Violence on the Bear River
Background Information

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One of the most violent confrontations between Native Americans and the United States Army occurred near the Idaho/Utah border in January of 1863. There are several eye-witness accounts of what occurred, though a great deal of controversy continues to surround the incident. Today, there are two monuments that mark the site, one labeling the event "The Battle of Bear River" and the other calling it "The Bear River Massacre." In recent years the Northwestern Shoshone have prepared to construct a new marker to memorialize the event. Your assignment is to propose a design for the memorial, including selecting a label for the event and creating a brief written description of what occurred. Although there is disagreement over the incident and who was to blame, there are a few things that most historians agree on.

1. The settlement of the Cache Valley region by Mormons had reduced the resources of the Shoshone. Livestock replaced the wild animals the Shoshone had traditionally hunted. And grazing cattle ate the native grasses that the Shoshone relied upon for food. In desperation the Shoshone turned to raiding cattle herds, attacking wagon trains, begging settlers for food, and extending the range of their hunting.
2. Conflict between the settlers and Shoshone increased during the 1850s and early 1860s. Periods of cooperation were interspersed with periods of hostility. Some people outside of Utah wondered whether the Mormon settlers supported the Shoshone raids on emigrants.
3. Conflict between the Shoshone and emigrants on the Oregon Trail increased during the 1850s and early 1860s, with both emigrants and Shoshone committing acts of violence and revenge. Discovery of gold in Montana increased travel in the region and as traffic increased so did the violence.
4. With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, most soldiers, including Johnston's army, which had been stationed in Utah, were pulled out of the West and relocated in the eastern theaters of war. A group of adventure-seeking volunteer soldiers from California, led by Colonel Patrick Conner, were deployed to Utah to keep an eye on the Mormons, whose loyalty to the United States was doubted, and to guard the emigrant trails through the territory.
5. Mormons and the California volunteer soldiers had uneasy relations. Soldiers didn't trust the Mormons and the Mormons resented having the soldiers around and were sometimes unsupportive of the military's efforts.
6. In the end of January 1863, after months of escalating violence between the volunteers and Shoshone, Colonel Conner led about 240 of his soldiers to Cache Valley in order to "chastise" a band of Shoshone led by Bear Hunter. On January 29, 1863 a clash occurred between about 200 soldiers and a large Shoshone village that resulted in the deaths of perhaps 400 or more Shoshone men, women, and children and about 20 soldiers.
7. After the event, settlers were able to expand unopposed into Shoshone lands and emigrants crossed Shoshone territory with fewer incidents of violence. The Northwestern Shoshone were unable to maintain their nomadic lifestyle and converted in greater numbers to Mormonism and settled on church-sponsored farms.

Resource: Interview of Darren Parry
https://heritageandarts.utah.gov/the-bear-river-massacre-a-shoshone-history-a-conversation-with-darren-parry/