Beginning in 1863, the U.S. Army forcibly relocated thousands of Navajo men, women and children from their homeland in present-day northeastern Arizona and northwestern New Mexico to the Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation at Fort Sumner, a distance of about 450 miles. Hundreds died en route, in particular the very old and the very young. Hundreds more died on the reservation.

Those who survived what came to be known as the Long Walk faced a harsh struggle for survival on the desolate plains of eastern New Mexico. Some succumbed to pneumonia or dysentery, a few died in fights with the soldiers, others simply starved to death. The conditions at Fort Sumner spared no one, and many Navajos buried both their parents and their children during the years they lived on the Pecos River that courses through the reservation.

The Mescalero Apaches of present-day southeastern New Mexico, though a much smaller group, did not escape the attention of the officer in charge, Brigadier General James H. Carleton, commanding the Military Department of New Mexico. They, too, were rounded up and forced onto the new reservation. Though the territory was familiar to them, such inhumane treatment was not. Like the Navajos who were forced to submit, the Mescalero Apaches were herded like cattle by Carleton’s field commander, Colonel Christopher “Kit” Carson.

In his latest history of the Navajos, entitled DINE, author Paul Iverson calls the Long Walk what it really was: a forced march driven by harshness and cruelty. And it was not one forced march but several, with at least a dozen different groups traveling four different routes between Fort Defiance and Fort Sumner. Regardless of the heat of the summer or the cold of the winter, the soldiers escorting them pushed the people as fast as they could go. According to stories of survivors, stragglers, no matter their age or their health, including women who were in the throes of childbirth, might be shot for falling out of line. Such was the policy of the U.S. government in New Mexico during the Civil War and in the years just following.

Removing Indians from their homelands wasn’t a new idea. Twenty-five years earlier, President Andrew Jackson had pursued a similar policy toward the Cherokee and other Native Americans living in the Southeast. During the forced relocation known as the Trail of Tears, an estimated 4,000 Cherokees, one-fifth of the tribe’s total population at the time, died on the trek from their homes in Tennessee and North Carolina to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) west of the Mississippi.
For the Navajo and Mescalero Apache people, loss of their land had begun long before 1863. The arrival of the Spanish settlers after 1598 marked the beginning of a constant battle for land and cultural survival. The arrival of American military forces in 1846 added to the turmoil and strengthened the hand of settlers.

To the military, Native American claims to their traditional homelands were mere obstacles to the “peaceful” settlement of the West. Having arrived in New Mexico in 1862 to defend the territory against Confederate invasion, Carleton ordered the subjugation of the Mescalero Apaches. After a successful campaign against them, he turned his attention to the Navajo people, ordering them to surrender and go to the Bosque Redondo. Any who refused would be considered hostile and face attack by Carson. Some did refuse, and Carson waged a “scorched earth” campaign aimed at starving the Navajos into submission. By the end of 1864, the U.S. Army held more than 8,500 Navajos at the Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation.

It wasn’t long before the Carleton’s policy began to unravel. The Mescalero Apaches left the reservation in November 1864 and eventually returned to their homeland in the Sacramento Mountains. Efforts by the military to recapture them were unsuccessful. Back on the reservation, the Navajos, who were excellent farmers and had been for generations, struggled to produce a good crop in the alkaline soils of the Pecos River Valley. The task was made harder by the interference of military overseers who tried to impose conventional European farming methods unsuited to the dry southwestern climate.

In addition, Carleton had apparently underestimated the number of Navajos. Although he succeeded in capturing only a small part of the Navajo population, he still had twice as many prisoners than he expected. When the crops failed, feeding such a large number of people overwhelmed the Army’s feeble supply operation. At the same time, concerns in the U.S. Congress began to grow about the condition of the western tribes. A Joint House-Senate Committee was established to investigate the sources of conflict, and in mid-1865 this committee (including Vice President Lafayette S. Foster) visited the Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation. Members of the Joint Committee were highly critical of the operation at Fort Sumner and published a report that condemned Carleton’s treatment of the Navajos—although their report did not offer an alternate policy.

Controversy at the highest levels of government continued,
as Congress debated civilian versus military control over Indian affairs. In November 1867, by order of General Ulysses S. Grant, administration of the Reservation was turned over to the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior. In April 1868, a delegation of Navajo leaders led by Indian Agent Theodore Dodd traveled to Santa Fe to ask Brigadier General George W. Getty to allow them to return to their homes. He deferred action until the Navajo leaders could meet with members of a newly established Peace Commission that was led by General William T. Sherman and Samuel F. Tappan.

The Peace Commissioners arrived at Fort Sumner on May 27, 1868, and met in council with about thirty Navajo headmen (leaders of clans) to offer relocation to the vicinity of Fort Sill in the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). The Navajo spokesmen rejected the offer and insisted on returning to their ancestral homeland (in present-day New Mexico, Arizona and Utah). Seeing no alternative Sherman and Tappan agreed to allow the Navajos to return home and quickly drafted a treaty to that effect. On June 1, 1868, the Treaty of 1868 was signed, establishing the Navajo Nation of today.

