



## ACT Heritage Council

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### Coppin Homestead Site, Molonglo

#### Block 3, Section 2 Molonglo

At its meeting of 11 February 2015 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Coppin Homestead Site, Molonglo, was not eligible for provisional registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Coppin Homestead Site, against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

### HISTORY

In considering the history of Coppin Homestead Site, the ACT Heritage Council acknowledges that the Ngunnawal people are traditionally affiliated with the lands in the Canberra region within and beyond contemporary ACT borders. In this citation, 'Aboriginal community' refers to the Ngunnawal people and other Aboriginal groups within the ACT for whom places within the Canberra region are significant. These places attest to a rich history of Aboriginal occupation extending from 25,000 years ago, as indicated by the Birrigai Rock Shelter, into the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial period. They show that Aboriginal people continued living traditionally in the region through to the 1870s-80s. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, traditional Aboriginal society in colonised areas suffered dramatic de-population and alienation from traditional land-based resources. In the Canberra region some important institutions such as intertribal gatherings were retained in some degree at least until the 1860s.

#### Pre-Federal Capital Period

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Canberra was a rural settlement that grew organically. This settlement was diametrically different to that established during the Federal Capital phase, as it was not guided by formal planning principles. At this time, the settlement comprised a network of large pastoral estates, stations and villages concentrated on the Limestone Plains, today the suburbs of Canberra and in the narrow valleys of Orroral, Gudgenby and Naas, and along the banks of the Murrumbidgee River in the southern part of the Territory (O'Sullivan and Huys 2011: 9).

A result of transforming Canberra into an urban centre after the formation of the Federal Capital Territory was that significant amounts of physical evidence of the 19th century settlement pattern, including homesteads and their outbuildings, were modified or destroyed. Many buildings were demolished as the Capital encroached upon rural properties to accommodate the sprawling city and archaeological deposits were disturbed through construction works. More recently there have been two major events that have destroyed evidence: first, the construction of Lake Burley Griffin in the 1960s, during which many cottages located along the Molonglo Plain were dismantled during the damming of the river and today, the only standing evidence of these houses of the Molonglo Plains is Blundell's Cottage (Young 2007); the second, the 2003 bushfires, during which many hut sites in the region were fire-affected or destroyed, and seven out of ten known historical sites in the Molonglo Valley were destroyed (Australian Archaeological Consultants 2006).

The development of European settlement of Canberra during the 19th and early 20th centuries can be divided into two main cultural phases:

1. The initial European settlement of Canberra (1820-1850) after European exploration of the Limestone Plains and the Murrumbidgee River and subsequent establishment of permanent occupation of the region; and

2. The consolidation period (1850-1911) commencing in the 1850s during the gold rush period and the introduction of Robertson's Land Acts, introduced in the 1860s.

### **Phase I: Initial settlement of Canberra 1820-1850**

European interest in the Limestone Plains began in the 1820s, when Charles Throsby entered the region, carrying out a survey in order to define the road for the Goulburn Plains. He first heard of the area when Aboriginal informants spoke of Lake George; Wee-ree-wah, it was called. In 1821, Throsby reached the Murrumbidgee River, near Tuggeranong (Gillespie 1991: 2-6).

Early settlement in the ACT was established through the acquisition of land grants and the practice of squatting. In 1829 the NSW government proclaimed that the Limestone Plains, today the ACT, formed part of two counties, Murray and Cowley. The Murrumbidgee River that runs south-east to north-west through the region was the boundary between the counties. The County of Murray extended as far north as Lake George and was bounded on its western side by the Murrumbidgee and by the Shoalhaven River to the east. The Murrumbidgee River formed the southern and eastern limits of the County of Cowley and the Goodradigbee River of the Snowy Mountains, the western boundary. At this time, the counties were divided into smaller units called parishes. This proclamation provided the Government with the formal legal power to sell and grant land with the proclaimed areas, as well as formally permit permanent settlement.

During this early phase, life was as difficult. The infrastructure was poor; there were no roads or rail services and the mounted police were located more than 60km away (Gillespie 1991: 23-25). By the mid 1830s, the conditions improved, as postal services were established in Queanbeyan, the urban centre of the Limestone Plains, and by 1838, Queanbeyan also had a blacksmith, a store and a police magistrate (Gillespie 1991: 23-25; Young 2007:7).

