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Joyce Herold

*Denver Museum of Nature and Science*

Gordon L. Yellowman Sr.

*Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma*

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## THE WASHITA CHIEF BLANKET: PART II, PROVENANCE AND ETHNOHISTORY

Joyce Herold, Curator of Ethnology,  
Denver Museum of Nature and Science,  
and  
Gordon L. Yellowman, Sr., Cultural Resources,  
Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma

A remarkable historic textile treasure of the early American West, the Washita Chief Blanket, originated in the early to mid-1800s trade to the Plains Indians, served as a fine garment among Southern Cheyenne people, and in 1868 survived an Indian Wars battle along the Washita River in western Oklahoma Territory. Since 1968 the blanket has been preserved at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. The preceding article by Whitehead and Herold entitled “The Washita Chief Blanket: Part I, Textile Analysis” introduces and illustrates the object and presents the current research design, textile description of the blanket, and comparisons with Southwestern blankets. This article further delineates the Washita Blanket’s ethnohistoric and cultural context and provenance, and begins to explore its possible origins and distinctiveness as a trade item.

### Cultural-historic Context

The Cheyenne, or Tsistsistas, meaning *The People*, in the 1830s were established buffalo hunters in the west central Great Plains, ranging from the Rocky Mountains to the areas of later western Nebraska and Kansas. With herds of Spanish horses they transported villages of hide-and-pole lodges in rhythm with seasonal buffalo migrations. Their material culture was based on the bountiful larder of the buffalo and on trading hides for cloth, knives, and other implements and luxuries. A rich community and ceremonial life featured men’s military societies and a women’s quillworking society. Contacts with Americans followed trading routes along the Platte and Arkansas rivers and with Spanish colonists, the trails to the northern provinces of a newly independent (in 1821) Mexico. As more and more wagon trains rolled along the Santa Fe Trail, Cheyennes increasingly were attracted to the southern edge of their territory, especially to Bent’s Old Fort on the Arkansas River (near the present town of La Junta, Colorado). In 1848 United States officially took over heavily Hispanic Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California.

Probably near the middle of the nineteenth century a Mexican, Spanish, or Euro American weaver produced our fine warm woolen blanket, boldly patterned in bands of red and dark brown (see previous article, Figure 1). It was an unusual eclectic piece that used Spanish-introduced churra sheep’s wool woven on a floor loom to make a piece of wearing apparel in a style favored by early Plains Indian people. The banded shoulder blanket originated with native weaver-wearers of northern New Spain (later the American Southwest) and became best known from the widely traded Navajo shoulder blanket, later termed the “First Phase Navajo Chiefs Blanket.”

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Like axes and kettles, wheat flour and coffee, lengths of cloth and hanks of glass beads, this new expression of a banded blanket became a valued trade item to Indian people clinging to traditional lands and buffalo sustenance as the western frontier of the United States advanced. The blanket and others like it passed via trade fairs, American and Spanish bison robe traders, or capture into the hands of native buffalo-hunters east of the Rocky Mountains, including Cheyennes. Someone in Cheyenne Peace Chief Black Kettle's band obtained this particular blanket. Probably an elder woman, a chief's wife, or a Cheyenne chief himself proudly draped it over the shoulders or around the waist.

The early setting of the trade blanket in the 1850s was the vast Prairies and Plains region controlled by tribes of hunter-gatherers and a few farmers. But by the late 1860s many restless Civil War veterans were heading west to seek fortunes in mining and agriculture. As the frontier line for 38 million Americans extended ever further west, traditional Cheyenne lands were designated as states or territories and were crossed by railroads under construction. White encroachment intensified into cultural collision between pioneers and Indians. U.S. government policy sought to relegate tribes to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). Some Plains tribes accepted life on reservations but others continued to live and hunt dwindling buffalo herds on traditional lands. Their warriors rose against white settlers and travelers. A seemingly endless series of Indian raids, retaliations by U.S. forces, treaties, and broken treaties ensued.

