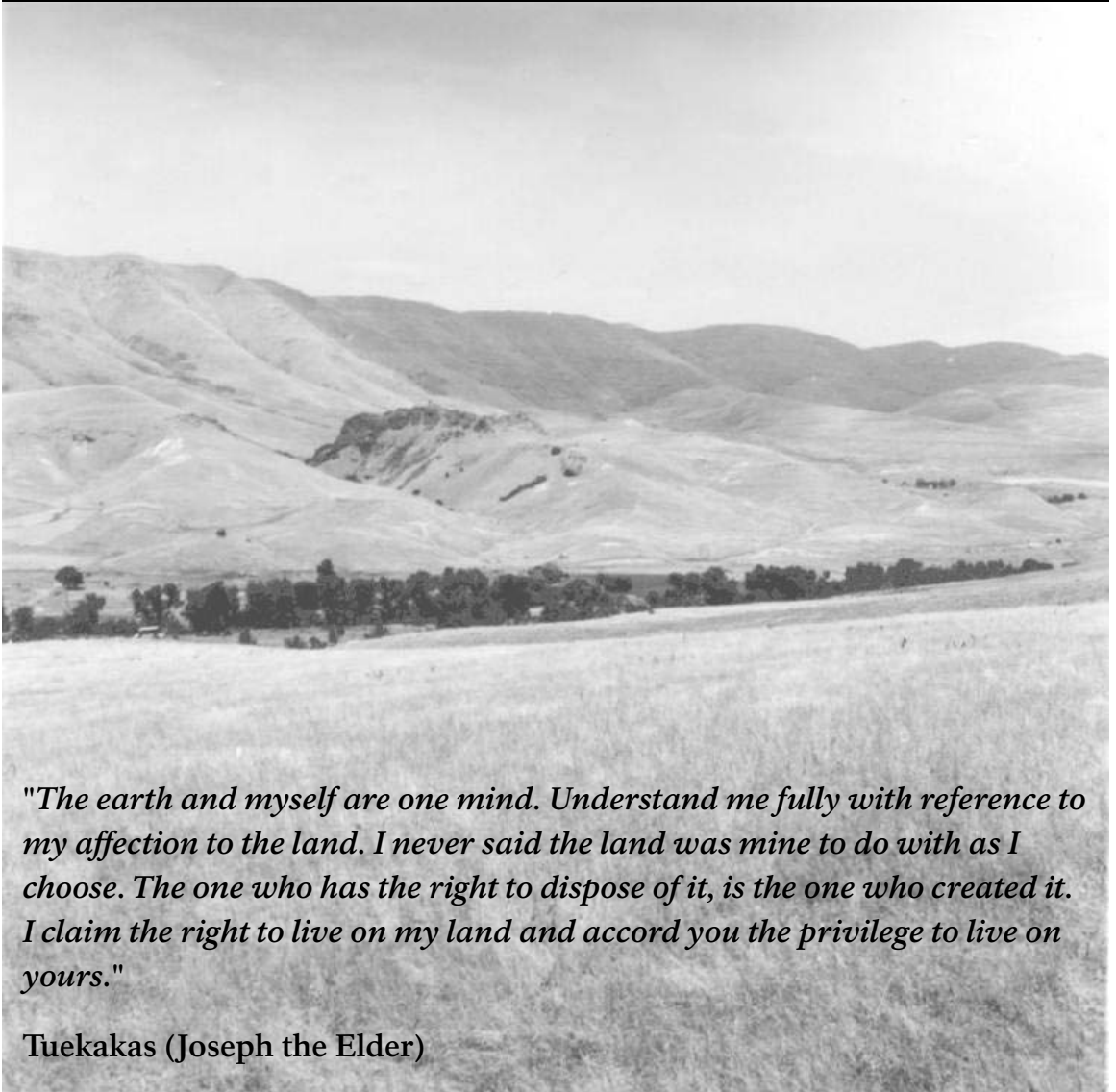




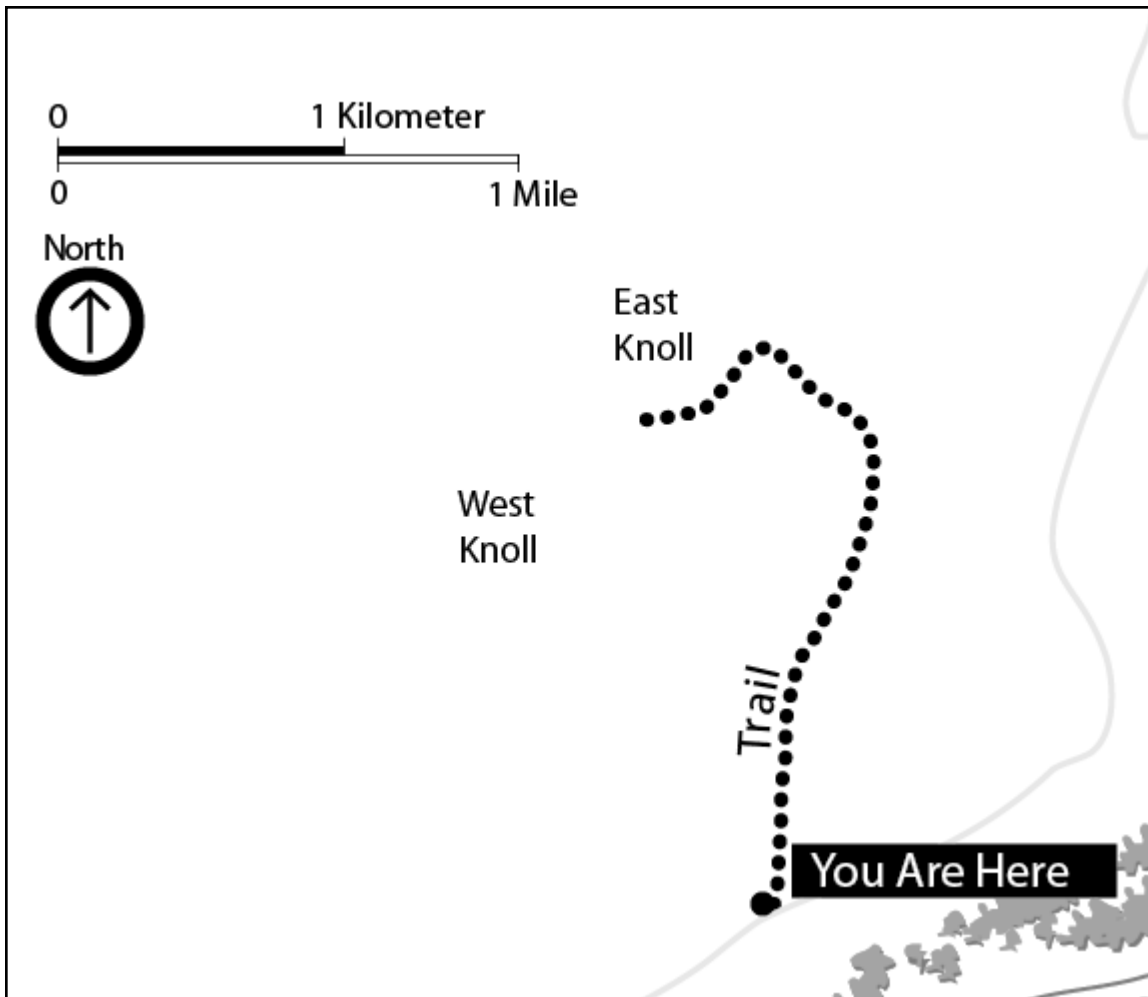
# White Bird Battlefield

Nez Perce National Historical Park  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of Interior



*"The earth and myself are one mind. Understand me fully with reference to my affection to the land. I never said the land was mine to do with as I choose. The one who has the right to dispose of it, is the one who created it. I claim the right to live on my land and accord you the privilege to live on yours."*

Tuekakas (Joseph the Elder)



### Things to Remember

The round trip is approximately 1.5 miles (2.5 km).

There are six stops on the trail.

The trailhead is at 1,700 feet. The trail climbs 460 feet in elevation.

Summer temperatures can reach over 100 degrees. **PLEASE BRING PLENTY OF WATER.**

There are **no** bathrooms at this site. Please plan accordingly.

White Bird Battlefield is one of thirty-eight sites that make up Nez Perce National Historical Park.

The primary visitor center at the Spalding site is approximately seventy miles north of the battlefield on Hwy 95. It is open daily from 8:00 to 4:30; in the summer months until 5:00 pm. The park can be reached at (208) 843-7001 or on the web at [www.nps.gov/nepe](http://www.nps.gov/nepe).

