

Educator Resource

The U.S.-Dakota War

Dates & Eras	1862, 1863, Civil War, Westward Expansion
Themes	Native American History, Empire, Westward Expansion, Civil War Era, American West
Grades	5–7 6–9
Standards	USI.1, USI.3, USI.4, USI.8

History Overview

Dakotans and White settlers engaged in heated combat during the late summer of 1862. The U.S.-Dakota War was a short-lived conflict that uprooted both Dakota and White settlers throughout the Minnesota River Valley in south-central Minnesota.

Tensions between Dakota and White settlers had boiled over when the settlers failed to send annuity payments to the Dakota. Those late payments in 1862, promised by treaties signed in the 1850s, led to a period of starvation for the Dakota people.

The main fighting lasted six weeks, between August and September 1862. During this time hundreds of Dakota people, White settlers, and U.S. Army soldiers died. Following the 1862 struggle, 38 Dakota men were hanged for their participation in the war—the largest mass execution in U.S. history—and large numbers of Dakota were forcibly displaced from Minnesota. Thousands of Dakota faced the wrath of empire and westward expansion as a result of the U.S.-Dakota War, a precursor to the famed Indian Wars of the American West.

During the Dakota War, New Ulm was a town that faced near destruction from the fighting between settler militias and the Dakota on August 19th and 23rd, 1862.

Resources

[Excerpt from "Forty Years Ago" in New Ulm Review](#)

Additional Links

[New Ulm Petition](#)

[US-Dakota War \(Youtube\)](#)

[ACWM Foundry Series: Civil War, Indian Wars, and Tribal Sovereignty \(Youtube\)](#)

Suggested Questions

1. What is the purpose and significance of the petition?
2. How did the citizens of New Ulm react to U.S. government's failure to supply or pay the Dakota people?
3. Why do you think the New Ulm townspeople found it important to sign a petition?
4. After reading the petition, what does the letter tell you about white Minnesota leaders' duty to the United States compared to their obligation to protect settlers in Minnesota?

Suggested Activities

1. Break the students up into three groups and give each group one of the documents: New Ulm petition, New Ulm Review editorial (in the "files" section above), and Wambditanka's account (in the "files" section above). Ask each group to analyze their document to determine the motives of the U.S.-Dakota War. Bring the groups together to compare and
2. In conjunction with these documents, have students watch this video and determine how New Ulm and the situation with the Dakota fits into the larger narrative of the War.
3. In three separate groups, have students discuss what is going on during the Civil War at the same time as the U.S.-Dakota War. Think broadly about the year 1862, like the Emancipation Proclamation or other key moments in Civil War History, and discuss how the U.S.-Dakota War alters the way we think about that pivotal year.

“Forty years ago the outlying districts of this part of the state were now live in comfort and happiness thousands of farmers, the savage Indians stalked in undisputed sway and hunted on the plains the buffalo and in the woods the deer.

Knowing nothing of the individual ownership of land, to them, like the air we breathe, the earth was common heritage of all—the birthright of their nation. Saddened by the encroachment of the whites, deprived of their hunting by the destruction of the game and seeing only starvation for their race if the white people continuing to occupy their land and acting on the theory that the United States was weak from the demand for troops for the Southern war, the Indians determined to reclaim their land by driving the whites, and there ensued the greatest massacre in the history of Indian warfare.

So the blow fell—the storm of fierce, savage murder, in its most horrible form. Day passed and night came; ‘Down sank the sun, nor ceased the carnage there—Tumultuous horrors rent the midnight air.’ Until the sad catalogue reached the fearful number of TWO THOUSAND VICTIMS from the gray haired sire to the helpless infant of a day, who lay mangled and bleeding on the ensanguined field. The dead were left to bury the dead, for the dead reigned there alone.

In two days the whole work of murder was done, and during these two days a population of more than thirty thousand, on foot, on horseback, with teams of oxen and horses were rushing loved ones and tortured with misery worse than that of the inquisition... More Indians were engaged more whites were killed and more property destroyed than in any other conflict or series of conflicts with the savages since the first settlement of this country... This ended the battles of New Ulm and the wild and senseless attempt of the Indians to regain their lands”

Excerpt from “Forty Years Ago,” *New Ulm Review* (New Ulm, MN), August 20, 1902, 1-3, <http://www.mnhs.org/newspapers/lccn/sn89081128/1902-08-20/ed-1/seq-1>.

"It began to be whispered about that now would be a good time to go to war with the whites and get back the lands. It was believed that the men who had enlisted [to fight in the Civil War] last had all left the state, and that before help could be sent the Indians could clean out the country, and that the Winnebagoes [Ho-Chunk], and even the Chippewas [Ojibwe], would assist the Sioux. It was also thought that a war with the whites would cause the Sioux to forget the troubles among themselves and enable many of them to pay off some old scores. Though I took part in the war, I was against it. I knew there was no good cause for it, and I had been to Washington and knew the power of the whites and that they would finally conquer us. We might succeed for a time, but we would be overpowered and defeated at last. I said all this and many more things to my people, but many of my own bands were against me, and some of the other chiefs put words in their mouths to say to me.

"I did not have a very large band. . . . Most of them were not for the war at first, but nearly all got into it at last. A great many members of the other bands were like my men; they took no part in the first movements, but afterwards did. . . . When I returned to my village that day I found that many of my band had changed their minds about the war, and wanted to go into it. . . . I was still of the belief that it was not best, but I thought I must go with my band and my nation, and I said to my men that I would lead them into the war, and we would all act like brave Dakotas and do the best we could. All my men were with me; none had gone off on raids, but we did not have guns for all at first."

Excerpt from Wambditanka (Big Eagle), via
<http://www.usdakotawar.org/history/wambditanka-big-eagle>.