The particular story of interest to us turned bitter on the wintry dawn of November 27, 1868: the Seventh U.S. Cavalry rode into the peaceful, slumbering Washita valley village of the subject blanket and attacked with great destruction and loss of life. A pivotal late Indian Wars event, the Washita Massacre, as many now call it, set in train the military defeat of the persevering Plains war chiefs and the near annihilation of a way of life.

Both Cheyenne and military contexts of the Washita Massacre can be better understood by turning back four years to the better-known Sand Creek Massacre in eastern Colorado. On November 29, 1864, despite the fact that American and white flags flew to indicate the camp of Cheyenne Chiefs Black Kettle and White Antelope was at peace and under military protection, volunteer troops under Colonel J. M. Chivington attacked and destroyed the village. In the aftermath, public outcry arose over what happened, the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers military society responded aggressively against whites, and Sand Creek took on grave historic and symbolic importance in Indian-white relations.

Chief Black Kettle escaped from the Sand Creek tragedy with some of his band and by 1868 they were in western Oklahoma Territory along the Washita River, called Lodge Pole River by the Cheyennes. In early November Black Kettle petitioned for protection at Fort Cobb but the respected Peace Chief was told that the commander had no protective authority and he returned to camp with flour, blankets, and other goods.

The Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867 had convinced few Arapahos, Cheyennes, Kiowas, and Plains Apaches to settle on reservations and war parties continued to raid white settlements in Kansas. "Punishment must follow crime," enunciated Major General

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Philip H. Sheridan and he mounted a winter campaign to surprise Indian camps. The Seventh Cavalry led by Lieutenant Colonel George A. Custer marched south with about eight hundred troopers, traveling through a foot of new snow, and picked up the trail of supposed Cheyenne raiders. In four days the force reached a position near an Indian encampment in the Washita valley. Before dawn on November 27, the troopers noticed the morning star and then attacked fifty-one lodges.

The village was quickly captured. Custer reported about a hundred Cheyennes, two officers, and nineteen enlisted men killed. Indian accounts claimed eleven warriors plus nineteen women and children killed, including Black Kettle and his wife. Custer ordered property seized from the lodges. Then he had the lodges burned and 875 Indian ponies destroyed. Fifty-three women, girls, children, and babies were taken prisoner.

Following the Washita attack, losing winter supplies and protection from attack, many Southern Plains bands accepted reservation life. Official reports, memoirs, and histories of the late Indian Wars emphasize Washita as the significant "battle" that began to bring the Southern Plains tribes to heel (Sheridan 1882:14-18; Schmitt and Brown 1948:43-45; Brady 1971:146-169). Even at the time, however, many easterners found Washita "little more than another Sand Creek Massacre [that] enhanced Custer's reputation as a dashing cavalier and launched his reputation as an Indian fighter" (Viola 1999:7). Today revisionist historians and many others join Cheyenne descendents in seeing Washita as a controversial and tragic massacre.

#### Provenance of the Blanket

The research process initially set questions about object credentials. Could the records passed to the Museum about the blanket and the buffalo robe be verified as more than mere folklore in the vast popular treasury of famous but unproven "Indian collectibles"? The documentation quickly proved reliable: the Washita attributions correlate exactly with other records about military events, the objects, and the collector. Archival and literature search revealed the detailed history of the Washita-Cheyenne provenance and the later non-Indian ownership of the blanket and robe, as reported below.

Graduated from West Point in 1867 and commissioned a second lieutenant, Edward Settle Godfrey was assigned to the Seventh Cavalry commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. On November 27, 1868, Godfrey (now a first lieutenant) took part in his first engagement, the attack on Black Kettle's village along the Washita River. His participation there is well documented in the official military account (Sheridan 1882), by Godfrey himself in an eyewitness account (Godfrey, E. S. 1928), and in Stan Hoig's definitive study *The Battle of the Washita* (1976). During the attack Godfrey was assigned to lead Troop K through the village without stopping in order to round up pony herds on the other side. He also pursued escaping Arapaho Indian allies of the Cheyenne, held them off in a counterattack, and reported but could not pursue another Arapaho action. Following the battle he was ordered to scour the village and capture all valuables and to destroy remaining Cheyenne property. He led the guard on prisoners as all rode back to the expedition's headquarters at Camp Supply.

