



ST. JOSEPH IN THE CIVIL WAR

At the beginning of the American Civil War, St. Joseph found itself caught in the cross hairs of this great conflict, which would redefine the country. By 1861, the town had become the nation's epicenter for communication and transportation. Not only did it boast being the western terminus of country's railroad system, but it was also the eastern terminus of the overland mail venture known as the Pony Express. In addition, the city had become a major staging point for the Oregon-California Trail, a steamboat port and a telegraph center. Some individuals even claimed its growth would outpace Chicago in coming years.

Unfortunately, the city was split in its politics, with many residents supporting the Union and others the Confederacy. In 1861, the town changed hands several times between bands of Northern and Southern militia. In May, 500 residents rioted over a local flag ordinance banning the display of either a Union, or Confederate flag. In one particular incident, Mayor M. Jeff Thompson led a mob to the post office and tore down the United States flag, whereupon it was shredded by the rioters.

By September 1861, guerillas sabotaged the railroad bridge over the Platte River leading into town. As a result, the train fell into the river killing 17 passengers. Shortly thereafter, Union troops were dispatched to the city to quell the violence and protect this vital communication and transportation link from further rebel insurgency. The 16th Illinois regiment, under the command of Colonel Robert F. Smith, entered St. Joseph in late September and commenced erecting breastworks on a bluff overlooking the city and the Missouri River.

During this period, the state was awash with Union and Confederate forces battling each other. Statewide, the Confederates scored two early victories. The first occurred on July 5 at Carthage, and the second on August 10 at Wilson's Creek. Both of these battles occurred on the western side of the state. Following these engagements, the Confederate Army, under the command of General Sterling Price a former Missouri governor, started advancing north along the western Missouri border. On the Kansas side of the line, Union General James Lane, a U. S Senator from Kansas and former Jayhawker during the Missouri-Kansas Border War, started shadowing Price. The fear arose; both armies might end up battling in St. Joseph.

With this possibility, Colonel Smith stood ready with his 2,500 troops and 12 cannon poised atop the newly created fortification on Prospect Hill. The colonel's troops named the emplacement after him, calling it Ft. Smith. Much to everyone's relief, General Price turned east and confronted Union forces at Lexington, again resulting in a Confederate victory. General Lane entered Kansas City, but did not advance any further north.

By the spring of 1862, the Union troops at Ft. Smith were downsized after the defeat of General Price's army at the battle of Pea Ridge, Arkansas in March. The Confederate threat had now subsided to some degree in Missouri, until later in the war. In time, many of Colonel Smith's men were repositioned to help Union General Ulysses S. Grant in his campaign to capture Vicksburg, Mississippi. However, the fort remained occupied by a token force from thereon.

The Civil War's presence, although minor in some respects to the larger battles and campaigns in other regions of the country, still had a profound effect on the community going forward. Because of the war, President Abraham Lincoln decided to originate the transcontinental railroad out of Council Bluffs, Iowa, as opposed to St. Joseph. All in all, though, the city fared better than most during this terrible conflict and it went on to become a gleaming metropolis in its own right.

**Written by Joseph K Houts, Jr.
St. Joseph Civil War historian and author of *Quantrill's Thieves***

**Contact Communications Director: Beth Conway for additional information and images.
bconway@stjomo.com**