

GEORGE STONEMAN: Civil War Soldier and Governor of California

By Ben Fuller Fordney

George Stoneman rarely emerges as a significant figure in the prolific writing of Civil War history that continues to pour off the presses, yet he played a prominent, if controversial, role in that conflict. He commanded the newly organized cavalry corps of the Army of the Potomac at the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863 and led the first major cavalry raid by Federal cavalry in the eastern theater of the war. After his military service, he was a progressive governor of California from 1883 to 1887.

There was little in his background to presage such a military and political career. It is perhaps trite to refer to a historical figure coming from pioneer stock, but George Stoneman was descended from a remarkable family of pioneers who settled in the state of New York. George Stoneman's grandfather was Richard Stoneman, who came to America from Exeter, England, shortly after the American Revolution. He settled in the village of New Berlin, New York, where he met and married Mary Perkins, whose family had moved to New York from Rhode Island. Their eldest son was named George, who moved to Chautauqua County in western New York state as soon as he came of age. He eventually settled in the town of Busti, later incorporated as the village of Lakewood, where he married Catherine Chaney Aldrich who was from Baltimore. The couple had ten children, eight of whom survived the rigors of frontier conditions. The eldest son was named after his father and was destined to become a central figure as a Union cavalry leader in the Civil War.¹

George Stoneman's boyhood, in the rugged country of western New York state, nurtured qualities that shaped his adult life: independence, physical



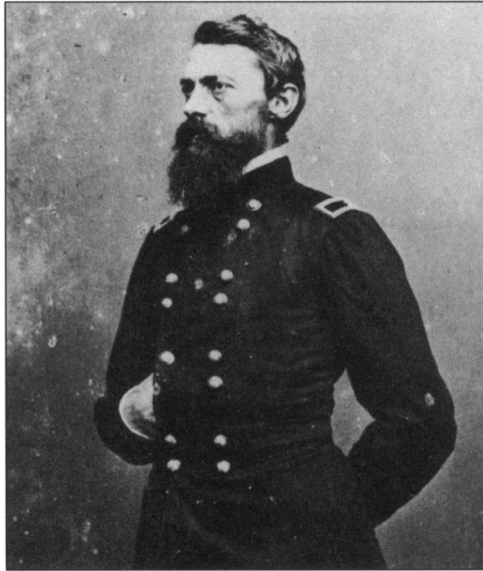
General and Mrs. George Stoneman during the Civil War shortly after their marriage. *Courtesy George B. Stoneman, M.D.*

toughness, and a strong sense of duty. The hardy settlers of the Chautaugua region did not encourage eloquence or loquaciousness and young George adopted a tight-lipped reticence that characterized him throughout his life.

George Stoneman, Jr. attended Jamestown Academy until he was eighteen, where he studied arithmetic, algebra, and some higher math and, although the school was located in a remote area, it provided Stoneman with a good classical education. His headmaster, E.A. Dickinson, noted that Stoneman developed good habits “both in application and perseverance. He has the confidence of all those who know him as a correct moral man.”²

Following his graduation from Jamestown Academy, Stoneman made the rather surprising decision to seek an appointment to West Point. A competitive and highly sought after appointment to the military academy was not unusual for a boy from a prominent and influential family, but Stoneman’s chances must have seemed remote to him and his family, as this was an era when political influence and social standing were the usual credentials for an appointment. Undeterred, Stoneman wrote directly to the Secretary of War, the Honorable Abe Bell: “A military life has ever comported with my incli-

General George Stoneman
in a Civil War portrait,
date unknown.
*Courtesy Massachusetts
Comandery Military Order of
the Loyal Legion and the
U.S. Army Military
History Institute.*



nation. But to make a military man he wants a proper education. I have therefore concluded to apply for the privilege of becoming a Cadet at West Point.”³

Stoneman was fortunate, due to the fact that his Congressman, Stanley N. Clarke, did not have the usual plethora of candidates in 1842 and, in fact, had nominated his own son but that still left one vacancy. Stoneman accepted an appointment to the Corps of cadets on May 9, 1842.

The roll of Plebes or first classmen who reported to West Point that summer contained some of the most illustrious names in the history of the American military, who in less than twenty years, would form the highest ranks of both the Union and Confederate armies in the Civil War. George B. McClellan, A.P. Hill, Thomas J. Jackson, who would be known as the immortal Stonewall, George E. Pickett, who was last in his class in graduation, Darius Couch, Jesse Reno, George H. Gordon all began their military careers that summer.

George Stoneman and Thomas J. Jackson had somewhat similar backgrounds. Both came from modest circumstances, unlike George McClellan, who was educated in Philadelphia’s best schools, and who earned good marks easily. Stoneman and Jackson both struggled and became roommates in 1844. Stoneman’s classmate, Darius Couch, wrote in 1895 that Stoneman and Jackson “were a great deal alike in some respects but different in others.

They both had “unobtrusive, meditative dispositions, not putting themselves forward, rather thinkers than talkers, and never saying a word that would wound a comrade’s feelings.”⁴ Jackson was the more diligent student, graduating seventeenth in his class of sixty, while Stoneman graduated twenty-third, behind his friend and future adversary.⁵

News of the coming war with Mexico over the disputed Texas border electrified the class of 1846. No doubt the newly commissioned Stoneman shared the enthusiasm of his classmates for the fight with Mexico, but Stoneman’s service was to be unusual. While McClellan, Jackson, and others went off to join General Zachery Taylor in Texas, Stoneman reported to the First Dragoons under the command of General Philip Kearney at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Stoneman was about to serve with one of the most unique units in U.S. military history, the Mormon Battalion, which marched over two thousand miles from Council Bluffs, Iowa, to San Diego, California, in the winter of 1846-1847. Relations between the Church of the Latter Day Saints and the U.S. government were tense as war was declared against Mexico. President James K. Polk, like many Americans of his day, mistrusted the Mormons and was not sure of their loyalty as they moved west from Council Bluffs two years after the murder of their founder Joseph Smith. Polk’s solution was to enlist some 400 Mormon men into a battalion, not to fight Mexicans but to support the U.S. occupation of California.

