

## Making Meaning out of the Village Creek Attack and TCU's Land Acknowledgment

As we enter a period of remembering the attack of Texas militia carried out on May 24, 1841 against a diverse gathering of Native Americans living in three settlements along Caddo or Village Creek, an important question arises. Does the attack have any meaning for TCU and those of us who live in the DFW metroplex? To help answer that question, here is a brief summary of how people have given meaning to the attack (the year of the particular characterization appears in parenthesis):

The attack was a major reason for naming Tarrant County in honor of General Edward H. Tarrant (1849). Similarly, Captain John B. Denton, a Methodist preacher and the only Texan casualty, had the county and city of Denton named in his honor (1846 and 1857, respectively). Over the years, various groups have erected multiple monuments and bestowed other honorifics on both. Tarrant was eulogized as “a pure man—a patriot of the patriarchal kind” (1858; “patriarchal” likely invoking the biblical patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who are considered the founders of ancient Israel). He has been praised for leading “a small band of settlers and soldiers against hostile Indians on Village Creek when this area was still a wilderness” (1932), thereby helping “civilization to push westward” (1949). His keeping for two years a small Anadarko boy captured in the fight has been pointed to as evidence that he was “an Indian fighter, but not an Indian hater” (1988). He is credited with responding to “raids by clearing the Indian Creek settlement (in what is now Arlington)” (1998). Denton has been praised as “the Warrior Preacher of Texas” (1853), “the martyr to Texas civilization” (1905), “a spoke in the wheel of God’s moral evolution” (1905), “a pioneer” and “a hero” (1923). The Texans under Tarrant’s command have been heralded as “daring pioneers” (1949).

On the other hand, the Native peoples that Texans attacked have been characterized as “the horrible Savages who have murdered our families” (referring to Native attacks against Texan settlements along the Red River). Their settlements have been identified as “the *Depot* for the stolen horses from our frontier” (1841), “that rude city of the wilderness” (1900), and a “haven for Indian raiding parties” (1984). These people have also been called an “Indian horde” (1841) and “foes of progress” (1905). As such, they had to be removed and replaced: “He (i.e., the white man) must place in the Indian’s stead the white race with the white man’s respectability. Cruelty is never justifiable unless something good grows out of it” (1905). The supposed necessity of removal has endured through the years as reflected in a newspaper column that proclaimed, “Tarrant Freed Area of Red[\*\*\*\*]” (1969). The attack was said to have marked the beginning of “the end of life as the red man knew it” (1973), while also providing firm roots for Fort Worth’s contemporary growth by reflecting essential objectives of “real estate development,” namely, “establishment of security” (Village Creek attack) and “new communities” (Bird’s Fort, Johnson’s Station, Fort Worth) and demonstrating “resourcefulness,” illustrated by examples of deceiving and pushing out Native peoples (1978). Some concluded that “many tribes began moving west” because of the attack (1980), realizing they no longer had “a secure sanctuary from the Texans” (1984). The attack, in turn, “opened way for white settlers” (1984) and “opened for settlers the area now known as Arlington” (1986). “The site of the first settlement in Tarrant county” has been credited to Jonathan Bird, who tried establishing a nearby fort a few months afterward (1981). There was no recognition that Native presence in the area dates back thousands

of years. One person, though, characterized the attack as “a planned slaughter of men, women, and children to establish the white man’s title to land” (1990).

Texans’ desire for the land that we now call north Texas has long been evident. An 1839 map characterized the area as a “Great body of excellent land,” while a map from 1841 designated it as “Excellent Land.” Others called it “the garden spot of Eastern Texas” (1841). The notion that Texans were bringing progress to the area and making it productive justified this desire, at least in the minds of Texans: “It was a wild waste, where wolves and panthers dwelt, and where the savage roamed and battled against advancing civilization.” Settlers were fulfilling God’s command “to have dominion and subdue the earth” (1905), while “The immigrant regarded it as the promised land, flowing with milk and honey” (1918). The chair of TCU’s Centennial Commission concluded that TCU “has seen its own surrounding area progress from Indian infested territory to an urban center” (1972). A member of Arlington’s Bicentennial/Centennial Celebration Committee observed that this area was among “the last land to be taken forcefully from the disillusioned, distrustful, angry and hungry Indians in Texas” (1976).

Some have reckoned that “In terms of historical importance, it wasn’t much of a battle” (1992), while most living in the DFW metroplex have ignored or been unaware of it or failed to recognize it as a local manifestation of broader attitudes about Native Americans and the violence demanded by Euro-American Christian colonization of the continent. Equally significant in understanding DFW’s collective memory is who and what have been left out or underemphasized. For instance, DFW’s generations have overlooked that Native peoples were fighting to protect their freedom, families, communities, and nations from people who wanted to eradicate everything about them and take their land. No monuments or commemorations of the Native peoples of Village Creek exist, nor have ceremonies been held or flags lowered to honor them (at least as far as I know).

How, what, and why we remember Village Creek are shaped by the interplay between the past and present. While most are unaware of the meanings we’ve inherited from previous generations, they remain influential. They have established a framework we routinely use when we explain and market today’s metroplex, create our individual and institutional places in it, and decide who is and isn’t included and empowered in our communities. They collectively become a conduit through which we participate in the attack and its aftermath.

What is TCU’s relationship to the attack at Village Creek? Throughout its existence, TCU has created a relationship based on DFW’s collective memory and the needs, goals, and values of the university during specific periods. TCU’s [Land Acknowledgment](#), however, provides an opportunity to rethink this relationship and to guide us in positive, constructive ways. Reading the university’s Land Acknowledgment in light of the attack that occurred on May 24, 1841 brings new meaning to TCU’s past, present, and future. We have an opportunity, even a responsibility, to discover and shape that new meaning in our courses, programs, meetings, activities, decision making, allocation of resources, and choices and priorities. Today is a good day to thoughtfully read and contemplate with courage TCU’s Land Acknowledgment and to imagine what a positive future for our university in respectful relationships with Native American and Indigenous nations and communities looks like.