west of the city around the present sites of Central City, Evergreen, Idaho Springs, and Empire. He did so until the onset of the Civil War in 1861. He then not only joined the 1st Colorado Volunteers, but actually helped to recruit fellow miners from our area to Company K. He was awarded a commission as the First Lieutenant for his efforts.

He participated in the Battle of Glorieta Pass, the “Gettysburg of the West” in New Mexico from March 26 to 28, 1862, handling himself in battle “as cool and collected as if on parade.” He helped save the Union, as he and the rest of his fellow “Pikes Peakers”, aided by New Mexico volunteers and regular Union troops, drove the Confederate invaders of Sibley’s Brigade back to Texas from whence they came. The Confederates had intended to capture the Colorado gold fields and eventually extend the Confederacy to the Pacific Ocean through southern California. Denying these resources to the Confederacy certainly contributed in no small way to their eventual defeat and the preservation of the Union.

During 1863 Soule continued to serve in the army, fighting Indians and occasional rebels. He recruited additional troops to assist in the defense of the citizens of Colorado territory. He was well known, respected, and liked within Denver City. His sense of humor and wit made him popular with his men and citizens alike.

In 1864, now a Captain in the 1st Colorado Calvary, he along with his commanding officer at Ft. Lyon, Major Ned Wynkoop, participated in the Camp Weld Council on Sep. 28, 1864. They brought Chief Black Kettle and a group of peace chiefs to Denver City to meet with Territorial Governor John Evans and the Commander of the Military District, Colonel John Chivington. Soule and Wynkoop tried in vain to get Evans and Chivington to negotiate peace with Black Kettle’s group.

Later that year Capt. Soule, as commander of Company D, 1st Colorado Calvary, was present at the Sand Creek Massacre on Nov. 29, 1864. The night before he had attempted with great emotion to convince Col. Chivington, the commander of all troops present, to not attack Black Kettle’s peaceful Indian village at Sand Creek. Soule did so with such passion that Chivington threatened to have him put in chains. Only when Chivington assured him that the camp would not be attacked, did Soule cease his objections.

The day of the massacre when Chivington went back on his word and commenced an attack on Black Kettle’s camp, Soule refused to order his men to fire on the defenseless and peaceful Indians, primarily old men, women, and young children. He even went so far as to order his men to take up a position between the Indians and the attacking troops, allowing more of the Indians to escape the massacre.

Despite threats against his life, Soule later testified against Col. Chivington. Soule's letters to family friend Walt Whitman and Major Wynkoop were among the primary reasons the Battle of Sand Creek was investigated. His testimony in early 1865 as the military and the US Congress both investigated Sand Creek, was listed among the reasons that the "battle" was reclassified a massacre.

On April 23, 1865, mere weeks after Soule's marriage to the young and beautiful Hersa Coberly, while serving as Acting Provost Marshall of Denver, Capt. Soule was assassinated by a member of the 2nd Colorado Cavalry. It was suspected at the time that Col. Chivington directed the assassin.

The citizens of Denver City turned out in great numbers for the funeral of their beloved Captain. He was buried at City Cemetery. A large memorial stone six feet high was erected above his grave. Soule was 27 years old when he died.

On April 12, 1867, two years after his death, Capt. Silas S. Soule was brevetted a Major in recognition of his meritorious service to our nation.

1. (Boldly They Rode, Ovando Hollister 1863 p. 70)

POSTSCRIPT :

When City Cemetery was closed and converted into Cheesman Park starting in 1893, many of the bodies were removed and transported to Riverside Cemetery. When Soule's body was transported, his large memorial stone was left behind and lost to history.

Concurring Perspective as spoken by one of our distinguished past US Senators:

Excerpt from "Speech on the Passage of the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site Study." Oct. 6, 1998 By Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, descendant of a Cheyenne survivor of the Sand Creek Massacre and the only Native American to ever serve in the United States Senate – U.S. Government Printing Office:

"Finally, on this occasion I want to pay a long overdue tribute to one young Coloradan, Captain Silas S. Soule, whose actions over one hundred and thirty years ago saved many innocent Cheyenne and Arapaho lives on that fateful day at Sand Creek. When Captain Soule, who was under Colonel Chivington's command, heard of Chivington's plan to attack a peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho winter encampment at Sand Creek, he vigorously tried to persuade Chivington to abandon the plan. However, Colonel Chivington, who was known to say "Nits make Lice" as a justification for killing innocent Cheyenne and Arapaho women and children, could not be dissuaded.

When Chivington ordered his men to attack the peaceful Sand Creek encampment, the vast majority of which were women, children, and elderly noncombatants, Captain Soule steadfastly refused to order his Company to open fire. Captain Soule's refusal allowed many, perhaps hundreds, of innocent Cheyenne and Arapaho to flee the bloody killing field through his Company's line.

While the Sand Creek Massacre was at first hailed as a great victory, Captain Soule was determined to make the horrific truth of the massacre known. Even though he was jailed, intimidated, threatened, and even shot at, Soule refused to compromise himself and made his voice heard through reports that reached all the way from Colorado to Washington, and even to the floor of the U.S. Senate. Even with the bloody carnage of the Civil War, the brutal atrocities at Sand Creek shocked the nation.

During hearings in Denver, Captain Soule's integrity and unwavering testimony turned the tide against the once popular Chivington and the other men who participated in the massacre and mutilations at Sand Creek. Captain Soule fully realized that telling the truth about the massacre could cost him his life, even telling a good friend that he fully expected to be killed for his testimony. He was right.

Walking home with his new bride a short time later, Silas Soule was ambushed and shot in the head by an assassin who had participated in the Sand Creek Massacre. Silas Soule's funeral, held just a few weeks after his wedding, was one of the most attended in Denver up until that time.

While Captain Silas Soule's name has largely faded into history, he stands out as one of the few bright rays of light in the moral darkness that surrounds the Sand Creek Massacre. He should be remembered.”

For more biographical information on Silas Soule, visit Byron Strom's site, silas-soule.com.

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