The leader of the Mormons, Brigham Young, agreed to the formation of the battalion because they were desperately short of food and supplies and partly because it would show their loyalty to the United States. After Young counseled the Mormons to take their Bibles and the Book of Mormon, the battalion marched off on July 20 under the command of Colonel James Allen to the tune of “The Girl I left behind me.”⁶

Stoneman joined the battalion at Santa Fe three months after receiving his brevet or temporary commission as a Second Lieutenant, which was the practice of the time. Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke, a profane but effective cavalry officer, commanded the battalion and led the Mormons out of Santa Fe. He appointed Stoneman Assistant Quartermaster, responsible for obtaining fresh mules and oxen, as well as provisions for the long march to California. Traveling through Apache territory, the battalion followed the Rio Del Norte toward Tucson. They established a new wagon road between the Rio Grande and the Gila River, and, although they did not realize it at the time, pioneered a route used by settlers, railroads, and gold-seekers in future years.⁷

The battalion encountered harsh conditions and obstacles as they traversed the Rocky Mountains, followed the San Pedro River and, on December 16, reached Tucson, where Mexican troops fled rather than contest the battalion's occupation.⁸ The battalion reached the Gila River a few days after Christmas, crossed it with great difficulty, as well as the Colorado River, and struggled through thick sand to California, reaching Warner's Ranch, the first house they had seen since entering the territory. Finally marching to the San Luis Valley, the battalion reached a deserted Catholic mission called Luis Rey and ascended a bluff. There the Mormons saw the great Pacific Ocean and its beauty "far exceeded our most sanguine expectations."⁹ After camping at another Catholic mission, four miles from San Diego, Colonel St. George Cooke reported to General Stephen W. Kearney, who had proclaimed California as occupied territory by the United States on March 6, 1847, and expressed his "ardent desire to promote . . . the interests of the country and the welfare of its inhabitants."¹⁰

Stoneman was enchanted by California and made a vow he would return and make his home in the San Gabriel Valley, although it took him twenty years to do so.¹¹ His duties, however, in those early days in the frontier were characterized by poor food, dangerous scouting assignments, and spartan living conditions. Probably the worst feature of army service was the monotony of long periods of duty away from family and friends.¹²

Severely restricted by a lack of funds and personnel, the regular army lacked the resources to play a significant role in the confrontations between Native Americans and white settlers after the California gold rush. Nevertheless, there were clashes between the army and Indians in which Stoneman was directly involved. In September 1849, Pit River Indians ambushed an army exploration expedition near Goose Lake in northern California. In 1850 General Persifor Smith, commander of the Pacific Division, led a force of dragoons and infantry in an attack at Clear Lake where between sixty and 100 Indians were killed. The troopers then marched to Russian River where an additional engagement took place at an island described by the commander of the expedition, Captain Nathaniel Lyon, as "a perfect slaughter pen" since between seventy-five and 150 Indians were killed.¹³

Stoneman's duties with the First Dragoons led to significant assignments escorting surveying expeditions in 1853 and 1854. Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War, had encouraged the Pacific Railroad Surveys to search for the most feasible routes to the American west. Stoneman was assigned to the topographical party looking for passes through the formidable Sierra Nevadas

and Coast Range that would connect California with Oregon and Washington. A second assignment followed in December 1853 when Stoneman returned to the route of the Mormon Battalion march escorting another survey. The party traveled to Tucson through the Chiricahua Mountains to a junction with Cooke's wagon road. Proceeding south after leaving the Rio Grande, the party found a more direct route through Texas and Arizona along the 32nd parallel.¹⁴

Stoneman was now one of the most experienced frontier officers in the service and, in 1854, he was assigned to the newly formed Second Cavalry, organized after several serious Indian attacks along the western frontier. The officers were personally selected by Secretary Jefferson Davis and the unit was a rare collection of military talent. Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston was commander. Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee was second in command. Other future leaders in both the Union and Confederate armies included Majors William J. Hardee and George H. Thomas, Captains Earl Van Dorn and E. Kirby Smith. The regiment even had a poet, Captain Theodore O'Hara, the author of "The Bivouac of the Dead."¹⁵

The Second Cavalry was organized in St. Louis, but was ordered to Texas in 1855. After a harrowing march through the Ozarks in subzero temperatures, the regiment reached Fort Belnap, Texas, in December. Stoneman led one of the squadrons attached to the command of Robert E. Lee, who was in command at Camp Cooper, a remote outpost in the Comanche Reserve.

Life at Camp Cooper was bleak. There were no buildings, as lumber was not available. There was blistering heat, choking dust and isolation in an area infested with snakes. Boredom was broken by occasional forays into Comanche territory. Stoneman confided to a friend living in San Diego: "This is god forsaken country and the lord only knows when I will get out of it again. I will embrace the first opportunity to get to California and it is altogether probable that when once there I shall never again leave it."¹⁶

It would be a long time before Stoneman's dream to get to California would be realized as the dark clouds of war were beginning to form over Texas and the nation.

