

GENERAL JOHN JOSEPH COPPINGER
COMMANDANT FORT GIBSON

By Carolyn Thomas Foreman

John Joseph Coppinger, born at Cove of Cork, County Cork, Ireland, November 10, 1834, was appointed a captain in the Fourteenth Infantry, United States Army, from the state of New York, September 30, 1861. He had some knowledge of French and Spanish; no business training; he had given attention to tactics, field fortifications, and general reading of history.¹

As a young man Coppinger was a lieutenant and captain in the Army of the Pope in the Papal War against Victor Emmanuel. He was made a chevalier of that corps for gallantry in action at La Raca in 1860. At the outbreak of the Civil War he came to the United States and volunteered for service. Archbishop John Hughes had been induced by President Lincoln to visit Europe in behalf

¹Adjutant General's Office, "Old Files," Maj. Gen. John Joseph Coppinger. According to the first edition of *Who's Who in America, 1899-1900*, General Coppinger was born October 11, 1834.

of the Union and he evidently met Coppinger while abroad, as he secured a commission for the young man when he came to this country.

When Louis Phillippe, Comte de Paris and the Duke of Orleans made a tour of the battlefields in Pennsylvania and Virginia they were accompanied by Captain Coppinger. The Comte de Paris served on the staff of General George B. McClellan in a Virginia campaign in the spring of 1862; after his return to Paris in July of that year he wrote a *History of the Civil War in America* which was translated into English and published in the United States.²

Captain Coppinger was wounded at the second battle of Bull Run on August 2, 1862, and was brevetted major June 12, 1864, for gallant and meritorious service in the Battle of Trevilian Station, Virginia; on October 19, the same year, he was brevetted lieutenant colonel for gallantry at the Battle of Cedar Creek, Virginia. Generals George A. Custer, A. T. A. Torbett and Philip H. Sheridan recommended Coppinger for brigadier general in 1864.³

Coppinger became a full colonel January 27, 1865, and was assigned to the Fifteenth New York Cavalry; he was mustered out of the volunteer service June 17, 1865, and the next year was transferred from the Fourteenth to the Twenty-third Infantry. While in this regiment he saw much service among the western Indians and received his commission as captain June 13, 1867, at Camp Three Forks, Ocoyhu, Idaho Territory. He was in the west from March, 1866, to November, 1868, and from April, 1869, to May 17, 1871.

During this period there was great dissatisfaction among the Idaho Indians owing to the delay of the government in dealing with them, and in carrying out stipulations in treaties made years previously.⁴ In 1868 the Indian war in that territory was about ended and an army officer in command reported: "Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the officers and soldiers participating in this frontier war." Governor D. W. Ballard wrote: "All honor and praise to officers and men of . . . the 23d infantry, who have participated in the Indian wars of Idaho."⁵ On December 1, 1868, Coppinger was awarded a brevet "for energy and zeal while in command of troops operating against hostile Indians in 1866, 1867 and 1868." At the age of thirty-four Coppinger was appointed colonel by brevet on May 17, 1869.⁶

Colonel Coppinger was in Monkstown, County Cork, Ireland, in the autumn of 1871, from where he asked additional leave because of the death of his "nearest relation," and the necessity to attend to some business. His company was still at Fort Boise, Idaho Ter-

² *The Evening Star*, Washington, D. C., November 5, 1909; *Lippincotts Biographical Dictionary*, Philadelphia, 1888.

³ AGO, "Old Files."

⁴ *Report commissioner Indian affairs*, 1876, pp. 248-49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1868, p. 199.

⁶ *Heitman*, vol. 1, p. 327.

ritory, and Major General J. M. Schofield wired that he had no objection to the extension of leave. Coppinger had also been on duty at Cairo, Egypt, during his stay abroad.⁷

The year 1872 was a most unhappy one for Colonel Coppinger, owing to accusations against him printed in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of July 21. He asked for a court of inquiry from his station at Angel Island, California, to investigate the charges. He was accused of a flirtation with the wife of a newspaper man who represented a New York paper. Coppinger was described as a "dashing looking officer—bold and brilliant." The newspaper man attempted to have Coppinger dismissed from the army. The court of inquiry assembled in San Francisco on August 5, 1872, and Coppinger was temporarily relieved from the command of his company. He denied through the press the truth of the accusations, stating that the woman was innocent and deserving of the highest respect.