### **Phase II: Consolidation Period 1850-1911**

Settlement of Canberra continued to consolidate as gold was discovered east of Queanbeyan in the 1850s (Lea-Scarlett 1968: 243-253). Towns prospered in areas such as Captains Flat as a result of mineral exploitation, while the agricultural industry expanded, particularly as there was increasing demand on farmers to provide goods, such as wheat, to feed an influx of people, a consequence of the gold diggings at Kiandra, Araluen, and Majors Creek (Gillespie 1991: 130). Residents of the area accommodated travellers who were en route to the fields. Indeed, Catherine Coppin hosted travellers during her time at the Goat Station (see below). In 1862, the first township of what is now the ACT, called Tharwa, was established in the County of Cowley and was located on the road en route to Kiandra (Gillespie 1991: 128-129). As the diggings dried up, many people, returning from the goldfields, settled in the region.

In 1861, the NSW Lands Minister introduced the Crowns Lands Alienation Act and the Crown Lands Occupation Act, collectively known as the Robertson Land Acts or Free Selection Acts. These Acts allowed that any individual to choose a block of Crown Land between 40 and 320 acres at a fixed price of £1 (\$2) per acre. The purchase conditions required minimum improvements within a three year period. The primary aim of the Free Selection Acts was to ensure equal opportunity and access to land, while producing stable rural communities 'and a class of contented and prosperous settlers' (Waterhouse 2005: 25,30; Dingle 2000: 59).

Initially, the Acts had limited effect in Canberra, as much of the best land had already been acquired by squatters. However, free-selectors took up small conditional holdings in the periphery of the Limestone Plains in the forested areas in Parishes of Gooroyarro (Gungahlin), Amungula (Kowen) and Yarrolumla (Molonglo) and also in the narrow valleys of the County of Cowley (Gillespie 1991: 51). Many settlers purchased holdings that were not suitable for agricultural production and too small for grazing livestock. The Acts also encouraged many people with little capital at their disposal to travel to rural areas (Dingle 2000: 59).

In 1911, the Federal Capital Territory was established when the Seat of Government (Administration) Act 1910 came into effect and gradually acquired land within its jurisdiction (Gillespie 1991: 247-249). In the County of Murray, the boundaries of the four parishes, Yarrolumla, Canberra, Narrabundah and Gigerline, were dissolved and all land within them was surrendered. As a consequence, many farmers of the region were forced to quit their properties. Some smaller sections of land were resumed from other parishes, including Queanbeyan, Amungula, Pialligo, Ginninderra, Weetangera and Gooroyarro.

**Catherine Sheedy and John Coppin**

At the age of 17, John Coppin, previously a farm labourer in Kent, was lured by the gold rush and immigrated to Australia (Boxall 2013: 2-3). Not long after arriving, he married Catherine Sheedy, who had migrated to Australia just two years earlier from Ballina, Ireland (Shumack 1967: 62; Boxall 2013: 1). After their marriage, John and Catherine relocated to the goldfield at Major's Creek for several months, supporting themselves with 'harvesting activities' (Shumack 1967: 62). As income from the goldfields was unreliable, the couple was advised by a family acquaintance, John Patrick (Paddy) Cunningham, to find stable work at a station. Paddy suggested that they travel with him to his place of work at William George Thomas Palmer's Ginninderra Estate, managed by William Davis, on the Limestone Plains (Shumack 1967: 72).

In 1859, the Coppins arrived at Ginninderra, where John accepted a position as a farm hand and shepherd (Shumack 1967: 62).

Particulars of the Australian life of Catherine and John Coppin, especially during their years in the former Parish of Yarrolumla area (the present-day Molonglo district), come from Samuel Shumack's oft-cited volume, *Tales and Legends of Canberra Pioneers* (1967). Shumack (p. 62) recalls his first meeting of the Coppin couple:

*One evening a man and woman, each carrying a heavy swag, called at our house and inquired the way to Ginninderra. The man was aged nineteen years and his wife twenty-nine. A thickly-timbered ridge hid the Ginninderra homestead from view, and it was in this scrub about 400 yards from our house that John Coppin and his wife Catherine-for such was their name-erected their tent. It was Friday evening. The next morning John Coppin went to the homestead and asked Mr Davis [of Ginninderra Estate] for a job.*