After a leave of absence for a European tour, Stoneman came back to the Second Cavalry in Texas and spent most of his time leading his company to chase Juan Nepomuceno Cortinas who was conducting raids across the Mexican-American border, stealing cattle and horses. Cortinas was a bandit to the Americans, but a hero to the Mexicans, and Stoneman engaged his raiding

party on several occasions, but Cortinas could escape across the border, eluding the American troopers.¹⁷

As the fateful year of 1860 drew to a close, events were swirling around Texas and the nation. John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, had inflamed passions that were further fanned by Abraham Lincoln's election in November. Sentiment for secession was high in Texas, and Colonel Robert E. Lee was waiting to be replaced by General David Emanuel Twiggs, a strong state's rights man married to the former Elizabeth Hunter, a Virginian. As Lee left for Washington, where he eventually made his decision to resign his commission and follow his native state of Virginia, his successor was about to earn the stigma of "Traitor Twiggs" from his subordinates who remained faithful to the Union. Twiggs complied with the command of pro-Confederate authorities to "deliver up all military posts and public property" to the Texans. All United States troops should march out of Texas as well, but many were detained as Texas prepared to secede from the Union. Stoneman escaped the fate of many of his fellow loyal soldiers, who were paroled after promising not to oppose the Confederates, and led his regiment to Brazos Santiago where they boarded a steamboat and eventually reached Key West, Florida. Stoneman finally made his way to Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania and reported to his West Point classmate, General George McClellan.¹⁸

McClellan assumed command of the Army of the Potomac and promptly appointed Stoneman Chief of Cavalry, with a rank of Brigadier General of Volunteers, on August 14, 1861. Like many of his counterparts in the Union army, McClellan believed that cavalry was too inexperienced and poorly led to be trusted to independent command. Cavalry regiments were assigned to infantry commanders that led to an ineffective use of that arm at the beginning of the war.¹⁹ The Confederacy did not make that mistake. The flamboyant Brigadier General J.E.B. Stuart led a cavalry division early in the war with an independent command. Aided by trained horsemen operating in familiar territory, the Confederates dominated Union cavalry in 1861 and 1862 in the Peninsula campaign in March through July 1862, and in several dramatic cavalry raids.

Dominance of Confederate cavalry was about to change, however, by early 1863, and George Stoneman played a prominent role in the evolution of the Union mounted arm. The Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia, fought in December of 1862, was a debacle for the Union Army of the Potomac. A series of frontal attacks against entrenched Confederate positions led to 12,700 Union casualties and the Federal army withdrew from the battlefield and into winter camps along the Rappahannock River.

The costly battle at Fredericksburg led to the appointment of Major General "Fighting Joe" Hooker as commander of the Army of the Potomac. Hooker brought an army of 100,000 men from a demoralized mob to a fighting force preparing for a spring campaign in 1863 against General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. He also appointed Stoneman commander of a cavalry corps of over 11,000 troopers, organized into three divisions. The order doing so is considered to be a *Magna Carta* for Union cavalry, and Stoneman spent the winter months equipping and training his men who would play an important role in the coming Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863.

Hooker's plan to defeat Lee called for Stoneman to lead a cavalry raid behind Confederate lines while three corps of infantry crossed the Rappahannock River above Fredericksburg and outflanked the Confederates. Stoneman's cavalry was ordered to cut the enemy's communication with Richmond, the Confederate capital, destroying supplies, cutting railroads and forcing Lee to retreat.²⁰

"Stoneman's Raid" began on April 13, 1863 as Stoneman led 9,885 troopers out of their camps along the Rappahannock intending to cross the river at several fords upstream. Weather, however, intervened and a heavy rain turned the river into a torrent, delaying the crossing for almost two weeks. When the Federals finally did cross, Stoneman spread his maps and planned his assault on several unsuspecting Virginia communities and military objectives. Striking the important center of Louisa Court House, Stoneman advised his men that several raiding parties would strike out "like a shell, and that I intended to burst it in every direction, expecting each piece or fragment would do as much harm and create nearly as much terror as would result from sending in the whole shell . . ." ²¹

Stoneman's raiders did a good deal of temporary damage to Confederate facilities, reaching the outskirts of Richmond before returning to the Army of the Potomac on May 7. The infantry campaign at the Battle of Chancellorsville, named after an inn on the battlefield, was another humiliating defeat for the Federal army. Lee, greatly outnumbered with an army of 60,000, boldly split his army in the face of the enemy, to contend with Federal movements, thus persuading Hooker to assume a defensive position. Lee also sent General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson's 26,000 men on a march that struck the Federal right flank and sent them reeling in retreat. In the end, Hooker lost his nerve and retreated back across the Rappahannock. Lee's "greatest victory" as it is sometimes called by historians, was marred by the loss of Jackson who was shot accidentally by his own men and mortally wounded.

In the bitter postmortems of Chancellorsville, Hooker needed a scapegoat and Stoneman was a clear choice. He wired Secretary of War Stanton on May 10 that the railroad lines between Fredericksburg and Richmond had been interrupted for only one day by Stoneman's raiders. "My instructions appear to have been completely disregarded by Stoneman," he complained, and remarked in a newspaper interview that he had to have a "wooden man" as cavalry commander due to Stoneman's seniority. "Neither he nor Averell (one of Stoneman's division commanders) were any count. I sent them off to cut off Lee's communications and the devils went so far around to avoid the enemy that they never accomplished anything they were sent for."²²

Although the raid did not have a strategic impact on the Battle of Chancellorsville, it was a major step forward for Union cavalry. It was the first operation by an independent cavalry corps in the Army of the Potomac. It also trained several officers who rode to fame in future battles, such as Brigadier General John Buford, who led Union cavalry at the first day at Gettysburg, and David McM. Gregg as well as future generals Judson Kilpatrick and Wesley Merritt.