From Fort Reno, Indian Territory, May 5, 1877, Captain Coppinger wrote to the War Department asking to be sent abroad as an observer of military operations in Russia and Turkey, but Adjutant General Edward Davis Townsend did not approve. On March 20, 1879, Coppinger became a major in the Tenth Infantry, and he was Acting Assistant Inspector General at Fort Leavenworth, headquarters of the Department of Missouri. Coppinger was one of the army officers sent to Captain David L. Payne's camp of "Boomers" to order the leader not to cross the line from Kansas into the Indian Territory, warning Payne that his troops had orders to shoot.⁸ He was promoted to lieutenant colonel October 31, 1883, and assigned to the Eighteenth Infantry. From October 2, 1886, to July 17, 1888, Coppinger was in command at Fort Gibson, Indian Territory.

Colonel J. J. Coppinger, when commandant of Fort Gibson, furnished the War Department, in 1888, with a detailed description of the buildings then in use at the fort. The commanding officer's quarters was a two and one-half story stone house of thirteen rooms; size 36 by 40 feet. Two frame houses stood on either side of above, each 36 by 60 feet, one and one-half stories high; one had twelve and the other thirteen rooms. These houses served as a double set of quarters for officers.

Barracks 23 by 154 feet, two stories high, contained ten rooms, barracks for two companies. Begun in 1845, it was completed during the Civil War.

Guard House on opposite side of parade ground from officers' quarters was one story frame of four rooms, 35 by 34 feet. A frame building of nine rooms, 35 by 34, served as a single set of officers' quarters.

The hospital was two-story frame, fourteen rooms, 37 by 37 feet, with a wing 25 by 47, and a kitchen 14 by 16 feet.

⁷ AGO, "Old Files."

⁸ Rister, Carl Coke, *Land Hunger* (Norman, 1942), pp. 82, 86.

Quartermaster store house of stone, 38 by 100, one story, four large rooms. Subsistence store house, also of stone, 34 by 80 feet, one story, four rooms.

Post bakery, frame, 19 by 57, one story, two rooms. Great oven. Blacksmith and carpenter shops in one story building of two rooms, 20 to 60 feet. Magazine was a stone building, 16 by 20, one story, one room.

One story building 20 by 90 feet, five large rooms, offices for commanding officer and quarters for unmarried officers. Large frame building, 24 by 80 feet, hay barn. Frame, 30 by 52, one story, 8 rooms, quarters of commissary & quartermaster sergeant. One large building of stone and frame was 13 by 206, quartermaster stables. Ice house, frame, 25 by 80 feet. A number of great cisterns.

Colonel Coppinger of General Pope's staff was married to Alice Stanwood Blaine, eldest daughter of Hon. and Mrs. James G. Blaine, at noon on February 6, 1883, in the new mansion of the family at 1500 20th Street, Washington, D. C. The ceremony was performed by Rev. Dr. Chappelle of St. Matthew's Church in the presence of a large group of friends of Mr. and Mrs. Blaine and army friends of the groom. A cabinet meeting was postponed so that President Chester A. Arthur and his cabinet might attend. Among the guests were General and Mrs. Sherman, Hon. J. Warren Keifer, Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Maine delegation in both houses of Congress with their wives, Col. Robert G. Ingersoll, the Chief Justice and other members of the Supreme Court, many foreign ambassadors.

The bride wore a white satin gown, *en traine*, a long tulle veil, and she carried a bouquet of roses and lilies of the valley. She was attended by her young sister, Hattie Blaine. The President and Hon. George Bancroft were admitted inside the white ribbon line reserved for the family. President Arthur escorted the bride to the dining room, where a sumptuous wedding breakfast was served. After a wedding trip north the bride and groom repaired to his station at Fort Leavenworth.⁸

During the time the Coppingers were stationed at Fort Gibson they were visited by Blaine, who suffered a severe illness at the post.

Passengers going to Fort Gibson were obliged to leave the train at Gibson Station and finish the journey by a horse drawn vehicle. In the spring of 1887 or 1888 Mr. Blaine and his family traveled from St. Louis in the private car of Mr. Richard C. Kerens; the car was switched to a side track at Gibson Station, where it remained during the sojourn of the distinguished visitors at the garrison. The party reached Gibson Station early in the evening and all of them, except Mr. Blaine who was not feeling well, were conveyed by army ambulance to the fort. They returned for him next morning, but

⁸ *The Evening Star*, Washington, D. C., Tuesday, February 6, 1883, p. 3, col. 5; George Frederick Howe, *Chester A. Arthur*, New York, 1934, p. 242.

not before Mr. George Shannon and his family had called upon him at the car.