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Godfrey, thus, by order focused his attention on the contents of the Washita camp. His reminiscences note blankets and buffalo robes piled in the village (Godfrey, E. S. 1928:13). The valuables selected for official plunder included saddles and horse gear, hatchets, firearms and ammunition, native weapons, tobacco, untanned buffalo hides, buffalo robes, and blankets. Among the items inventoried were 470 blankets and 573 buffalo robes, making an average of nine blankets and eleven buffalo robes for each family in the village of fifty-one dwellings. Godfrey's fine appreciation of Indian materials and their importance to the Cheyennes themselves led him to feel conflicted about Custer's orders to destroy everything not captured. In an exceptionally personal narrative of his "mopping up" assignment, Godfrey described Cheyennes saving materials and soldiers taking relics, in contrast to his own reluctant restraint:

I allowed the prisoners to get what they wanted...I began the destruction ..., tearing down tepees and piling several together on the tepee poles, set fire to them. All articles of personal property--buffalo robes, blankets, food, rifles, pistols, bows and arrows, lead and caps, bullet molds, etc.--were thrown in the fires and destroyed. I doubt but that many small curios went into the pockets of men engaged in this work. One man brought to me that which I learned was a bridal gown, a "one piece dress," adorned all over with bead work and elks' teeth on antelope skins as soft as the finest broadcloth. I started to show it to the General and ask to keep it, but as I passed a big fire, I thought, "What's the use, 'orders is orders'" and threw it in the blaze. I have never ceased to regret that destruction. (Godfrey, E.S. 1928:14)

The day after the fighting the obedient-but-regretful officer Godfrey did acquire for needed bedding a painted buffalo hide and presumably also collected the woven trade blanket. At some point he documented the buffalo robe by pinning to it a scrap of U.S. Army cardboard with the following signed handwritten note, "Buffalo robe, was taken from an Indian Teepee at the Battle of Washita Nov 27, 1868. From whom I purchased it the following day, \$10" (Godfrey, E. S. n.d.) Godfrey's second wife, Ida Emley Godfrey, corroborated and added details to this testimony in a note that passed down with the buffalo robe: "General Custer had ordered everything destroyed after the capture of the village-But a soldier disobeyed orders and Mr. Godfrey having lost his bedding bought this Buffalo skin of soldier" (Godfrey, I. E. n.d.)

Although not mentioned in these two records, the blanket was clearly specified by Godfrey's daughter Mary among the Washita objects in the Godfrey collection: "Indian pottery, bead work, a Navajo blanket—or rather an Indian blanket taken from the battle of Washita—" (Godfrey, M. 1941). Thus, the robe and the blanket—paired in the Godfrey collection for seventy-three years--were documented separately, but not together, to the Washita event. Godfrey did not mention any of his collected objects in his official writings, possibly because the objects were retained outside Custer's orders to capture property (including the hundreds of robes and blankets) and to destroy the rest.

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Godfrey later served under Custer at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876 but survived with Captain Benteen's detachment. He received the Congressional Medal of Honor for service against the Nez Perce Indians in 1877 and became a West Point instructor and commandant at Fort Riley. Retired as Brigadier General in 1907, he was known as an authority on the Indian campaigns. The buffalo robe and blanket remained together in Godfrey's personal collection. His obituary states that in his home in New Jersey, "he surrounded himself with maps, pictures and relics of his Indian service" (Bates 1932: 67). He became the longest surviving officer of the major Indian War campaigns and died on April 1, 1932, at the age of 88.