The Navajos wasted no time in preparing for their return home. In his book, *Signers of the Treaty of Peace*, Martin Link notes that at dawn on June 18 a column composed of 7,304 Navajos with at least 1,500 horses and mules and 4,000 sheep and goats, stretching ten miles along the road north toward Fort Union, left Fort Sumner. A troop of the 3rd Cavalry led the way as escort, and a company of the 37th Infantry brought up the rear and handled the wagons. The column covered ten to twelve miles a day and reached Fort Wingate on July 23. The Treaty of 1868 provided just $100,000 in reparations to pay the cost of reinstating the Navajos in their homes. Yet the Navajo people themselves went about the work of re-establishing a nation with such determination that within ten years a casual visitor might never have guessed that anything as devastating as the Long Walk had ever happened.

Tragically it had, and the damage done by Carleton and Carson would create a bitter legacy for generations to come. In 1967, as the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of 1868 approached, efforts began to commemorate what had happened on the Long Walk and at the Bosque Redondo Reservation. The Village of Fort Sumner purchased a small section of the Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation and deeded it to the State of New Mexico. On June 12, 1968, the
site was proclaimed a New Mexico State Monument, and, in 1970, a modest visitor center was constructed to relate the events of the Long Walk period.

In 1992, efforts in the New Mexico State Legislature to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Treaty of 1868 led to the passage of a House Memorial requesting that the Office of Cultural Affairs “continue efforts towards the commemoration of the Bosque Redondo site through the planning of a memorial to that tragic event.” A Senate Memorial in 1993 resolved that a new facility be erected at the Fort Sumner site “to commemorate the Long Walk that the Navajo people took back to their homeland and to commemorate the healing that has taken place since that event.” That same year, the legislature also appropriated $100,000 to fund the design phase for this new Bosque Redondo Memorial.

In 1999, Democratic Senator Jeff Bingaman, supported by Republican Senator Pete Domenici, introduced a federal bill to appropriate $2 million, which came to half of the estimated cost to construct the memorial. The Bingaman bill, enacted in November 2000 with funding made available in September 2002, made it clear that the state had to fund the remaining 50 percent of the cost. Because of the delays in the appropriation, the time to spend the funds was extended to September 30, 2003. By this time, however, the estimated cost of construction had increased to $5.9 million, placing even more financial strain on the state. In the legislative session of 2002, State Representative Brian K. Moore (R-Clayton) succeeded in securing another $500,000 towards the state’s share of the cost to build the memorial.

Because of the deadline to incumber the $2 million federal grant by September 30, 2003, it was decided to divide the construction of the Memorial into phases, with the first phase providing 75 percent of the Memorial building, all of the landscaping, roads, and parking, and a temporary exhibit.

While this first phase, expected to be completed mid-summer 2004, will provide an adequate part of the memorial, it will not provide for construction of a planned, large exhibition space nor the permanent exhibit that will relate the story of those long years of suffering on the Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation or the failed government policy that produced it. It will not relate the story of the hundreds of men, women, and children who died during the years of internment and whose sacrifice resulted in the Navajo Nation that
exists today. That part of the Memorial is the responsibility of the State of New Mexico; consequently, efforts continue to acquire the remaining funds to construct the rest of the memorial that will stand in tribute to the endurance and tenacity of a people who were victimized by a government bent on expansion, with little or no regard for them. It will honor the memory of the thousands of Navajo and Mescalero Apache people who suffered and died as a result of the forced relocation and internment. Moreover, it will celebrate the official birth of a sovereign nation born of the tragedy of the Bosque Redondo.

Once completed the Bosque Redondo Memorial will join other historic and commemorative sites across the United States and throughout the world that honor and preserve memories of similar tragedies. It will be among a distinguished group of museums of conscience such as the District Six Museum in South Africa that recalls the forced removal under apartheid; the Gulag Museum in Russia, the only Stalinist labor camp to be preserved in Russia; the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh that recalls the killing fields and the genocide of the Bangladeshi people during the Liberation War of 1971; the Maison Des Esclaves in Senegal, an 18th-century slave transport station; the Women's Right National Historic Site in the United States that relates the long struggle for women's right in this country; the Manzanar National Historic Site in the United States that recalls the forced internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II; the Memoria Abierta in Argentina commemorating the desaparecidos during the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s; the Terezin Memorial in the Czech Republic, a labor camp used to model the “humane practices” of the Nazi regime to the Red Cross; The Workhouse in the United Kingdom, a 19th-century solution to poverty; and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in New York City, a living, permanent memorial to the six million Jews and millions of others murdered by the Nazi regime and its collaborators.