Mr. Blaine was seriously ill, threatened with pneumonia, and a telegram was sent to Mr. Kerens in St. Louis asking him to send a doctor at once to the fort. Mr. Kerens arranged to take Dr. H. H. Mudd; after they started Coppinger wired that "Mr. Blaine is doing very well. Only slight fever. Pulse good, 80 per minute."⁹

A telegram to the Associated Press dated Fort Gibson, April 8, 1887, reported: Mr. Blaine is suffering from bronchial catarrh with fever of a remitting type . . . Charles P. Berne, Post Surgeon." There was no telegraph line from the post to the railway station, so the message was probably sent by a soldier on horseback. On April 10 the doctors reported their patient much better; he had a slight bronchial pneumonia but his fever was subsiding. Two days later Blaine was still improving, but the doctors insisted that he remain in doors at least a week longer. That day he was allowed to converse with his family for a short time; he was quite hoarse and not out of danger. His illness was caused by exposure on the trip west, as he had been called out on the platform at every station and took a severe cold. Blaine was up and dressed on the fifteenth and on April 19 he and his party arrived in St. Louis on the way to Chicago. He was said to be still ill and planned to remain three days with his son in Chicago.¹⁰

"Upon his return to Gibson Station, prior to leaving for the east, all of the party, consisting of Col. and Mrs. Coppinger, their two sons, Blaine and Connor, Mrs. Blaine, Miss Hattie Blaine, Mrs. Mary E. Dodge, a writer using the nom-de-plume of Gail Hamilton, and Mr. Kerens, called at the Shannon home."¹¹

The *Indian Journal* of Eufaula, Indian Territory, stated, July 7, 1887: "Col. Coppinger has a new sail boat, which he has named 'Jackdaw' (his baby boy's pet name). We have convenient opportunities for boat riding living on the bank of Grand river."

Mrs. Coppinger was called to Washington in January, 1890, to attend the funeral of her brother, Walker Blaine; on January 29 she was taken seriously ill of congestion of the brain in her father's home, the old Seward mansion on Madison Place, and died on February third.¹²

Colonel Coppinger arrived in Washington from Columbus, Ohio, the day before his wife's death. At ten a.m. on Wednesday, February 4, 1890, a brief service was held at the home of her parents after which her body was taken to St. Matthew's Church where

⁹ *New York Tribune*, Saturday, April 9, 1887, p. 1, col. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, April 10, 1887, p. 1, col. 5; April 13, 1887, p. 1, col. 3; April 15, 1887, p. 1, col. 6; April 20, 1887, p. 5, col. 5.

¹¹ *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, "George Shannon," by Daisy Shannon, vol. X, no. 4, p. 551; *ibid.*, vol. X, no. 1, p. 32, "Events Among the Muskogees during Sixty Years" by C. W. Turner.

¹² Charles Edward Russel, *Blaine of Maine*, New York, 1831, p. 426.

Father Thomas Sherman, son of General Sherman, celebrated requiem mass; Cardinal Gibbons read the burial service and blessed the body; the choir chanted the Miserere. Mrs. Blaine was escorted by Colonel Coppinger; Secretary Blaine had a daughter on his arm and they were followed by James G. Blaine, Jr., with his other sister; Emmons Blaine with his wife; President and Mrs. Benjamin Harrison, Vice President and Mrs. Levi P. Morton and members of the cabinet.¹³

The remains were buried in Oak Hill Cemetery, Washington, D. C. Mrs. Coppinger was born March 18, 1861 and lived in Augusta, Maine, until her marriage. During her married life she had lived at Fort Leavenworth, Fort Assiniboine, and Fort Gibson. At the time of her passing the Coppinger home was on Governor's Island, New York. She left two sons, Blaine, six years old and Connor who was four.

On October 23, 1890, Colonel Coppinger was detailed to Paris, France, to obtain information and he remained there until April 25, 1891. He became a full colonel January 15, 1891 and commanded the Twenty-third Infantry.