The Washita relics stayed for nine years more with the Godfrey family until the General's daughter Mary Godfrey found a suitably appreciative home for them with friends. In 1941 she offered them to the illustrator Joseph Scheuerle, who early in the century painted many portraits of western Indians and moved in Charlie Russell's circle of Montana artists (Boileau 1971). In a letter to Scheuerle, Mary Godfrey documented the Godfrey collection as well as uncertain Navajo identification of the blanket, "I can think of no better abiding place for some of our Indian relics than in your hands. If you care to have them. Indian pottery, bead work, a Navajo blanket--or rather an Indian blanket taken from the battle of Washita--Have you space for them?" (Godfrey, M. 1941)

The artist Scheurle did have space and kept the blanket and robe. Only after Scheuerle's death and the sale of his estate did the Washita objects transition from personally meaningful mementos to marketable commodities. Despite damaged condition and modest aesthetic appeal, the blanket and robe had major value in their joint historical provenance. They passed together over a short period to Michigan collector Richard Pohrt, then to Missouri dealer E. B. Daniels, and to Santa Fe dealer Rex Arrowsmith.

In 1960 Arrowsmith sold the Washita materials to Francis V. Crane, an avid collector of Western history, and his wife Mary W.A. Crane, who operated the private Southeast Museum of the North American Indian in Marathon, Florida. Finally, in 1968, a century after leaving Cheyennes, the pieces were donated with the Crane American Indian Collection to the Denver Museum of Natural History (now the Denver Museum of Nature and Science) (Herold 1999).

Too sensitive for display in the Denver Museum's American Indian Hall, the Washita pieces have never been exhibited and are reserved for research. The present study began in 1998 in response to consultations with the Southern Cheyenne Tribe. On September 21-23, 2000, at request of the Southern Cheyennes, the Washita Chief Blanket and the Chief White Antelope Blanket from the Sand Creek Massacre were laid out side by side at the School of American Research, Santa Fe, for inspection by the Seventh Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America.

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### Cheyennes and Trade Blankets

As the southernmost bands of Cheyennes moved into the Arkansas River area in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the wearing of heavy buffalo hide robes must have become increasingly impractical in all but the coldest winter weather and the Cheyennes increasingly chose to wear cloth blankets. Suitable for both ordinary life and important occasions, blankets were improvised from lengths of plain woolen commercial trade cloth or blankets loom-woven to form and size needed. The blankets might originate on a Navajo vertical loom, a Spanish or American floor loom operated by hand and foot, or an American or British machine loom. Plentiful documentation shows that woven blankets were a staple exchange item for Indian-tanned buffalo hides. For example, Josiah Gregg said in 1820 of Comanche buffalo hide traders in the south, "Each owner usually wants a general assortment,...as a blanket, a looking-glass, an awl, a flint, a little tobacco, vermillion (sic), beads, etc." (Quaife 1967: 210).

A vivid account by trader William Boggs near Bent's Old Fort in 1845 establishes the popularity among the Cheyennes of particularly the banded shoulder blanket in the version called the First Phase Chief Blanket, traded from the Navajos. Boggs described blankets "all alike, with white and black stripe[s] about two inches wide." He watched "several hundred of these young Indian maidens, dressed in their Navajo blankets, form a circle at a war dance outside of the circle of braves, who were dancing around a large bonfire...with their trophies of Pawnee scalps." (Hafen 1930)

More typically, nonspecific old journal accounts merely hint at banded blankets among the Cheyennes. For example, on August 6, 1846, at Bent's Fort Susan Magoffin, a traveler on the Santa Fe Trail, described some sort of banded trade blanket, possibly worn by a Cheyenne: "Another Indian has come in....He is a warrior well armed with bow and arrows—a quiver full. His dress consists of a striped blanket wrapped around his body, a string of beads, and his long hair tied up with a piece of red cloth." (Drumm 1982: 70)

We know that at least one Cheyenne of the period wore a blanket in the proper colors, though unknown pattern. Dog Soldier Chief Tall Bull was described as rising in great dignity at a gathering sometime before 1869, with his red and black blanket folded around so that he had free use of his right arm to gesture (Stanley 1982).