White Bird Battlefield is also a part of the Nez Perce National Historical Trail. The trail follows the route the non-treaty Nez Perce and their allies took during the 1877 conflict. For more information on the trail, please call (208) 476-8334 or on the web at <http://www.fs.fed.us/npnht/>.

### **Trail Reminders**

Please stay on the marked trail. Poison Ivy, rattlesnakes, uneven terrain and high cliffs pose a hazard.

Hunting is prohibited on National Park Service lands.

Metal detecting is also prohibited on all National Park Service lands.

**Archeological sites, battlefields, and artifacts are protected by state and federal law. Anyone who injures, destroys or appropriates artifacts or archeological resources on park lands are subject to arrest and prosecution to the maximum extent of the law.**

**Please call (208) 843-7001 to report incidents.**

## ***Welcome to Lahmotta, the site of White Bird Battlefield.***

Early in the morning of Sunday June 17, Captain David Perry led 106 mounted soldiers of the First Cavalry Regiment and eleven civilian volunteers down into White Bird Canyon. The Nimiipuu, as the Nez Perce call themselves, met Captain Perry's advance guard under a white flag. A shot rang out, and the last chance for peace was gone. The war was not inevitable, but roots of the conflict went back a generation, to the beginning of the nineteenth century . . . .

Since the beginning of time, the Nimiipuu lived on these lands and called it home. Their homeland stretched across an area that encompassed most of what today is northcentral Idaho, southeastern Washington, and northeastern Oregon, an area between 13 and 15 million acres. With the arrival of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in 1805 and Presbyterian missionary Henry H. Spalding in 1836, an era of sweeping cultural change was unleashed as the Nimiipuu were forced to cope with the increasing social and political pressures of a rapidly expanding United States.

In 1855, the Nimiipuu agreed to the terms of their first treaty with the United States calling for a reservation that encompassed 7.5 million acres. In the years it took for the Senate to ratify the treaty, gold was discovered in the northeast corner of the reservation. Another treaty was subsequently negotiated in 1863, excluding reservation lands in northeastern Oregon and large parts of Idaho. As a result, the reservation shrank to 750,000 acres. The Nimiipuu families that had lived in Oregon's Wallowa Valley and other portions of Idaho for centuries were dispossessed of their homes at the stroke of a pen.

What had begun as a relationship of mutual respect and admiration with Lewis and Clark in 1805 gradually eroded and was replaced with feelings of injustice, division, acrimony, and distrust. All of these issues came to ahead on June 17, 1877 on what is now known as White Bird battlefield.

*"Twenty times over you repeat that the earth is your mother, and about the chieftainship of the earth. Let us hear it no more, but come to business at once."*

General Oliver O. Howard

*"In peace councils, force must not be talked. It was the same as showing us the rifle."*

Himin maqsmags (Yellow Wolf)

## **Stop One (Trailhead) - Prelude**

In the aftermath of the 1863 Treaty, attempts to create a separate reservation for the Nimiipuu in the Wallowa Valley came to nothing. In the spring of 1877, General O.O. Howard gave an ultimatum to the Nimiipuu to relocate to the Nez Perce reservation. With heavy hearts and little time to gather their horses, cattle, and personal belongings, the Wallowa band of Nimiipuu accompanied by some of their Palus and Cayuse relatives, complied with Howard's order.

Between the Wallowa Valley and Lapwai, they stopped at Tepahlewam or Tolo Lake, a traditional Nez Perce gathering place on the Camas Prairie. While the bands enjoyed their last stretch of complete freedom, a few warriors led by Wahlitits attacked some homesteads on the Salmon River. Pent up frustration over decades of injustice and racism spilled over, as Wahlitits avenged the murder of his father in 1875.

Realizing the army would respond to the bloodshed, the Nimiipuu bands moved to Lahmotta, one of the homes of the White Bird band. By June 16, their lodges could be seen along White Bird Creek. On June 15, Captain David Perry was sent from Ft. Lapwai to investigate reports coming from the Camas Prairie. Upon arrival, Perry was told the Nez Perce had left Tolo Lake for White Bird. Pressed by settlers in Grangeville, Perry continued his advance on the evening of June 16.

