

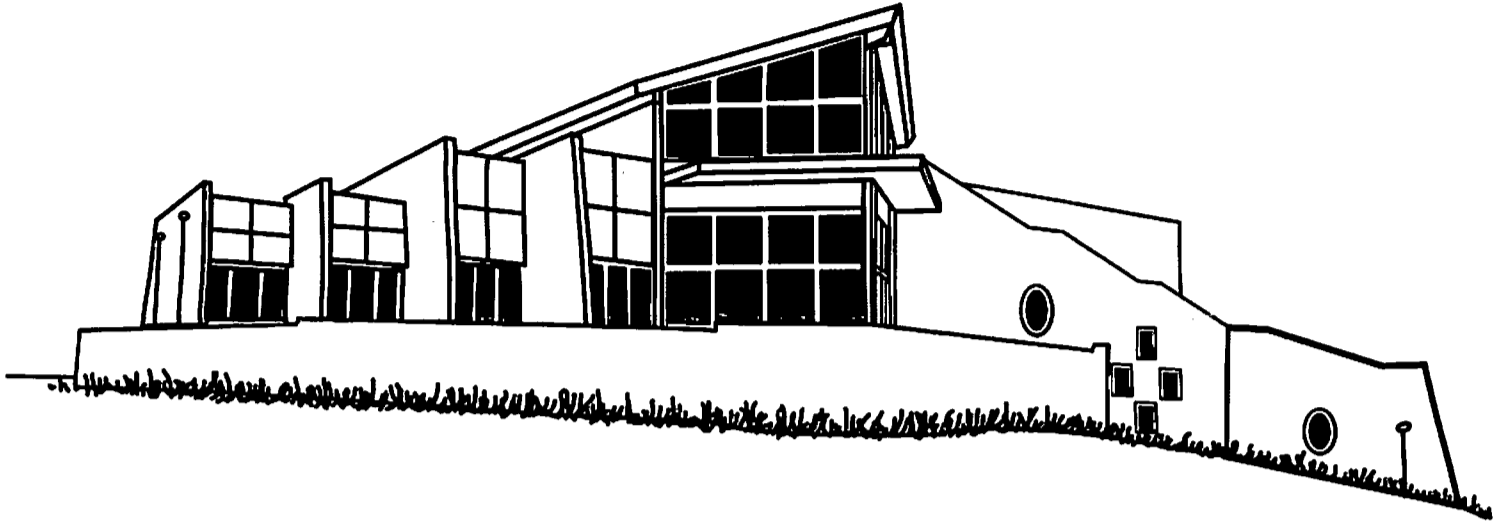
Washita Battlefield

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Washita Battlefield
National Historic Site

Once Upon A Building....



Can a building tell a story?

The Cultural Heritage Center at Washita Battlefield National Historic Site is a building with a story to tell. Let it speak to you through its shape, its colors, and its designs.

It's a story that begins on a cold morning in November 1868, when Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer led the 7th U.S. Cavalry on an attack against the Southern Cheyenne village of Peace Chief Black Kettle. It's a story of clashes between cultures and of different ways of looking at the world. The building's story aims to honor the past while looking toward the future.

First impressions

As you approach the building from the west, it seems to sit low on the horizon, only a story high. The building is actually two stories high but was built into the side of a hill. The low profile keeps it in scale with nearby buildings and echoes the traditional sod and dugout houses of early Oklahomans.

The building's top floor is oriented toward the Cheyenne directions of northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest. The bottom floor, which houses National Park Service and U.S. Forest Services offices, is oriented east/west, reflecting the movement of Europeans from east to west in the United States.

Concealing the parking lot behind the building on the lower level helps the site keep its rural flavor. The large island of grass and trees in the parking lot provides a place for picnic tables and will be

used to display a tipi and military wall tent and as space for special events. A sod dugout is also planned for the site.

The building's rough exterior blends with the local landscape. The red bricks match the red dirt of western Oklahoma. The tan stripes represent the sandstone that runs through the countryside and emphasize the building's horizontal shape.

The wall on the left of the sidewalk to the upper entrance is angled to reflect military maneuvers while the curved wall on the right represents the movement of American Indian tribes. A narrow space between the walls echoes the clash of cultures that occurred at Washita Battlefield. It will also provide a natural spot for groups to gather before entering the building.

The gallery

Meandering like the Washita River itself, the upper sidewalk leads to the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site visitor center. The front door follows the tradition of Cheyenne-Arapaho tipis, which always face the rising sun.

The soaring raftered ceiling of the gallery has a churchlike feel to emphasize the sacred ground of the attack on the Washita's banks. The design also reflects the great lodges of the National Park Service system and provides a frame for the view of the Washita River valley beyond.

The gallery will be used for temporary exhibits, displays of school projects, and demonstrations of arts and crafts. The gallery floor is decorated with a black diamond pattern, the symbol for Black Kettle.

Oklahoma speckled red granite from a nearby quarry tops the information desk. Eastern red cedar is inlaid in the front of the desk and surrounds a shadowbox displaying exhibits from Oklahoma cultures.

The meaning of the fours

Groups of fours can be found throughout the building. Four is an important number in Cheyenne life: there are four directions, 44 chiefs in the Cheyenne nation, and the four societies of Elk, Bow String, Dog Soldiers, and Kit Fox.

Notice the four angled walls outside, the windows in groups of four, and the four black diamonds in the gallery floor. The wall along the sidewalk rises four inches every four feet. The wooden strips for hanging exhibits on the gallery walls are in fours.

Four American elm survivor trees from the Oklahoma City bombing were planted at the building's dedication. As they grow, they will provide shade and shelter to all park visitors. These native trees draw their strength from the land and sun and represent the resilience, strength, and character of those who have graced these lands in the past.

Energy efficiency

The building uses the best of old and new technology for maximum energy efficiency. Solar efficient glass was used in all windows. The angle of the sun throughout the year was analyzed and windows were positioned to take advantage of warmth from the winter sun and to avoid summer heat. Walls were angled and overhangs built for the same reason. This design also minimizes damage during severe weather.

Backing the building into a hill not only makes for a low profile but also takes advantage of

the insulation and weather protection provided by the ground, just as dugouts and sod houses did.

Round skylights throughout the building let in natural light and echo the smokehole of a tipi. The biggest skylight illuminates the Cheyenne tribal seal on the floor of the exhibit area.

Along the south wall of the lower floor, a row of redbuds, Oklahoma's state tree, will shade the windows in the summer. After leaves fall in autumn, winter sun can reach inside to warm the building.

Accessible to everyone

Elevators and low drinking fountains are an obvious way to make a building accessible to everyone, from visitors to employees. Countertops and exhibits built at varying heights mean easier use for all sizes of visitors. Instead of door knobs which must be turned, door levers can be pressed down to open a door.

More people can enjoy the exhibits, too. A topographic relief map of the area shows camp locations, troop movements, and geographic features and can be read by sight or by touch. Audio wands turn visual exhibits into auditory ones by describing pictures and artifacts and reading text aloud.

Open for business and education

Distance learning is becoming increasingly important for schools, businesses, and other organizations, especially in wide-open spaces like western Oklahoma. Over 90 percent of Oklahoma schools are wired for distance learning and the visitor center has followed suit. A program originating in the building's auditorium can be broadcast to up to five

classrooms at the same time and students in each classroom can talk to their "classmates" at every other site.

The building also contains a meeting room that will be open for public use, for government training, and for special events.