No banded blankets similar to the Washita example have been found thus far in scholarly studies of commercially created, machine-woven wearing blankets produced in the United States or Britain for an American Indian market, from the earliest Hudson's Bay blanket to the contemporary Pendleton. However, Robert Kapoun's important study of American Indian trade blankets, which focuses on later periods, provides clues for search among the products of an early independent woolen mill operating in New England and another in Oregon. (Kapoun 1992: 38-9).

Cheyenne artists of the mid-to late eighteenth century depicted trade blankets in use in pictographic style drawings of early camp scenes, ceremonies, horse raids and battles, drawn on pages of American ledger books. Navajo Chief Blankets and Hudson's Bay

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blankets were models for many textiles, but thus far the distinctive Washita style pattern has not been recognized in ledger book drawings. A careful check of the Dog Soldier Ledgerbook, a Cheyenne document dated 1865 to 1869 that was collected at the Summit Springs battleground, showed trade cloth blankets around waists of warriors and on the backs of their horses but none with cross-banded patterning (Afton et. al. 1996).

Most promising for continuing research, but so far yielding no images of Washita blankets, are historic photographs of Cheyenne people. Many images show Cheyennes wearing trade blankets with banded patterns, including multi-color-banded point-marked Hudson's Bay blankets and multi or single-banded white blankets. For example, at a meeting at Camp Weld, Colorado before the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864, Chief Black Kettle and other Cheyenne and Arapaho delegates are enveloped from waist to feet in white blankets that have a single bold dark band along one end (Afton et. al. 1997:xvi).

To Southern Cheyennes today, this blanket has sacred presence as well as cultural meaning for it comes from one of the "sites of shame, where armed military forces attacked sleeping Indian villages,...Without question, the sites are sacred to Native Americans, who feel an obligation to tell the living about past atrocities." (Gulliford 2000: 88, 90). The victims and survivors of Sand Creek and Washita are family relations who are known by all their Cheyenne names. As the ancestors once possessed the warmth, beauty, and usefulness of the surviving Chief Blanket in their lodges, on their horses, and over their shoulders or around their waists at chiefly events, so the present-day kinsmen are touched and honored by the blanket's endurance and symbolism. Contemporary Cheyennes have a strong sense of stewardship toward the blanket: they believe that study and knowledge of the blanket support honoring it. Our future search for the Washita Chief Blanket tradition and meaning will include interviews with elder Cheyenne people and review of previous first-person accounts.

#### Trade Blankets Beyond the Cheyennes

While Part I has shown technical and design uniqueness yet linkages of this blanket with native Southwestern and Hispanic blankets of the period, no examples of the style have been found in collections or historic photographs or other depictions connected with Southwestern Indians. Looking eastward and northward, however, several early photographs depicting Washita-style blankets have been found—showing the blanket on the backs of Cheyenne enemies.

Closest to Cheyenne homelands is a photograph of a Pawnee scout unmistakably wearing a similar blanket, though the red color can't be discerned (Figure 1). The often-reproduced William H. Jackson image of an earth lodge village in Nebraska was possibly taken in 1871. In identifying both men as probable scouts, who often assisted the U.S. military, Pawnee scholar Roger Echo-Hawk noted that raiding and prisoners could have circulated trade blankets among Plains peoples (Echo-Hawk 2000). Details of the blanket design, namely, the compound center band and the three spaced bands, leave little doubt that the tall man in the center is wearing a look-alike of the Washita Chief Blanket. It is fringed at the base (though the top edge is hidden): textile analysis of our specimen



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(Part I) leaves open the possibility of fringing.