*"During our halt one of the men in "F" Company struck a match to light his pipe . . . Almost immediately after lighting his match I heard the howl of a 'coyote' but noticed the last note of the howl was different than anything I had ever heard before. I thought then, I think still, it was one of the Indians on picket."*

First Lieutenant William R. Parnell

*"Soon came lighter sun. I raised up and looked north. Something seemed moving away up country. I watched closely. Yes, there came the soldiers a good distance off. We all lay flat and watched."*

Himin maqsmags (Yellow Wolf)

## **Stop Two (First Interpretive Wayside) - Daybreak, June 17, 1877**

Nimiipuu scouts kept watch on Captain Perry's column as it moved deeper into the canyon. As Perry advanced, the alarm was raised in the camps. Despite having taken advantage of whiskey that was liberated from local homesteads, the Nimiipuu responded. Close to seventy warriors would participate in the battle.

As the soldiers descended the canyon on a wagon road, Ollokot, Chief Joseph's younger brother, and Two Moons sent small groups of men along the bluffs that paralleled the route they expected the soldiers to take. It was late spring and lush, waist high grass covered the hillsides, offering the Nez Perce some concealment as they prepared to meet the soldiers.

Perry sent Lieutenant Edward Theller and an eight man scouting party ahead of the main column. As Theller approached the rise that you see directly before you, the Nez Perce sent a peace party of six men led by Wettiwetti Howlis or Vicious Weasel to parley with the soldiers. They had strict instructions not to fire unless fired upon. For a few short minutes, the decision for peace or war would hang in the balance.

*"When Chapman got closer, he fired across at us. Then the soldiers started shooting. That was how the battle started. Chapman made the first two shots."*

Himin maqsmags (Yellow Wolf)

*"I took in the situation at a glance; that the ridge I was on was the most defensible position in that vicinity. I accordingly dismounted my troop and deployed on the ridge, sending my horses into the valley . . ."*

Captain David Perry

### **Stop Three (On the hillside approaching stop Four) - Opening Moves**

Turn around and look at the view of the village of Whitebird. Imagine as Lieutenant Theller's scouting party came across this ridge, far down the canyon he would have seen wisps of smoke marking the location of the Nimiipuu encampments along White Bird Creek.

As Theller took stock of the situation, he would have noticed a Nimiipuu peace party approaching, flying a white flag. Arthur 'Ad' Chapman, a volunteer came up to Theller's position or close by and for reasons that cannot fully be explained, opened fire on the peace party. The Nimiipuu responded and bullets began to fly. Before Theller could give instructions to his Trumpeter, John Jones was shot and killed by Otstotpoo or Firebody, adding to the initial confusion.

Out of sight of the unfolding action, Perry was not completely aware of what was happening ahead of him; all Perry heard was the crack of rifle fire. He ordered Company F to dismount their horses and form a loose line of men known as a skirmish line as they continued to move forward.

An opportunity for a parley and peaceful solution evaporated in a moment. The die was cast and the first battle of the Nez Perce War began.

*"After Otstotpoo killed the bugler, we ran our horses to where the fighting was getting under way. There were about sixteen of us and struck the soldiers left flank. Those soldiers, some of them in citizen clothes, were on a low rocky butte . . . They did not stay there any time . . .*

Two Moon

*"I think [the volunteers] left that knoll at the first fire when one of their men was wounded. After that knoll was taken the line had to retire. The Indians got completely in the rear of left flank."*

First Lieutenant William Parnell

## **Stop Four (Interpretive Wayside) - The Critical Moment**

The volunteers, led by George Shearer, responded to that first shot by leaving the main column and heading toward the village. As they approached the heavily wooded White Bird Creek, the volunteers began to receive heavy fire from the Nimiipuu, driving them back to this knoll. The volunteers may have only stopped here briefly before continuing their retreat back up the canyon. Seeing the volunteers run had a demoralizing effect. Some of the troopers in Company F interpreted the withdrawal of the volunteers as an order to retreat. Perry was quickly losing control of his command.

Once the volunteers were dislocated from these knolls, the Nez Perce occupied them and began to pour fire into Company F which was deploying across the slope of the ridge on foot. Captain Perry also wanted Company H to deploy further up the ridge line, forming a loose line of soldiers across the ridge top. With one Trumpeter dead and the other useless (he had lost his trumpet on the trail down into the canyon), Perry lost the ability to communicate to his men. Moreover, Perry did not know that the volunteers had fled the battlefield and that his men were now in a precarious position.