The Bosque Redondo Memorial will also be tangible substantiation of the founding declaration of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience: “The belief that it is the obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of the sites and its contemporary implications. And that stimulating dialogue on pressing social issues and promoting humanitarian and democratic values is a primary function.” To achieve all of its objectives, a complete Bosque Redondo Memorial is a commitment to be fulfilled.
A Concern for the Future
GREGORY SCOTT SMITH, Manager, Fort Sumner State Monument

There is a Navajo traveler's shrine at Fort Sumner State Monument that consists of only a small rock cairn and a juniper tree. On February 14, 1971, representatives of the Navajo Nation, led by a hataalii (singer) named Tom Ration, established it with a Blessing Way Ceremony. On a morning about thirteen years ago, Ranger Angie Manning arrived at work to find a letter pinned under one of the rocks at the shrine.

The letter was written on two sheets of ruled paper torn from a spiral-bound notebook, a student's notebook. To find such notepaper is not all that unusual. About 1,000 to 1,500 Navajos visit the monument annually and they often leave messages or prayer bundles on the shrine. Staff members at Fort Sumner are always careful to avoid disturbing such offerings, and we often remind the more casual visitors that the cairn is similar to the altar in a church and should be treated with the same respect and reverence. But the letter that Angie found that morning seemed different: It wasn't folded up like most messages are, and it appeared to be addressed to the staff:

"We the young generation of the Diné (Navajo) were here on June 27, 1990, at 7:30 p.m. We find Fort Sumner's historical site discriminating and not telling the true story behind what really happened to our ancestors in 1864–1868.

"It seems to us there is more information on ‘Billy the Kid’ (which has no significance) than to the years 1864–1868. We therefore demand that the museum show and tell the true history of the Navajos and the United States military.

"We, the young generation of the Navajos, are concerned for the future."

The note was signed by: Herbert Yazzie, Steamboat, Ariz.; Kenny Begay, Rockey Tso; Tommy Bitsui; Fabian Kee; Mat Fry, Jeddito, Navajo Nation, Ariz.; Jeannie Y. Benally; Wendy C. Begay; Darlene Smith; Sherretta Martinez, Crownpoint, N.M.; Jason Songster, Leonard F., Fort Wingate, N.M.; Marlon Yazzie, Farmington, N.M.; Cassandra Ben; Sonja Bahe, Jeddito, Ariz.; Laura Becenti, Kinlichee, Ariz.; Petula Shirley, Kinlichee, Ariz.; Pauline M. Begay, Sawmill, Ariz.; Evelyn Becenti, Naschitti, N.M.; Kidd Louis, Crystal, N.M.

Manning copied the letter to then Director of New Mexico State Monuments Tom Caperton and returned the original to the files, where I found it while researching the history of the Bosque Redondo Memorial project.

Efforts by the Museum of New Mexico and New Mexico State Monuments to obtain authorization and funding to build a new museum at Fort Sumner have been persistent, if not consistent, since Fort Sumner State Monument came to be in 1968. The monument itself was created in conjunction with Centennial Ceremonies, which were organized by the Navajo Nation to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of 1868.

When I started as manager at Fort Sumner State Monument at the end of 1990, the site had been open to the public for twenty years. In 1970, a visitor center was constructed (by Star Construction of Santa Fe) for just under $40,000 that included a caretaker's residence, restrooms, and exhibit space of about 600 square feet.

Built in the style of the old fort, the visitor's center had exhibits and interpretive programs that emphasized the military point-of-view. The staff concentrated on developing living history programs that featured a ranger dressed in a Civil War uniform to demonstrate the weapons and equipment of soldiers stationed at Fort Sumner. This was the standard interpretation of the day for a frontier Army post. It also reflected the limited efforts that had been made to consult with the Navajo Nation and the Mescalero Apache Tribe so that their points-of-view were also represented.

The current exhibit in the visitor's center, installed in June 1987, includes less text than you'd find on the dust jacket of most books. By reading the text on every display case and interpretive sign, a visitor still could not fully understand that in the 1860s the U.S. Army forcibly relocated Navajos and Mescalero Apaches to a 1,024,000-acre block of land called the Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation, with Fort Sumner at the center. Thousands died on the Long Walk to Fort Sumner and during their years of internment. In all, the Navajo Nation lost approximately 20 percent of its population.

It's the story that twenty young Native Americans were asking to be told now—nearly 400 years later. It's the story that New Mexico State Monuments want to tell at the Bosque Redondo Memorial.

1. Mrs. Helene Allen donated 50 acres to the State Land Office, which were then proclaimed a state monument by Commissioner of Public Lands Guyton B. Hayes on June 12, 1968. The U. S. Congress passed a joint resolution recognizing the Centennial Year of the Treaty of 1868 on May 17, 1968, and President Lyndon B. Johnson issued a proclamation in honor of the Treaty of 1868 on the 100th anniversary of the original signing.
2. Estimates of the total Navajo population at the time vary widely; one estimate is 3,000 deaths in a population of 15,000.