The Bannock Indians became aroused when some lawless white men killed two or three of their tribesmen who were on a hunting expedition to the Jackson's Hole country, Wyoming. Governor Richards of Wyoming and the Indian agent at Fort Hall, Idaho, asked for troops because of the warlike attitude of the Indians towards the white settlers. A squadron of the Ninth Cavalry and a battalion of the Eighth Infantry under Major Adna R. Chaffee were ordered from Fort Robinson in July, 1895, to Market Lake, Idaho, where they took up the march to the scene of expected trouble. General Coppinger took part in this expedition, going from Omaha with Indian Inspector Province McCormick. The troops arrived at Jackson's Hole July 31, and engaged in returning the Bannocks to the Fort Hall Reservation, after which the excitement soon subsided. Jackson's Hole was the old hunting ground of the Bannocks but there "the last of America's big-game shooting was being reserved for those Americans who were wealthy enough to penetrate that country with the necessary transportation and equipment."¹⁴

General Coppinger, the United States district attorney of Wyoming and several army officers and McCormick met the governor of Wyoming to discuss the matter of the Bannocks hunting in the Jackson's Hole country and the Inspector reported: "I think I can safely say that I have discovered no disposition on the part of a single Indian to undertake for himself any revenge. . . There seems to be none of the soreness or sullenness that one would ordi-

¹³ *New York Tribune*, Monday, February 3, 1890, p. 7, col. 4; Wednesday, February 5, 1890, p. 5, col. 4.

¹⁴ William Addleman Ganoë, *The History of the United States Army*, New York, 1924, pp. 368-69; William Harding Carter, *The Life of Lieutenant General Chaffee*, Chicago, 1917, p. 119.

narily expect to see after the perpetration of such a dastardly, cowardly, preconcerted, outrageous crime as was inflicted upon these defenseless persons by the so-called law officers of Wyoming."¹⁵

During 1893, 1894, and 1895 a number of high officials recommended Coppinger for brigadier general; letters are on file in the War Department from General H. G. Wright and R. C. Kerens of Missouri, Governor J. S. Hogg of Texas, Governor C. A. Culberson of Texas, Senator S. B. Elkins of West Virginia and Hon. Robert R. Hitt of Illinois, and many others. William Russell Grace, ex-mayor of New York, stated that Coppinger had fought in thirty of the hottest battles in the Civil War.

The promotion of Coppinger to brigadier general April 25, 1895, vice General Wesley Merritt, caused unpleasant criticism as he was said to have been jumped over the heads of twenty-eight colonels.¹⁶

From Fort Clark, Texas, April 29, 1895, Coppinger acknowledged receipt of his commission as brigadier general. May 14, 1897, General Coppinger wrote the War Department from Omaha, Nebraska, that he would retire if given the same promotion as Generals Wheaton and Forsyth, parallel cases.¹⁷

He was hoping for active duty in case of hostilities in the spring of 1898, and wrote the War Department to that effect in spite of his near retirement for age. Early in May he was appointed a major general of volunteers in command of the Fourth Army Corps at Camp Wheeler, Huntsville, Alabama. This corps was organized at Mobile and in June had a strength of 20,816.¹⁸

General Coppinger was retired October 11, 1898, by operation of law of June 30, 1882. He died at his home, 820 18th Street, N.W., Washington, D. C., November 4, 1909; of double pneumonia. Funeral services were held at St. Matthews Church and interment was in Arlington National Cemetery where he had selected his lot near the graves of old comrades. Pall bearers were Brigadier General Theodore Swan, General Robert M. O'Reilly, Admiral F. M. Ramsay, Brigadier General C. R. Edwards, Colonel Robert T. Emmet, Major David S. Stanley, Major Frank McIntyre, Chief Justice Harry M. Clabaugh, Hon. John D. Crimmins of New York, Captain Dudley Winthrop and Captain A. W. Perry. The Engineer Band played the funeral march. There was also a trumpeter.¹⁹

¹⁵ Report Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1896, pp. 57-9.

¹⁶ AGO, "Old Files," Albert M. Hamer, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, October 27, 1895, to Daniel S. Lamont, Secretary of War. "Army officers are kicking because Coppinger, a junior colonel, has been appointed to a brigadiership in the army . . . and it was through Mrs. Blaine's influence that he was appointed . . . An attempt to procure his promotion at the hands of President Harrison met a failure which led to a spirited quarrel between Harrison and Mrs. Blaine" (*Fort Smith [Arkansas] Elevator*, May 3, 1895, p. 2, col. 6).

¹⁷ AGO, "Old Files," Coppinger.

¹⁸ Ganoe, *op. cit.*, p. 372; *Nelson's Encyclopaedia*, New York, 1907, Vol. 3, p. 363.

¹⁹ AGO, "Old Files," Coppinger.