The controversy over the raid and a recurrence of a severe case of hemorrhoids, a common complaint of cavalymen and a condition that would plague him for the rest of his life, had convinced Stoneman to ask for sick leave while waiting for orders. Anxious to get back into the field after an assignment as head of the Cavalry Bureau in Washington, an office that re-equipped cavalry units and procured new mounts, Stoneman implored old Army colleagues to get him back into the war. Through the efforts of General John Schofield, a friend and fellow native of New York state, Stoneman was given command of the cavalry of the Department of the Ohio and assigned to General William Tecumseh Sherman.

Stoneman's cavalry was designed to be an integral part of Sherman's campaign to capture Atlanta, Georgia. Anxious to redeem his reputation after Chancellorsville, Stoneman persuaded Sherman to authorize a cavalry raid to liberate Federal prisoners of war at Macon, where the officers were being held, and the infamous Andersonville prison where 23,000 enlisted men were being held under appalling conditions. Stoneman led his division east of Atlanta southward toward Macon, destroying railroads and military supplies along the way, but found his way blocked at Macon by Confederate home guards and militia. Stoneman elected to return to Federal lines close to Atlanta, but was blocked by Confederate cavalry and eventually forced to surrender most of his command near Sunshine Church. Instead of freeing Federal prisoners at Macon and Andersonville, Stoneman, weakened by days of

hard riding and loss of blood from his affliction, suffered the humiliation of surrender.²³ His captivity was brief as he was exchanged in September 1864 for Confederate General D.C. Goven. He emerged from prison, the highest ranking officer ever captured by the Confederates, determined to settle accounts and salvage his reputation as a soldier.

Stoneman's military reputation was at a low ebb following his capture at Sunshine Church, but his old friend John Schofield came to his rescue once again. He was assigned to the Department of the Ohio and immediately planned a raid into southern Virginia and North Carolina. The Confederacy was entering its death throes in the spring of 1865 as Stoneman led close to 10,000 cavalry from Knoxville, Tennessee, in March of 1865, toward the vital salt works and lead mines near Wytheville, Virginia. After defeating Confederate forces sent to deter him, he completed the destruction of the facilities and then wheeled south into North Carolina. The objective was Salisbury, the site of an infamous Confederate prison and major logistical center. Stoneman's men captured the city on April 12-13, burned the hated prison and then continued west to return to Tennessee.²⁴ Confederate General Robert E. Lee had surrendered on Good Friday, April 9, 1865 at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia and the Civil War was soon over.

Stoneman was appointed Commander of the Department of the Tennessee in June 1865 with headquarters in Memphis, a city that seethed with racial tension, as African American troops formed part of the occupying Union army. A major riot broke out on May 1 between black soldiers and defenseless blacks in South Memphis, leading to charges that Stoneman had not acted quickly enough with Federal troops to quell the rioting. In the end, rampaging whites, most of them Irish immigrants who were competing with blacks for manual labor jobs, killed forty-six blacks. The police force was predominately Irish and was an instrument of oppression against the black community.²⁵

A Congressional committee investigated the riots and, after thanking Stoneman for extending every possible assistance, delivered a mild rebuke, chastising him for not acting quickly in the initial stages of the riot.²⁶

The riot in Memphis and an even worse racial disturbance in New Orleans on July 30 set the stage for the Congressional elections of 1866. Disturbances in the South provided Radical Republicans with ample ammunition to claim that all opponents to radical reconstruction were "Copperheads," or southern sympathizers, and that blacks were not safe from southern savagery. Stoneman became a Democrat at this time because he opposed the more severe programs

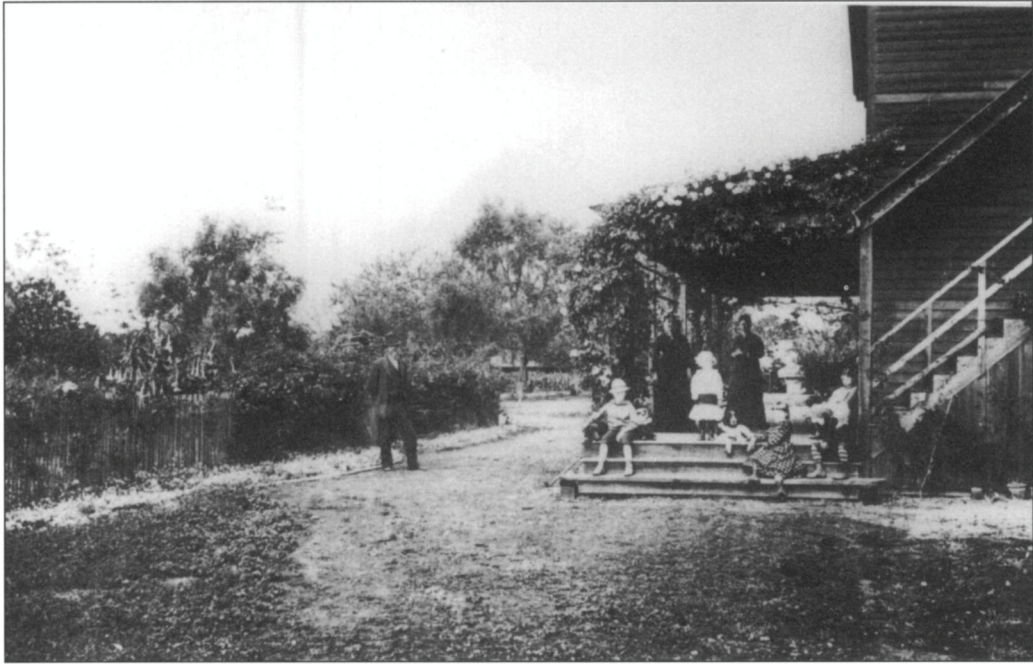
of Radical Reconstruction. President Andrew Johnson started his famous "Swing Around the Circle" on August 28 to support Democratic congressional candidates. Stoneman, fresh from the disruptions in Tennessee, was added to the party as a witness to the dangers of disfranchising moderate southern leaders and leaving the governing of the south in the hands of loyal but ineffective elements favored by Radical Republicans.²⁷