Laurie D. Webster has recently pointed out two important images of similar fringed, banded blankets that were published by the Museum of the American Indian in 1982. Indian people contemporary with Washita but living far north of Cheyenne country are depicted—Crow Indians in the 1868 delegation to Washington. In each photograph of a man and his wife, the woman is arrayed in a zone-banded dark on white wearing blanket with fringes at bottom and top. In “Portrait of Blackfoot and Wife, Crow” (photographer unknown), only a single band detail differentiates the blanket from the Washita textile. Intriguing identifications (albeit undocumented) occur in the captions: “She is wearing...the Spanish trade textile favored by the Crow” and “His wife is wearing...a Spanish trade blanket.” (Museum of the American Indian 1982: 32,33,61)

From the images and “Spanish trade blanket” attributions above, our search for sister blankets of the Washita Chief Blanket clearly should encompass Plains Indians in the north as well as the south. It should focus on fringed blankets produced on wide floor looms of the Spanish, either in New Spain (Texas, New Mexico or Mexico) or European Spain. The latter direction is consistent with advice from several textile authorities (Nancy Blomberg, Jerry Becker, Ann Hedlund, Will Wroth, Jeanne Brako, and Bob Mann) to look at products from floor-loom workshops and commercial enterprises outside the Southwest to the south and east. We already know that blankets most widespread from this period--Saltillo blankets and serapes from northern Mexico and Hudson’s Bay blankets from England--are dissimilar. Other producers are little studied and sister blankets must be sought through collections survey and specialist information.

The first similar specimen came to light recently. Laurie D. Webster briefly inspected a textile fragment strikingly similar to ours at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. The longitudinal half, cut from a large rectangular blanket, is band patterned across the width in black and red on white, almost identically to the Washita Chief Blanket. Knotted warp threads form fringes at both ends, indicating probable treadle looming. Though material and technical details are only partly known as yet, the warp appears to be 3-ply-Z-spun, S-twist, used in pairs, and the weft wool is 2-ply Z-spun, S-twist. With so many diagnostic trait similarities and filled-in parts, the Peabody textile offers excellent supplementation to knowledge of the Washita style textile. It disappoints only in its poor documentation: donated to the Museum in 1907, the textile has uncertain date and culture of manufacture (labeled ca. 1860s, Mexican?).

### Conclusion (Parts I and II)

Research has defined the Washita Chief Blanket descriptively and vis a vis Southwestern wearing blankets and verified its provenance and cultural-historic context. Despite its strong visual similarity to the Navajo First Phase Chief Blanket, the blanket is an anomaly in the Southwest. Technical characteristics, provenance, and ethno-historic evidence establish it as another style of trade blanket to Plains cultures of the mid-nineteenth century (ca. 1840-1870). Specific source identification is hampered by the blanket’s oddities and missing ends, the indeterminate yarn production, the absence of

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floor looms of sufficient width, and lack of similar source-documented specimens. The dyes and wools and ethnohistoric data place its probable place of manufacture in the Spanish sphere, but textile producers in the eastern United States cannot be dismissed.

The warps of the Washita Chief Blanket are so fragile that its survival is amazing (due in large part to its post-1868 life as a display piece). The existence of similar blankets is problematic, yet the historic Crow and Pawnee images show that there were such blankets in other Native hands and the discovered matching fragment gives hope of other illustrations and rare surviving textiles. Ultimately, we may find a wide loom with paired warp weaving structure from the mid-eighteenth century.

Moreover, the “whole cloth” of the Washita Chief Blanket story depends on understanding its role and significance among changing peoples, arts, and belief systems on the Western Frontier. Crucial are first-person knowledge and viewpoints of Southern Cheyenne descendants, who carry on the language of the robe and many other customs of the Cheyenne Way. Most vitally, for all, homage to the Washita tragedy is long overdue.

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Pawnee scouts wearing trade blankets, Loup Fork village, Nebraska, 1871?. William H. Jackson photograph, Smithsonian Institution. National Anthropological Archives. (BAE-1249).