



COPPERHEADS



The Copperheads, also known as Peace Democrats, were a faction of Democrats who opposed the war and favored an armistice with the Confederacy. They opposed President Lincoln and claimed he had usurped his powers and was ruling as a dictator. They also opposed the draft and often encouraged soldiers to desert. It is unclear where the name came from, Republicans started calling the anti-war Democrats "Copperheads" referring to the venomous snake of that name. The democrats in turn, embraced the name and chose as their symbol the Lady Liberty Head on the Copper 1 cent coin.

Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio were hotbeds of Copperhead organizations. Both Mattoon and Charleston hosted Copperhead groups.

A large group of Copperheads converged on Mattoon on 30 July 1863 with the purpose of holding a parade through town and then congregating at the farm of D J Vanderen, southeast of town. The parade ambled down Broadway, about 1500 strong, consisting of men from Coles, Shelby and Moultrie Counties. After an afternoon of speeches and condemnations of Lincoln at a grove on the Vanderen farm, the group processed back through town and disbursed. There were some minor altercations along the return parade route, but generally all was peaceful.

Not so peaceful were events in Charleston on 28 March 1864. The east side of Coles County, including Charleston had been largely settled by southerners, mainly from Kentucky and leaned largely towards the Peace Democrats. The county was about evenly divided and in fact only gave Lincoln a 28 vote majority in the 1860 election. The sheriff, John H O'Hair was a Democrat and a known Copperhead sympathizer.

A large contingent of Copperheads had converged on Charleston that day with a plan to support Judge Charles H Constable who had recently allowed 4 Union deserters to go free and thus angered Union supporters. Many of these Copperheads were armed. There had been frequent clashes between furloughed soldiers and Copperheads so things were at a low boil at this point.



Coles County Courthouse

As it happened, the 54th Illinois Infantry was just concluding its 30 day Veterans Furlough at Camp Grant and many soldiers from the 54th were in Charleston that day, including Colonel G M Mitchell and Major Shubal York, the Regimental Surgeon who was passing through Charleston on his way back from visiting his home town of Paris.

About 3:00 pm an altercation occurred between Pvt Oliver Sallee, of the 54th and Nelson Wells, a Copperhead. Within a few minutes, both men were dead, Wells by a shot from Sallee and Sallee from an unknown shooter. A general melee developed and as most of the soldiers were unarmed it was a one-sided affair. The Sheriff, John H O'Hair, was considered to be one of the ring leaders and abdicated his responsibility to maintain peace and order.

Major York was killed, shot in the back, and Colonel Mitchell was lightly wounded, a bullet grazed off his watch case. Mitchell quickly organized the soldiers and got off a telegram to Mattoon, calling for aid. Within an hour, about 250 soldiers arrived, but by that time the Copperheads had all taken flight, led by Sheriff O'Hair, who was observed cutting the telegraph line before leaving town.

In his official report, Colonel Mitchell stated: "I telegraphed to Colonel Chapman in Mattoon to bring men and guns. He arrived at 4:30pm with 250 men. I immediately mounted 75 men and scoured the country in all directions, arresting several parties implicated."

That evening, the 41st Illinois Infantry arrived by special train from Camp Yates, where they had been on Veteran Furlough. Governor Yates had dispatched the regiment to quell any further unrest in the Mattoon, Charleston area.

The 41st arrived to find a disquieted citizenry, but no further trouble. They completed their Furlough at Camp Grant.

Twenty-Nine of those detained were transferred to Mattoon where they were held under armed guard at the Cumberland Presbyterian Church for several days. On 8 April 1864 the twenty-nine were transferred to Camp Yates. All but 15 would be released and those 15 were moved to Fort Delaware, on the Delaware River. President Lincoln subsequently ordered them returned to Coles County for trial.

Eventually, after several changes of venue, the only two tried, George Rardin and John Redmon were found Not Guilty by an Effingham jury. The others detained were released upon taking an oath of allegiance to the federal government.

Sheriff O'Hair and several others fled to Canada and did not return to Coles County until after the war.

In all six soldiers, two Copperheads and one civilian were killed in the fracas.

Colonel Mitchell concluded his report: "no room to doubt that a party of men came to Charleston armed with revolvers and shotguns with the knowledge and consent of Sheriff O'Hair, with deliberate intention of killing the soldiers."

Col. Mitchell is still hunting down those engaged in the Charleston affray, and taking evidence for the court at Springfield against those already under arrest. A large number of depositions have been taken, some of which are strong enough to hang several of them. Those who do not quite deserve hanging or the State prison, should be allowed the privilege of volunteering in the army.

MURDER!

THE 54th Regiment Illinois Volunteers offer ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD for the apprehension of John H. O'Hair, Sheriff of Coles County; J. Elsbury Hanks, John Frazier, James W. Brazier, Henderson O'Hair, James O'Hair, Jesse O'Hair, B. F. Toland and B. F. Dukes, all of whom were engaged in the brutal murder of Major York and four soldiers of the 54th Reg. and the wounding of several others, in Charleston, on Monday March 28th, 1864.

DESCRIPTION.

John H. O'Hair, height 5 feet 11 in., age 35, eyes light, hair light, complexion light, Sheriff of the county.
J. Elsbury Hanks, 5 ft. 8 in. 35 yrs. old, dark eyes, light complexion and hair, farmer.
John Frazier, 5ft 10, age 33 dark eyes, dark hair and complexion, farmer.
Jas. W. Brazier 6ft, age 40, dark eyes hair and complexion; farmer.
Henderson O'Hair, 6ft, age 40 dark eyes, complexion and hair; farmer.
Jas. O'Hair, 5ft 11, age 45, light eyes hair and complexion; farmer.
Jesse O'Hair, 5ft 9, light eyes hair and complexion; no occupation.
B. F. Toland, 5ft 10, age 35 black eyes hair and complexion; farmer.
B. F. Dukes, 5ft 8, age 35, light eyes hair and complexion, loafer.
The citizens of Coles County will pay \$300 for the apprehension of J. H. O'Hair, and \$100 for each of the above named, and for Alexander Rogers. This reward will be given whether dead or alive. Dukes is badly cut about the face.
Charleston, Ill., April 2d, 1864.