Anti-Johnson radicals in Congress achieved a stunning victory in the 1866 elections and moved to establish military districts in ten "unreconstructed" states in the south that placed the south under virtual military rule.²⁸ Stoneman first commanded the sub-district in Petersburg, Virginia, and then moved up to command the First Military District of Virginia, succeeding his old friend General John Schofield on June 2, 1886. Both officers supported a moderate policy that eased Virginia through the Reconstruction process with a minimum of disruption and chaos.

George Stoneman finally realized his dream to move west when he was ordered to return to his regiment in April 1869. The regiment, the 21st U.S. Infantry, was ordered to the District of Arizona with Stoneman in command at his permanent rank of colonel. Stoneman was not displeased with his assignment. Arizona was a frontier post with all its attendant hardships, but it was close to California, the land of his dreams.

Stoneman arrived at Camp McDowell, northeast of present-day Phoenix, but the heat and discomfort did not appeal to him or his family. He persuaded his commanding officer, General George H. Thomas, Commander of the Department of the Pacific, to extend the District of Arizona to include Drum Barracks at Wilmington in southern California. Drum Barracks served as a staging and supply area for action against the Apaches and other "hostiles" in the Southwest and included San Diego, San Bernadino, and Los Angeles counties. Stoneman's request was approved and he administered his district from afar, a fact that was not unnoticed by the settlers in Arizona. Orders flowed up and down the chain of command with little comment from Stoneman and he rarely intervened in routine administration.²⁹

Events would soon propel Stoneman into a more active role. The Apaches had long been a concern of the U.S. Army in Arizona, since the United States acquired the territory from Mexico by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago in 1848. According to the terms of that treaty, the United States was obliged to prevent Indian raids across the new boundary. There were no military bases between Santa Fe and San Diego. The army patrolled southern Arizona the best it could, protecting isolated set-



The Stonemans at their Los Robles Ranch House in San Gabriel, date unknown. General Stoneman is in the driveway; Mrs. Stoneman is standing, possibly with the general's sister, also standing. The Stonemans had four children, 2 boys, 2 girls, who are included in his photo with perhaps a visiting neighborhood child as the fifth. *Courtesy George B. Stoneman, M.D.*

lements, but the Apaches, faced with increasing competition for land and hunting rights, committed raid after raid. Stoneman was obliged to control the Apaches on one hand while he was also subject to increasing pressure from the Grant administration to bring the Apaches on to reservations peacefully.³⁰

Responding to pressure from the governor of Arizona Territory, Anson Peacely-Killen Safford, a new department was established under Stoneman's command, which included Arizona Territory and "so much of California as lies south of a line from the northeast corner of Arizona to Point Conception."³¹ Headquarters was established at Fort Whipple, near Prescott. Stoneman could no longer administer his command from the relative comfort of Drum Barracks.

As Stoneman formulated his plans for his department, it soon became clear that conflicting interests in Washington and Arizona had placed him in

an impossible situation. A peace or "Quaker" policy toward Native Americans was popular with the Grant administration, while the territorial political leaders were calling for punitive measures against marauding Apaches. Unfortunately, in terms of his relations with the settlers in Arizona, Stoneman, once again, established his headquarters at Drum Barracks, hundreds of miles from the scene of an increasing number of Indian attacks.

Stoneman's inability to convince Governor Safford and the territorial legislature that his moderate policies would control the Apaches, led to a campaign by Safford to remove him from command of the department. Safford went to Washington and met with President Grant to ask him to replace Stoneman with Lieutenant Colonel George Crook. Grant agreed that Crook was the best Indian fighter in the army and told Safford that he would cut through red tape and appoint Crook as the department commander with the brevet rank of Major General. At that point, Safford later recounted, "Stoneman's head rolled into the basket, where he has been powerless to abuse and injure the frontiersmen . . ." ³²

As protocol dictated, Stoneman received his successor at Fort Drum and invited Colonel Crook to dinner. Crook was obliged to accept, but he noted in his biography, it was a long and uncomfortable evening. "I had to accept out of politeness but never passed through such an ordeal. Mrs. Stoneman, while trying to be polite, could not help showing in every action that she would like to tear me to pieces . . ." ³³

