“Let Them Eat Grass.” The Dakota War. Part 2 of 4.

Beginning in 1805, treaty-making between the Dakota (or Sioux) people of Minnesota and the United States government began. In the most basic sense, these treaties were land sales—they transferred land from the Dakota to the US in exchange for money. Like all treaties that the US enters into, the treaties were voted on and put into US law by the Congress.

The most significant of these treaties came in 1851 at Traverse des Sioux and Mendota. The Sisseton, Wahpeton, Mdewakanton, and Wahpekute bands of the Santee Dakota ceded 35 million acres of their land within Minnesota to the US. In exchange, the US promised $3,075,000 to the Santee which was to be paid in annuities over 15 years. The US signatories also promised to establish reservations along the Minnesota River for these bands—however, when the treaty reached the Senate, the Senate stripped that clause from the treaty and left the Santee without a place to live. Temporarily overriding the Senate, President Fillmore agreed that the Dakota could live on the land meant for the reservations—but only until Americans demanded the land.

After the 1851 treaty, the Dakota Santee lived on an isolated strip of land along the Minnesota River. The strip ran 150 miles from Big Stone Lake near the Dakota border to the German-Scandinavian settlement at New Ulm. Then, in 1858, a second land sale treaty ceded the north side of the river to the US—the 6,600 Santee then lived on a 10-mile-wide and 150-mile-long strip of land along only the south side of the Minnesota River.

While most (but certainly not all) of the Santee were content with the sale of the land and met their treaty obligations, the same cannot be said for the United States. Corrupt Indian Agents (government officials acting as middlemen in the treaty system) and swindling traders meant that the Santee often did not receive the payments that the US had legally promised them.

As the US Civil War escalated into 1862 and the cost of fielding the eastern armies expanded, the annuity payments first dwindled and then were unilaterally (without Santee consent) changed to food (rather than the promised money). Then, that food was withheld. When the Santee angrily protested that the US was not meeting its treaty obligations, the response was: “Let them eat grass.”

On August 18, 1862 the Santee’s anger pushed them to the tipping point. Enraged over the failure of the US to live up to its treaty promises and with hunger-panged bellies, the Santee, led by Little Crow of the Mdewakanton band, lashed out and attacked the Euro-Americans of Minnesota. The Santee’s “paroxysm of rage” led them to indiscriminately and brutally massacre approximately 800 men, women, and children in mere days. All across southwestern Minnesota, at least 30,000 settlers packed up and fled to the east.

By September, the US Army, under General Sibley, brought the massacre to a halt and imprisoned approximately 2,000 Santee. However, the leader of the Mdewakanton Santee, Little Crow, the primary leader of the massacre, and 200 of his followers fled towards Spirit (Devil’s) Lake in Dakota Territory.

The people of the US demanded bloody revenge. General Sibley, who would lead the Army into Dakota Territory the next year, established a kangaroo court and quickly tried 389 Santee and convicted 307 of them of offenses worthy of hanging. President Lincoln, upon hearing of the scheduled executions, demanded a review of the cases. After that review, the number of Santees convicted to hang was 38. On December 26, 1862, the day after Christmas, the largest mass execution in US history took place at Mankato, Minnesota. After the hanging, the bodies of the 38 Santees were buried in a shallow mass grave—the US Army then permitted doctors to dig up the bodies and use them in research.

The next summer, 150 years ago, General Sibley and Sully amassed an army and marched into Dakota Territory in pursuit of Little Crow and Santee who had fled Minnesota.

Next week, Part 3 of this series will discuss the Sibley and Sully expeditions.

For extensive information about the 1862 Dakota War in Minnesota, reference the Minnesota Historical Society’s website: [www.usdakotawar.org](http://www.usdakotawar.org).