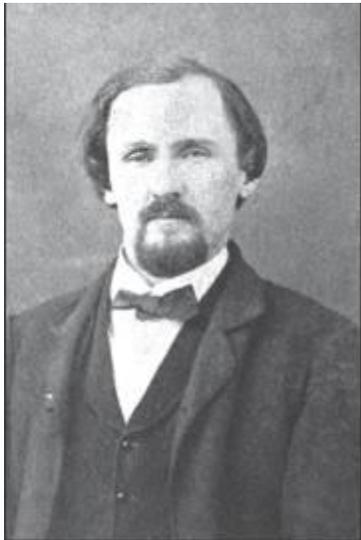


Johnson's Island plot foiled, things turn out OK for the Union

BY RANDY KOCH



John Yates Beall

SANDUSKY

September started poorly for the Confederates. Atlanta fell to Sherman on Sept. 2, just three days after the Democrat's presidential nomination of General George McClellan, instead of outspoken peace candidate Clement Vallandigham. With a sense of urgency, the plot to free the prisoners from Johnson's Island moved forward.

A crisp, clear morning greeted passengers as they boarded the Philo Parsons in Detroit on Sept. 19. Twenty Rebel operatives, dressed as laborers and lugging an old trunk, supposedly containing workman's tools, joined the other passengers boarding in Detroit.

The previous evening, John Yates Beall's second in command, Bennett Burley, requested that ship's clerk and part owner, Walter Ashley, stop at Sandwich Island in Canada to pick up several friends, Beall. While the vessel steamed toward the Bass Islands, the debonair Burley entertained the female passengers at the piano. Several more operatives boarded at Kelleys Island, the final stop before Sandusky.

At about 4:15 p.m., after the Philo Parsons left Kelleys, Beall approached the acting mate, as Captain Atwood had disembarked at Middle Bass Island to spend the evening at his home. The muzzle of Beall's revolver pressed against Nichols's ribs as the Rebel announced that the Confederate States of America now controlled the vessel.

Beall's men opened their trunk and armed themselves with revolvers and hatchets. Several shots reverberated in the process of rounding up the passengers and crew. The raiders apprehended the wheelsman, whom they forced to pilot the boat, and released the fireman to maintain pressure in the boilers. According to Beall's personal memoir, the exuberant Rebels then raised the Confederate flag.

However, Beall learned the ship lacked sufficient fuel to carry out his mission and return safely to Canada. The boat steamed back to Middle Bass to replenish wood supply. Shots rang out again, but the locals' bravado quickly evaporated at the sight of 30 battle-hardened Rebels pointing their weapons ominously at the islanders.

As the Parsons pulled away, the Island Queen, carrying 25 members of the 130th O.V.I. heading to Toledo to muster out, approached the dock. Nearing the dock and sensing something amiss, the Queen's captain feverishly attempted to reverse engines, but to no avail. Beall chose to parole the Queen's crew and passengers, along with the Parson's passengers, on Middle Bass.

While Beall scuttled the Island Queen, startled South Bass Island residents, including John Brown Jr., son of the legendary John Brown, scurried about with the alarming sounds of hostile gunfire to the north. Ironically, the previous year, young Brown sent a letter, now in the Sandusky Library's Archives, expressing his concern for the Rebels' easy access from Canada to Johnson's Island. Brown and three companions immediately boarded a small boat, intent upon warning the mainland of hostile activity.

Meanwhile, Beall set course for Sandusky Bay to unite with Charles Cole, who had planned to drug the crew of the Michigan during an elaborate dinner party so he and Beall could commandeer the heavily armed warship. Cole was on the Michigan as anticipated but, unbeknownst to Beall, as a prisoner. Two days earlier, Detroit's acting provost marshal allegedly received information from a former Confederate soldier, informing the Union official of the Sept. 19 plot. While skeptical, the provost marshal telegraphed Jonathan Carter, captain of the Michigan. The informant's return the following day added credence to the claim.

The provost marshal allowed the Parsons to depart as scheduled on the 19th, apparently hoping to capture the Rebels in the act, despite the danger to the civilians. In Sandusky, Naval Captain Carter and Johnson's Island Army Commandant Colonel Charles Hill prepared to foil the plot. In early afternoon, federal officials arrested Charles Cole in the West House lobby. Cole soon realized that the authorities were well aware of the plot. He spun the elaborate tale that he had proceeded with the intention of notifying authorities and assisting in the capture of the conspirators once they all arrived.

Unsuccessful with that ploy, Cole named local people he claimed to be fellow conspirators, men opposed to the war, but not actually involved with the plot. He hoped the commotion created by these arrests might allow true operatives to escape.

Unaware of Cole's predicament, Beall forced the Parson's captain under darkened skies to pilot the ship near the channel but not to enter the bay. Had Beall proceeded, the Michigan's crew anxiously awaited the opportunity to blow the enemy out of the water. By midnight, having received no signal from Cole, the ever dutiful Beall ordered his men to prepare for assault. Sensing the futility, all of Beall's crew except Burley and one other refused. To maintain his honor, Beall drafted a document whereby his men acknowledged they refused the order.

Beall had no choice but to return to Canada, where he scuttled the Philo Parsons and evaporated into Canada. Early the next morning, an exhausted John Brown arrived at Johnson's Island, bringing first word of the *mêlée* at Middle Bass. The Michigan sailed after Beall, but unaware that Beall scuttled the Parsons, they returned to Johnson's Island fearing he might return for a second attempt. In time the excitement subsided, although authorities became more vigilant and strengthened fortifications.

What of the conspirators? When paroled after the war, Cole was last heard of somewhere in Texas. Burley was captured, jailed in Port Clinton, and eventually escaped. He later traveled the globe serving as a renowned war correspondent for the London Daily Telegraph.

The federals captured John Yates Beall in mid December, after he disembarked from his train at the Canadian border to retrieve a teenage companion who fell asleep in the station. The North, smarting from the recent Confederate attempt to burn New York City, seized upon the opportunity to make an example of anyone. Although not involved with the arsons, Beall found himself whisked away for a speedy trial on a number of charges, and sentenced to hang. Even the long line of influential petitioners could not convince Abraham Lincoln to commute the sentence. After Beall's execution on Feb. 24, 1865, Lincoln is quoted as saying, "The case of Beall on the Lakes—there had to be an example. I had to stand firm. I had to turn away his poor sister. I can't get the distress out of my mind yet." Exactly seven weeks after Beall died, John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln.

Even today, much speculation remains concerning the plot. Some say a school girl overheard the plot and notified authorities. Others offer a variety of identities of the mysterious informer. Just as intriguing, if U.S. authorities never became aware of the plot beforehand, could Charles Cole have captured the Michigan, and with Beall's aid have released 2,500 vindictive prisoners from Johnson's Island? What depredations would Sandusky and our numerous surviving period structures have suffered — and what would be Sandusky's place in the annals of Civil War history?

Randy Koch is president of the Erie County Historical Society, chairman of the Erie County Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee, and has authored several books, including "Eyes Toward the South", which chronicles the Civil War career of John Yates Beall.