

M. Jeff Thompson and Robert C. Bradshaw

Introduction

M. Jeff Thompson is best known for his role as brigadier general of the 1st Division of the Missouri State Guard, where he earned the moniker “Swamp Fox” for his exploits battling Union forces in southeast Missouri. Ironically, his greatest impact on present times was a little-known event that occurred on the other side of the state during the secession crisis.

Event

Before the war, Jeff Thompson was a prominent citizen of St. Joseph, Missouri. He supervised railroad construction and later served as mayor (1857–1860) of the bustling young city that was the terminus of the most western railroad in the country, the Hannibal & St. Joseph line. It was assumed that given its position the city would be the eastern terminus of the planned transcontinental railroad, making it an even larger hub for transportation and ensuring great wealth and prosperity for the city. Residents had a prominent Massachusetts senator named Charles Sumner on their side.

Unfortunately for St. Joseph, Jeff Thompson would ruin all that. On May 23, 1861, St. Joseph was an incredibly tense place. In an effort to keep the peace, the mayor and city council had decreed that no Union or Confederate flag would fly there. So when the St. Joseph Post Office let the Union flag unfurl, Jeff Thompson climbed up the pole and threw the flag to the ground, where a mob of angry secessionists tore it to pieces. The mob then began marching across town where they intended to tear down another flag flying over Turner Hall. Upon seeing the action of the mob Robert C. Bradshaw made his way over to Turner Hall where he stood in defense of the door. Bradshaw described his experience, saying, “I then told the parties I would take the flag down, but before doing so I claimed the right to salute it. Leaving Mr. Slayback in charge of the door, I went upstairs, then out on the roof. When halfway from exit in roof to the flag staff, the ‘mob’ raised a cry to ‘Shoot him!’ I stopped and told them I would take the flag down agreeable to the demands of the mayor and the city council, but no mob could make me do it.... I gave three cheers for the national flag, and raising my revolver I fired six shots over the flag in token of salute, then lowering it, I took the flag and returned it to the second story where it was deposited in safety.”

Aftermath

Following the removal of the flag flying above Turner Hall the mob dispersed, but the damage was already done. The story of the events in St. Joseph led by Jeff Thompson spread throughout the nation. When Sen. Charles Sumner heard it he reversed his position on the transcontinental railroad, becoming firmly opposed to St. Joseph as its starting point. As a result, the railroad started at Omaha instead of St. Joseph.