And:

*A few months later Coppin accepted the position of shepherd at the Goat Station-now Coppins Crossing-taking charge of one flock of sheep ... Here Coppin and his wife reared a family of seven, and as neighbours were excellent. It would be impossible to find a more hospitable couple than John and Catherine Coppin.*

Having accepted the shepherd's position in 1860 at the Goat Station (an outstation of the Ginninderra Estate) on the lower Molonglo River, John Coppin looked after one flock of sheep while the Coppins' friend, Paddy Cunningham looked after another. The Coppins shared the three-room Goat Station Hut with Cunningham, with Catherine supplementing John's wage by catering to travellers to the Kiandra goldfields (Boxall 2013: 4).

Shumack (39, 72) recounts some of the economic and interpersonal difficulties encountered by John and Catherine during their time at the Goat Station:

*In July [1864] father [Richard Shumack] planted two acres of wheat for John Coppin at the Goat Station, but this crop was destroyed by rust. Father was paid for the seed only; he received nothing for his labour. Coppin at this time was employed by William Davis ... Thomas Gribble and Thomas Wells were partners on a farm near us and they bought the crop sown by father for Coppin for the value of the seed-five bushels at 7 shillings a bushel.*

*The hut was of three rooms, and Paddy kept his effects in one room and slept in the watchbox. Following a sudden change in the weather, Paddy went to the hut to get his coat and discovered that the lining, including the sleeves, had been cut open and the sizeable sum of money he had concealed there had vanished. He accused Mrs Coppin but she strongly denied the theft. However, Paddy was not convinced and he immediately left ... Thus the friendship of many years was shattered.*

Later it transpired that Catherine had not committed the theft, which was attributed instead to a locally-known beggar.

In 1870 John and Catherine Coppin had begun building a new house at the Goat Station to accommodate their growing family when, in April and May of that year, it was damaged by floodwaters (Boxall 2013: 5). John attempted to purchase several blocks of land after the 1861 Robertson Acts were introduced but was unsuccessful. Shumack (1967: 139) later claimed that John, like many others, was cheated out of blocks of land through corruption.

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However, in August 1878, John Coppin finally conditionally purchased Portion 107, Parish of Yarrolumla (see Image 2), comprising 200 acres, located on the southern bank of the Lower Molonglo River (Boxall 2013: 8). Portion 107 had fallen within the 4,200 acres of land purchased by Captain Edmund Harrison Cliffe, who called it Craven Estate. Cliffe died in 1837 although it appears his trustees, Thomas Walker and Samuel Ashmore took up his land that fell within Parish of Yarrolumla (McCann and O’Keefe 2011).

John Coppin’s selection on Portion 107 was not far from the Goat Station, and a Lands Department 1880 Survey Plan of Portion 107 shows that within eighteen months (ie by February 1880) Coppin had made improvements, an integral part of the conditional purchase, to the value of £57. The improvements consisted of a hut (£10), garden fence (£12), land clearing (£30) and yard (£5) (Boxall 2013: 8, 9).

It is possible that, like other free selectors, John Coppin must also have struggled to meet purchase payments on the property. On 3rd May 1882 his property was transferred to George Harcourt - probably by way of mortgage (State Records of New South Wales, cited in Boxall 2013: 9).

On 25<sup>th</sup> September 1890, Coppin made an application to purchase 320 acres, Portions 130 and 46 (Conditional Purchase 90.153 cited in Boxall 2013: 15) in the Parish of Amungula, present day district of Kowen (ACT). Subsequently, he made another application for the conditional lease for Portion 131, comprising 960 acres, in the same Parish. These portions were located on the northern banks of the Molonglo River, forming part of the present-day heritage registered Glenburn Precinct in the ACT. Reportedly, *the Coppins wasted no time in building their new home at ‘Cohen’<sup>1</sup> in the Burbong area – a locality listed in the 1891 Census with four households and thirty people in the sub-district of Majura* (McAlister 2007).

The reasons behind their decision to leave Yarrolumla are unclear, although John, Catherine, and probably some of their children remained there until relocating to their newly acquired property in 1891 (Boxall 2013: 15).

On 3 February 1891 the Yarrolumla holding officially became part of the Yarralumla estate when George Harcourt transferred Portion 107 to Frederick Campbell for a sum of £375 (State Records of New South Wales, cited in Boxall 2013: 11).