*"The warriors charging up the west canyon struck that flank hard. Hanging on the side of their horses where not seen, they gave the horses a storm of bullets. Warriors dismounted, and from hiding dropped soldiers from their saddles."*

Himin maqsmags (Yellow Wolf)

*"After taking position, I discovered and it was reported to me, that the Indians were moving around on our right and driving stock . . . I cautioned the men to remain steady as they were . . ."*

Captain Joel Trimble, First Cavalry, Company H

## **Stop 5 (Interpretive Wayside) - Company H Joins the Fray**

As Captain Perry attempted to sort out the deployment of Company F, upon hearing the rifle fire, Captain Joel Trimble ordered Company H to assume a position on the far right of the Perry's line on the ridge top.

Due to the nature of the terrain, rather than forming a solid line of soldiers, there was a rather substantial gap of perhaps 200 yards between Company H and F. In a bold move, the Nez Perce stampeded horses up hill toward the right of Trimble's position. Three warriors in conspicuous red coats, Sarsis Ilppilp, Wahlitis, and Tipyahlahnah Kapskaps were amongst the stampede, disrupting Trimble's desperate attempt to keep his men calm and focused.

Having lost the volunteers, with rifle fire pouring into their flanks, Company F was beginning to panic. In less than thirty minutes, the courage and daring of the Nimiipuu warriors put Perry in an untenable situation. Faced with a growing number of wounded and killed soldiers, Perry had few options left but to retreat back up the canyon.

*"We chased the remaining soldiers. Fought them running for several miles. We drove them back across the mountain, down to near the town they came from.*

Himin maqsmags (Yellow Wolf)

*"The Indians were all the time pressing us in front and flank and from this time, getting around in our rear".*

Captain David Perry

## **Stop 6 (Interpretive Wayside) - McCarthy's point**

As Captain Trimble deployed the men of Company H, he sent a detachment of six men led by Sergeant Michael McCarthy to this bluff to protect the rear and far right flank of soldier's position. As the thin line of soldiers began to break and pull back from the ridge top, McCarthy left his position, but was ordered back by Captain Trimble. McCarthy remained on the bluff to support a stand that never materialized; McCarthy was left behind. He evaded Nimiipuu warriors combing the battlefield for weapons and made it to Grangeville two days after the battle.

### **Retreat**

Unable to stem the Nimiipuu advance, Perry's command split into two groups. Captains Perry, Trimble, and a small number of men retreated up the steep sides of the canyon. Lieutenants Theller and Parnell followed the wagon road they had descended earlier that morning. Theller and seven men went off the road into a ravine and became trapped and were killed; Parnell's group survived.

Perry and Parnell eventually met at the top of the Canyon and continued their retreat across the Camas Prairie to Johnson Ranch. They ultimately returned to the community of Mt. Idaho where the survivors of the battle were reinforced by volunteers and subsequently retired to Grangeville. The long, deadly day had finally come to an end.

## Aftermath

As Perry gathered his shattered command at Mt. Idaho, he left behind thirty-four dead. An additional two soldiers and two volunteers were wounded. Three Nimiipuu suffered wounds, but no one was killed. As the soldiers left the battlefield, the Nimiipuu retrieved the weapons and ammunition that had been left behind by the soldiers and began to plan their next move.

Pursued by General O.O. Howard, the Nimiipuu eluded the U.S. Army for the next five months. After a series of skirmishes north and east of White Bird, the bands crossed the Bitterroot Mountains to western Montana. Despite the steep odds and a disastrous battle at the Big Hole, the Nimiipuu continued to frustrate the army's plans. At the end of September, their luck ran out when the army besieged the Nimiipuu at Bear Paw and the campaign came to an end. During the siege, Chief White Bird and his followers were able to escape into Canada. Joseph and the remainder of the Nimiipuu, surrendered on October 5, 1877 and were sent into exile, first in Oklahoma and later to the Colville Reservation in Washington where the descendants of the Joseph band live today.

## Suggested Reading

Jerome A. Greene. Nez Perce Summer 1877. The U.S. Army and the Nee-Me-Poo Crisis. (Helena, Montana: Montana Historical Society Press, 2000).

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John D. McDermott. Forlorn Hope. The Nez Perce Victory at White Bird Canyon. (Caldwell, Idaho, Caxton Press, 2004).

L.V. McWhorter. Yellow Wolf. His Own Story. (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Press, 2000).

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White Bird Battlefield as seen from the overlook on Highway 95.

Published Courtesy of the Northwest Interpretive Association