

Chief Joseph Biography and Timeline

Chief Joseph was born in 1840. His Nez Perce name, Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekt, translates into English as “Thunder Rolling Down the Mountain.” His father, Joseph the Elder, helped establish a Nez Perce reservation (a land dedicated to Native Peoples) in 1855. The Nez Perce resided in the plateaus (a high piece of land that is flat on top), mountains, and gorges (a deep area on either side of a mountain) of northeastern Oregon, southeastern Washington, and western Idaho. When the gold rush came in 1863, the government tried to move the Nez Perce out of the Wallowa Valley and into Idaho.

With the growing population of gold miners, the Nez Perce were ordered by the US government to relocate to a new, smaller reservation. Initially refusing to leave the Wallowa Valley, the three Nez Perce leaders finally agreed to the resettlement when a violent conflict became imminent in 1877. Before the move could happen, warriors from one of the bands attacked and killed several white settlers. The US army retaliated against all Nez Perce, including those who were not involved in the group that killed the white settlers.

Chief Joseph organized a retreat to protect his people. He led 600 Nez Perce 1,400 miles toward the Canadian border. He fought and won against the US army in several battles along the journey over the summer of 1877. However, cornered by US troops, facing an upcoming winter with no food and no supplies, Chief Joseph worried that his people would not survive. Chief Joseph then surrendered, saying, “I am tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever.” The tribe was sent to a reservation in Oklahoma.

Chief Joseph became known as “the Red Napoleon” because he negotiated the return of his band (the part of the tribe of which he was the leader) to the Nez Perce reservation in Idaho.

Chief Joseph was unsuccessful in his efforts to return to his homeland during his lifetime. When he died in 1904, he was buried in the Colville Indian Cemetery on the Colville Reservation in Washington State.

The following events are out of order. Add dates to each event. Cut out the strips and reorganize them to reflect an accurate timeline of important dates in the life and times of Chief Joseph.

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- Settlers of the gold rush begin to push Nez Perce off reservation
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- Chief Joseph surrenders, relocates with followers to Oklahoma
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- Chief Joseph born in Oregon
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- Conflict escalates with US government and army
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- Joseph the Elder helps establish a large Nez Perce reservation
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- Chief Joseph dies, never returning to Native Wallowa lands
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- Chief Joseph and several hundred followers flee toward Canada
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