The Coppins’ association with Portion 107 Yarrolumla in present day Molonglo is represented by the toponyms Coppins Crossing, and Coppins Crossing Road. Coppins Crossing is located near the old site of Goat Station. Further, the land in the vicinity of Coppin Homestead Site, Molonglo, was known as Coppins Corner Paddock (see Image 3) until at least 1904, with adjacent land and landmarks (such as waterways) similarly labelled ‘Flynn’s Paddock,’ ‘Craven’s Paddock,’ ‘Craven’s Creek’ etc after previous occupants/owners. John and Catherine’s house was gone by 1913, as indicated by resumption records held by the National Archives of Australia (McCann and O’Keefe 2011).

Of the house and land in the Glenburn area, Inspector Martin noted in around 1895 that the land was being used for grazing purposes, with the family in residence, with the homestead having furniture and provisions, and livestock free ranging (Boxall 2013: 16).

As of 2015, remains of the house comprised two partially standing fireplaces and earthworks. The fireplaces consisted of roughly coursed random rubble cemented with a mud mortar, with the first fireplace located in the northern section of the site, standing 1.5m in height.

It was believed another building was perpendicular to kitchen, oriented southeast to northwest. Mounds, the remains of stone walls, indicated that the building was quite large and oriented southeast to northwest. Along the eastern side of the building was a fireplace.

Another, smaller, structure was identified as low mounds that had two or three levels of quoins (corner stones) observable. Bulbeck and Boot (1990) also noted two depressions nearby that suggested the remains of a well or a privy, and approximately 30m to the southeast of the house was a mature male Osage orange tree (*Maclura pomifera*). Artefact scatters, comprising pottery fragments and a metal washing tub were observed on the ground

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<sup>1</sup> As it was spelled at the time: The district of Kowen has been spelt in different ways, including, Kowan, Kohan, Coen, Cohen and even Kohn (Cross 1985: 50–51). A phonological reconstruction of Kowen suggests that it was partially derived from the Aboriginal place name for the area, which was ‘kuwain’ (Koch 2009: 152–153). Kuwin was also the first element of the aboriginal Kuwiniyan, from which Queanbeyan was derived, although its meaning is unknown (Koch 2009: 152–153).

surface (ACT Heritage Council 2015).

Catherine Coppin passed away in May 1901, having lived at the ‘Cohen’ property in Amungula Parish for around ten years. In 1902 this property was transferred to one Mr Jeremiah O’Keefe, as John was now being looked after by his daughter, Ellen Kelleher, at Naas. John passed away in 1903 (Boxall 2013: 17, 18, 22).

Timeline	
1859	John and Catherine arrive at Ginninderra Estate on the Limestone Plains where John is hired as farm hand and shepherd by William Davis.
1860	John accepts position of shepherd at Goat Station (an outstation of the Ginninderra Estate) on the lower Molonglo River, where he and Catherine live, Catherine supplementing John’s wage by catering to travellers to the Kiandra goldfields.
Circa 1870	John and Catherine Coppin begin building new house at Goat Station, damaged by flood twice in the year.
1878	Portion 107, Parish of Yarrolumla conditionally purchased by John Coppin.
1882	Portion 107 transferred to George Harcourt
1890	John Coppin makes application to purchase 320 acres, Portions 130 and 46 in the Parish of Amungula, present day district of Kowen (ACT), and another application for the conditional lease for Portion 131, comprising 960 acres in the same Parish.
1891	John and Catherine Coppin move to newly acquired holdings in Parish of Amungula (‘Cohen’).
1901	Catherine Coppin passes away
1902	Coppin holdings in Parish of Amungula (‘Cohen’) transferred to Mr Jeremiah O’Keefe.
1903	John Coppin passes away

### **Slab Huts in the ACT.**

Coppin Homestead Site, Molonglo, is an example of an early settler, small-scale rural holding prior to acquisition of lands for the Federal Capital Territory. While not an exhaustive list of homesteads in the ACT, other comparable, small-scale rural holdings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which are still standing or exist as ‘ruins,’ include: Gungaderra Homestead in Harrison, Woden Homestead in Hume, Blundell’s Cottage in Parkes Crinigan’s Hut Ruin, Amaroo, Coppin’s Homestead Ruins, Kowen (in the Glenburn Precinct), and The Valley, Gungahlin. Building materials for these places varied, and included pise, slab, and stone, however Coppin Homestead Site, Molonglo, would almost certainly have been made of hand cut timber slabs, possibly with a bark roof initially (Boxall and McAlister 2013).