Stoneman lost no time in notifying the retirement board and the army of his intention to retire effective August 16, 1871, for disability. He was now able to realize his lifelong dream in the fall of 1872. He purchased 500 acres from Benjamin D. Wilson and John C. Downey in the rich San Gabriel Valley, a site that he had seen when he first arrived in California as a young second lieutenant over thirty years before; he paid the bargain price of \$50.00 an acre. He then sold 100 acres on the southern part of the parcel for \$100 an acre, leaving him with 400 acres. ³⁴ The ranch was named *Los Robles* (The Oaks) and was to become a prosperous vineyard, carefully supervised by the retired soldier. Stoneman settled in with his wife, Mary Oliver Hardisty Stoneman, a vivacious belle from a prominent Baltimore family, whom he had married on November 22, 1861. ³⁵ The Stonemans had four children: Cornelius, his eldest son, another son George Jr., who was to become a prominent attorney and debater in Los Angeles and Arizona, and two daughters, Katharine Cheney and Adele, who was born in the military hospital at Drum Barracks in 1870. ³⁶

As the population of California expanded, an issue emerged that would propel Stoneman into public life and dominate his political agenda: the regulation of powerful railroads. In 1876, state commissioners of transportation were appointed, primarily to devise equitable tax regulations for railroads and to control freight and passenger rates. Governor William Irwin appointed Stoneman as one of the three commissioners, although he lived in the Los Angeles area, which was not favored with a major rail connection until 1876, when the Southern Pacific Line was established. The three-man board met and decided there should be a permanent body to study the railroads and propose legislation to correct abuses.³⁷ Stoneman was a member of the commission until 1878. In the two years he served, Stoneman found ample evidence that the railroads in California were a monopoly guilty of inflating fixed capital illegally, misleading stockholders concerning the average charge per mile and charging passengers more than comparable roads in the east. Railroad giants like the Central Pacific were earning lucrative profits despite an extensive construction program.³⁸ Unfair practices by the railroads became a *cause célèbre* for Stoneman and one that he embraced throughout his political career.

Following a brief stint as Indian Commissioner, appointed by Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes, Stoneman sought his first political office in 1879, running for the office of railroad commissioner as a Democrat but also endorsed by the Workingmen's Party and the New Constitution Party. He handily defeated his Republican opponent and received an annual salary of \$4,000, generous for the time, designed to discourage bribes from railroad corporations.³⁹ The other two commissioners were pawns of railroad interests and rates favored by the Central Pacific were set. Stoneman was a voice in the wilderness, but he became a symbol of rectitude and populist anger. The Democrats realized they had a potent issue and a war hero to champion it.

Stoneman attracted the attention of Democratic politicians as the gubernatorial election approached in 1882, notably Judge David S. Terry and Stephen M. White. Another early and influential supporter was Colonel James T. Ayers, editor and later owner of the *Evening Express*, a Democratic paper opposing special interests. Ayers and other reform minded Democrats prevailed on Stoneman to seek the Democratic nomination for governor. Despite his growing fame as a foe of railroad interests, Stoneman had political negatives. He was not a favorite of the Democratic inner-circle, his popularity was rural based, he was not an effective speaker, and he appeared to some to be an honest but uninspiring leader. "He was not a keen man," Ayers noted, "but he was man of noble purposes, true as steel, and steadfast in his

determination to do the right thing. His weaknesses were those of a loyal and unsuspecting nature. . . .”⁴⁰

Stoneman’s principal opponent for the nomination was the owner of the *San Francisco Examiner*, George Hearst, who expected to be nominated on the first ballot. He led in the early balloting, but Stoneman’s rural supporters rallied around him and Stoneman was nominated on the fourteenth ballot. His acceptance speech was brief. “I have made a record—I hope I have—during my past life. . . . I have made no pledges, no promises . . . I have met defeat often, I hope I can say I have met with victory and oftener, . . . but there is no victory that I have ever gained that gives me more satisfaction than this.”⁴¹

The Republicans nominated Morris M. Estee, an experienced politician who also opposed the power of railroads. A member of the Second Constitutional Convention and Speaker of the Assembly, Estee was supported by many who felt Stoneman was inexperienced and not ready to manage the problems facing California. Stoneman’s executive ability was challenged. The editor of the *Daily Alta* claimed that “his heart is all right but his mouth is a scatter-gun.”⁴²

Stoneman campaigned throughout the state, hampered by his poor speaking ability and rigid style but he hammered on the railroad issue and other populist themes. His wife Mary deplored the rigors of the campaign. In her diary, she noted: “Stony returned from Martinez having had a very successful meeting there. He is feeling sick and used up. Oh, why did he enter into this dirty political contest . . .”⁴³ Early in the campaign she made her feelings known about California politicians: “. . . to think GenS being one of them makes me sick.”⁴⁴

After a long summer of campaigning, election day finally arrived. Mary Stoneman expressed her anxiety in her diary: “Today is the fateful decision . . . have been nervous as a cat . . . not much doubt about the result yet nothing is absolutely certain until vote is counted.”⁴⁵ Stoneman overcame his political shortcomings and overwhelmed his opponents, receiving 67,175 or forty percent of the total of the 164,661 votes cast for four candidates.⁴⁶

Stoneman resigned from the military retirement list upon his election. When he accepted the nomination of the Democratic party for governor, he was unaware of a provision in the state constitution that prohibited an officer of the U.S. Army from being a candidate for governor. When he was advised that this provision applied to retired officers as well, he resigned from the retirement list. This would cause him grief later after he left office

as it would take a special act of Congress to restore him to the retirement list and this was not easily obtained.⁴⁷