Timber post and beam structures form the majority of Australian vernacular building construction. ‘Post and beam’ describes only the main structural frame; buildings are more typically described by their walling system, e.g. slab hut. Logs used in the construction of the structural frame were invariably obtained in the immediate vicinity of the building, usually within 1km. Trees were felled using either a standard axe or crosscut saw; once on the ground the crosscut saw was the preferred means of cutting logs into the required lengths (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service 2002: E2).

Vertical slab construction was developed in the early 19th century subsequent to the introduction of log and horizontal slab construction. Vertical slab construction was more common than drop slab (horizontal) construction. It rapidly gained predominance and by the 1820s it was recommended to new settlers as the construction method for their first homes (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service 2002: E6).

Coppin Homestead Site, Molonglo, represents one of around 30 properties where slab constructions have been noted in the ACT. The majority of these were constructed in the nineteenth century, with just three constructed after 1900. The earliest were constructed in the late 1830s/40s at Lanyon and Oaks Estate. Good examples of slab construction within the ACT can be seen at Rosebud Apiary, Belconnen, Well Station, Orroral Homestead and Elm Grove, all of which are entered in the ACT Heritage Register (ACT Heritage Council 2010: 11).

Often, slab constructions within the ACT were part of a larger complex of buildings, with uses including stables, gardener’s cottages, sheds, school rooms, and kitchens. However, a number of slab constructions within the ACT were also used as cottages or small homesteads. Slab buildings are vulnerable to water and termite damage, and many do not survive owing to the ease with which slab buildings could be dismantled, with timber used elsewhere (ACT

Heritage Council 2010: 11).

### **Archaeology at Coppin Homestead Site, Molonglo**

In 2010, Biosis completed an archaeological excavation at Coppin Homestead Site, Molonglo. The aims of the sub-surface investigations were to determine the location and size of the hut, the associations between the ornamental plantings and the chimney remains and if any sub-surface artefacts remained.

Archaeological excavation trenches were laid across the area in an attempt to locate postholes or footings. Six trenches were excavated resulting in some broken crockery, glass and nails being recovered from the site. No footings or postholes were located that would give additional information as to the form or size of the hut.

Artefacts consisting of nails, broken glass and crockery were recovered from the trenches laid over the area directly in front of the chimney feature where the internal form of the hut was most likely, and the area in front of the hut site.

Biosis determined that artefacts recovered were typical of a domestic hut of the period. The recovered crockery consisted of a blue floral underglaze printed pattern or plain white bone china, a glass bottle bottom (Heel) bearing the stamp 877 in raised lettering. This bottle stamp dated the bottle as belonging to the period 1820-1920. Underglaze transfer patterns were most popular from 1790 to 1860 but continued in production and still occur today (Burke and Smith 2004: 371 cited in Biosis 2010).

Biosis noted that the scarcity of archaeological remains fitted with the purposeful removal of the hut and its possessions, as it is presumed that if the hut had been destroyed by fire or left to decay a high density of artefacts would be expected to occur in sub-surface contexts, and in the surrounding area.

Of the similar hut sites listed above, Crinigan's Hut yielded an important archaeological assemblage, providing important evidence of the everyday lives of people in the pre-Federal Capital era of the region. The collection is a rare example of a 19th century rural household assemblage of artefacts that covers a wide range of artefact types and in significant quantities.

By comparison, archaeological studies from Coppin Homestead Site, Molonglo, and the other sites listed above have either not yielded assemblages of the same significance, or are considered unlikely to. Surface and sub-surface archaeological assemblages for these sites generally reveal materials such as mortar and undiagnostic glass, ceramic, wire, nails, and other metal, with small selections of other domestic effects such as broken clay pipe fragments, buttons, or buckles. Such assemblages are well represented in the archaeological record for nineteenth and early twentieth settler homesteads in Australia.

### **DESCRIPTION**

In 2011 the ACT Heritage Council provided advice on a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) for Coppin Homestead Site titled: *Molonglo Future Urban Development Stage 2 – Historic Site MHS1 and MHS2* – by Biosis. The CMP noted that site MHS2 (Coppin Homestead Site) had low to moderate cultural and archaeological significance, yet concluded that the place met criteria for listing on the ACT Heritage Register. While the management recommendations proposed in the CMP were approved, the ACT Heritage Council has formed its own opinion regarding the heritage significance of the place.

The site is characterised by the remnants of a stone fireplace (see Image 4) and a pile of cut (dressed) stones (see Image 5), which probably also represents a fireplace. The fireplace and the rock pile are some 3.8 metres apart and some 14 metres to the south west of the centre of an Osage orange tree (Boxall and McAlister 2013).

Boxall (2013: 11, 12) observes the following about the landscape setting of Coppin Homestead Site, Molonglo:

*The large spreading female Osage orange tree [Maclura pomifera] stands close to the fireplace remnants - probably grown as a windbreak to protect the homestead. Split down the centre by some force of nature many decades ago, its main trunk now grows sideways in two directions. The nearby Roman cypress [Cupressus sempervirens], box thorns [lyium], hawthorns [crateagus] and briars [Rubiginosa] were most likely planted as a hedge to protect the homestead garden from straying stock.*

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*Now a rare sight in the ACT, Osage orange trees are a native of USA where the wood was prized by the Osage Indians for making bows. Still used today by modern bowyers, the species is said to have been introduced to Australia by Californian gold seekers in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century.*

The ruins and exotic plantings are surrounded by a hinged-joint boundary fence built to specifications of Territory and Municipal Services Directorate. The place will be conserved as a heritage area within the future urban area of Molonglo.

The survey plan of Portion 107 Parish of Yarrolumla April (1880) notes a garden and yards at the homestead (Boxall and McAlister 2013: 4), however the footprints for these are no longer extant and were not detectable during archaeological excavations in 2010.

### Physical condition and integrity

There are no discernible mounds, ephemeral platforms, cornerstones, or remnant surface or sub-surface archaeological assemblages that might indicate the former scale or orientation of the homestead identified during the 2015 site visit. The lack of heritage fabric is probably owing to the dismantling and subsequent re-use of building materials.

One of the two piles of dressed stones retains the shape of the base of a chimney, enabling some degree of interpretation.

Plant species at the site include:

- Osage orange tree (*Maclura pomifera*) split down the centre with a sideways-growing trunk.
- Roman cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*)
- box thorns (*Lyium*)
- briars (*Rubiginosa*)
- hawthorns (*Crateagus*)

Most remnant vegetation is in a state of spreading, splitting, or seeding, with the exception of the Roman cypress (see Images 6 to 8). While landscape elements may have originally been used as windbreaks or boundary markers to domestic yards or paddocks, there is no remaining structure or formality to the planting systems that would permit interpretation or assessment of significance.

ACT Heritage completed site visits to the place in 2010 and again in 2015, and both times the stone piles were heavily obscured by thick vegetation (see Image 9).