Despite problems with the legislature, Stoneman was able to advance some of his objectives. Laws dealing with roads and incorporation of cities were passed. The state was reapportioned and the state engineer studied irrigation problems. Stoneman failed, however, to resolve a major issue: the payment of delinquent taxes by railroads. The issue was heard by the federal district court, which decided against the state, but the case went to the U.S. Supreme Court. Stoneman expected to win, but the California Attorney General made an out of court settlement with the railroads, an arrangement that Stoneman never accepted. Stoneman called a special session of the state legislature to consider the railroad tax issue. The Assembly passed his recommendation but it failed in the Senate.⁴⁸

Despite his failure to resolve the railroad issue, Stoneman established a progressive record in other areas. Two new state hospitals were established in 1885 as well as a home for the blind. A board of forestry was created. Regulations of foods and drugs were adopted and care for additional mental and blind patients.⁴⁹

On July 17, 1885, tragedy struck the Stoneman household at *Los Robles*. Fire destroyed the ranch house, and although there were no injuries as the family was absent, Stoneman's papers and many of his Civil War mementos and personal effects were lost. The press was convinced that the house had been burned by Stoneman's political enemies. In a story datelined July 17, a newspaper account proclaimed that "it was hardly a question but the fire was the work of an incendiary."⁵⁰

The same account pointed out that Stoneman had permitted the execution of two Mexican murderers, but he had commuted the sentence of a white convicted murderer named Lenox, described by a newspaper as 'the most brutal murderer of all' to a life sentence.

Politically motivated or not, Mary Stoneman was devastated by the loss. "So we are houseless and homeless—not a souvenir left of home—noth(ing) of my children's youth—nothing . . ." She was also appalled to discover that the governor had let the insurance lapse so the loss was complete.⁵¹

Although control of the railroads was his major concern, another important question was that of water rights for all Californians. The courts had upheld the riparian rights of those who lived on river banks, but Stoneman argued that those living inland had a right to the free use of water as well.

Mrs. Stoneman in a formal portrait during her husband's term as governor of California.

Courtesy George B. Stoneman, M.D.



Stoneman called a special session of the legislature on July 18, 1885 to deal with the issue but, once again, he was defeated and the special session adjourned in September without acting on his recommendations.⁵²

As the Democrats met to consider who would be the candidate for governor in 1886, Stoneman faced strong opposition in his own party. There was feeling against him for non-partisan appointments he had made, his crusades against special interests, and the issue of water rights. He lacked the political skills to build a core of support in his own party and wasn't considered for re-nomination. His record as governor was hardly mentioned at the Democratic convention.⁵³

Stoneman denounced his enemies in a letter to his wife prior to the convention: "I find that public sentiment is fast ending in the right direction & I will be endorsed by the people if I was not by that yelping crew of traitors . . . all of whom have been rejected by the people of California."⁵⁴



Mrs. Stoneman later in life while living in Los Angeles. *Courtesy George B. Stoneman, M.D.*

Stoneman's biennial message of 1887 was his last public pronouncement. He regretted the increase in state expenditures and warned they should not exceed revenues. He admitted he had not succeeded in his campaign against the railroads but pointed with pride to the state's agricultural progress. He re-affirmed his position on irrigation and hoped another session of the legislature would be convened to solve the problem.⁵⁵

Stoneman's last years were not happy ones. He was estranged from his wife over an alleged affair, an allegation she denied. Broken in health and finances, he travelled cross the continent to visit his sister, Mrs. Benjamin Williams, in Buffalo, New York. He was never to return to California. His friend, Colonel James J. Ayers, lamented his departure: "It is sad to think that Governor Stoneman, after a career so distinguished and services so valuable to his country and his chosen state, should have closed it so far away from . . . the beautiful retreat in the San Gabriel Valley where he fondly hoped to spend his declining years. . . ."⁵⁶