SITE PLAN



Image 1 Site Boundary

IMAGES

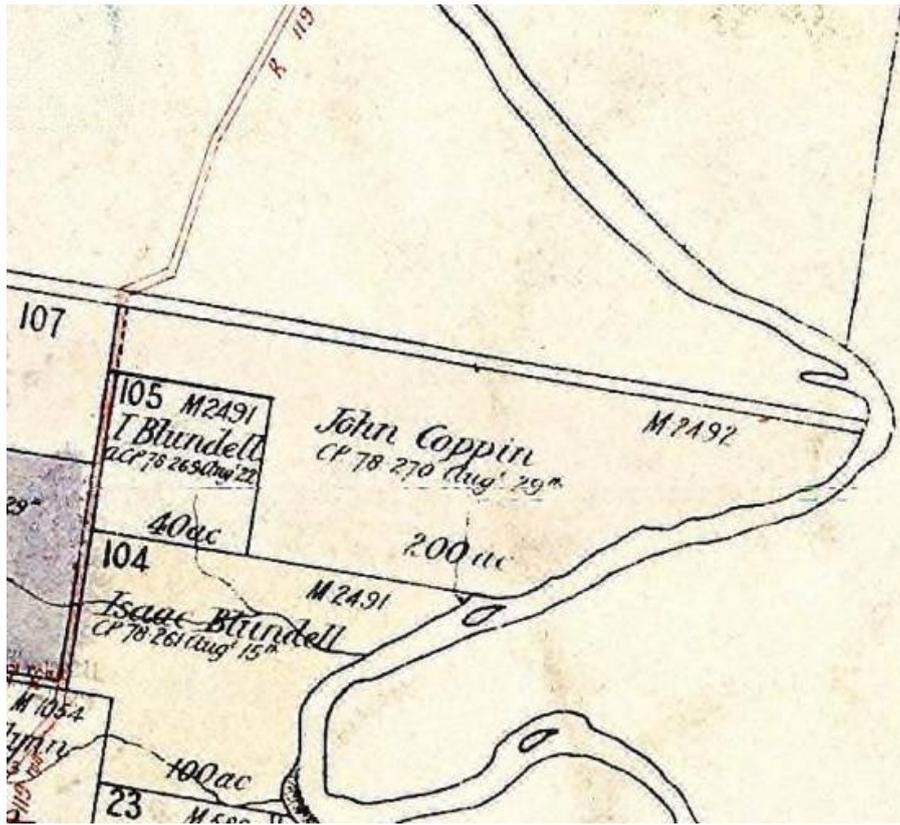


Image 2. John Coppin Portion 107 beside Molonglo River (Department of Lands Parish Map 104)

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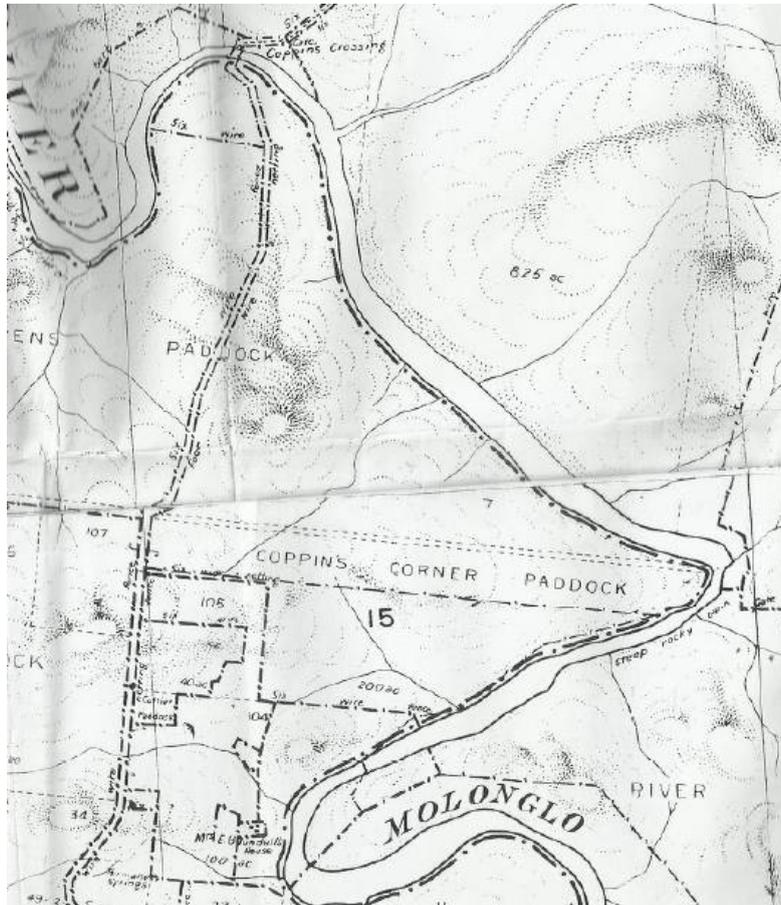


Image 3. Coppins Corner Paddock 1915 Territory Features Map (McKann and O’Keefe 2011)



Image 4. Dressed chimney stones (Biosis 2011)



Image 5. Second dressed stone pile (probably chimney, Biosis 2011)



**Image 6. Osage orange split (ACT Heritage 2015)**



**Image 8. Boxthorn and briar at site (ACT Heritage 2015)**



**Image 7. Vegetation coverage (ACT Heritage 2015)**



**Image 9. Roman Cypress at Coppin Homestead Site  
(ACT Heritage 2015)**

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