NOTES

- ¹William J. Doty, ed., *The Historical Annals of Southwestern New York* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1940), 46.
- ²Letter from E.A. Dickinson, Jamestown Academy, Jamestown, New York, to the Hon. John C. Spencer, Secretary of the Navy, 10 November, 1841. George Stoneman Papers, United States Military Academy Archives, West Point.
- ³Letter from George Stoneman, Jr. to the Hon. Abe Bell, Secretary of War, 26 July, 1841. Stoneman Papers.
- ⁴Darius Couch *Twenty-Sixth Annual Reunion of the Association of Graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, June 10, 1895* (Saginaw, MI: Seenann and Peters, Printers and Binders, 1895), 29.
- ⁵"Cadets Arranged in Order of Merit in Their Respective Classes, as Determined at the General Examination in June, 1846," USMA Archives.
- ⁶Susan Young Gates (one of Young's daughters), *The Life Story of Brigham Young* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), 75; Sergeant Daniel Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War. 1846-1847* (Glorieta, New Mexico: Rio Grande Press, 1881; reprinted 1969), 113.
- ⁷John F. Yurtinus, "A Ram in the Thicket: The Mormon Battalion in the Mexican War" (2 vols., Ph.D. Dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1975), I: 183.
- ⁸"Journal of the March of the Mormon Battalion Under the Command of Col. P. St. George Cooke from Santa Fe New Mexico to San Diego California," U.S. Government Document, special session 30th Congress, Sen. Doc. No. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1849), 39.
- ⁹Tyler, *A Concise History of the Mormon Battalion, 1846-1847*, 252.
- ¹⁰Dwight L. Clarke, *Stephen Watts Kearney. Soldier of the West* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 288.
- ¹¹Virginia Hardisty Stoneman, "George Stoneman, 1822-1824. A Paper on his Life," submitted to the Los Angeles Historical Society, 24 August 1929.
- ¹²Robert M. Utley, *Fontiersmen in Blue. 1848-1865* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), 29.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, 175-176.
- ¹⁴William H. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West. 1803-1863* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 290-292.
- ¹⁵Carl Coke Rister, *Robert E. Lee in Texas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1946), 22-23.
- ¹⁶Stoneman to J. Coutts, 1 June 1856, collection of Stoneman correspondence, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
- ¹⁷National Archives, Second Cavalry Records, Military History of Officers, 1860, entry 770.
- ¹⁸George F. Price, *Across the Continent with the Fifth Cavalry* (New York: Antiquarian Press Ltd., 1959), 97.
- ¹⁹Stephen Z. Starr, *The Union Cavalry in the Civil War. From Ft. Sumter to Gettysburg* (3 vols., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), I: 237.
- ²⁰Ben F. Fordney, *Stoneman at Chancellorsville. The Coming of Age of Union Cavalry* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Press, 1998), 42.
- ²¹U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion. A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Vol. 25, Pt. 1, 1060, hereafter cited as O.R.
- ²²*Official Records*, Vol. 25, Pt. 2, 463; "Fighting Joe Hooker," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 May 1872, 13.
- ²³David Evans, *Sherman's Horsemen. Union Cavalry Operations in the Atlanta Campaign* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1996), 340 *passim*.
- ²⁴William Bushong, Co. C, *The Last Great Stoneman Raid*, delivered at the Regimental Reunion, Bellefontaine, Ohio, 1916; James S. Brawley, *The Rowan Story 1753-1953. A Narrative History of Rowan County North Carolina* (Salisbury, NC: Rowan Printing Company, 1953), 198.
- ²⁵James Gilbert Ryan, "The Memphis Riots of 1866: Terror in a Black Community During Reconstruction," *Journal of Negro History* 62 (1977): 244.
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- ²⁷Patrick W. Riddleberger, *1866. The Critical Year Revisited* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 218.
- ²⁸*Ibid.*, 110-111; *Cong. Globe*, 39th Congress, 2nd Session, 1037.
- ²⁹Constance Wynn Altshuler, *Chains of Command* (Tucson: Arizona Historical Society, 1981), 166; *Drumbeats* (Drum Barracks Civil War Museum) IV (October 1990): 8.
- ³⁰James R. Hastings, "The Tragedy at Camp Grant in 1871," *Arizona and the West* 1 (1959): 147-148.

- ³¹Headquarters Department of Arizona, Prescott, 3 May 1870, General Orders Number 1, Department of Library and Archives, Arizona, No. 56024.
- ³²*Arizona Daily Citizen*, "A Stirring Address by Governor Safford on the Troublesome Times in the Early History of Arizona," 8 August 1888, Section 4: 2, 3, 4, Hayden File, Arizona Historical Society, Tucson.
- ³³*General George Crook. His Autobiography*, edited and annotated by Martin F. Schmidt (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 162.
- ³⁴Information provided through the courtesy of Dr. George B. Stoneman. Midge Sherwood, in *Days of Vintage, Years of Vision* (2 vols., San Marino, CA: Orizaba Publications, 1982), I: 225 puts the sale at \$7,000 or \$17.50 for 400 acres.
- ³⁵Ben F. Fordney, *Stoneman at Chancellorsville*, 51. The marriage was controversial in the Civil War years as Mary Stoneman was called "a hot Balt. Secsh" (Southern sympathizer) by some in Washington society. See *The Civil War Letters of Elizabeth Blair Lee*, ed. Virginia Jean Laas (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 194.
- ³⁶Sherwood, *Days of Vintage, Years of Vision*, I, 225.
- ³⁷Charles D. Wilson, "George Stoneman: General and Governor. A Biography" (Master's Thesis, San Jose State College, June 1967), 41.
- ³⁸*Ibid.*, 41.
- ³⁹Peter H. Burnett and Benjamin F. Gilbert, *The Governors of California* (Georgetown, CA: The Talisman Press, 1965), 207; Wilson, "George Stoneman: General and Governor," 46, note 24.
- ⁴⁰Colonel James J. Ayers, *Gold and Sunshine: Reminiscences of Early California* (Boston: R.G. Badger, 1922), 329.
- ⁴¹*The Weekly Mirror*, 1 July 1882, 1.
- ⁴²Burnett and Gilbert, *The Governors of California*, 207.
- ⁴³Diary of Mary Oliver Hardisty Stoneman, 31 October 1882, courtesy of George B. Stoneman, MD, hereafter referred to as Diaries of MOHS. Mary Stoneman referred to her husband in her diaries as either "Stony" or "GenS."
- ⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 18 August 1882.
- ⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 7 November 1882.
- ⁴⁶Burnett and Gilbert, *The Governors of California*, 207-208.
- ⁴⁷Major General Schofield to the Secretary of War, January 20, 1891, "Service Record of George Stoneman," Adjutant General's Records, 3414, National Archives, Appointment Commission and Personnel Branch, 1871.
- ⁴⁸Burnett and Gilbert, *The Governors of California*, 210.
- ⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 213.
- ⁵⁰Newspaper clipping found in the diary of MOHS. Name of the newspaper and author were not given.
- ⁵¹Diary of MOHS, July 18 and 29, 1885.
- ⁵²Burnett and Gilbert, *The Governors of California*, 213.
- ⁵³Wilson, "George Stoneman: General and Governor," 89.
- ⁵⁴George Stoneman to his wife, 13 November 1886, courtesy of George B. Stoneman, MD.
- ⁵⁵Burnett and Gilbert, *The Governors of California*, 214.
- ⁵⁶Ayers, *Gold and Sunshine*, 329.