

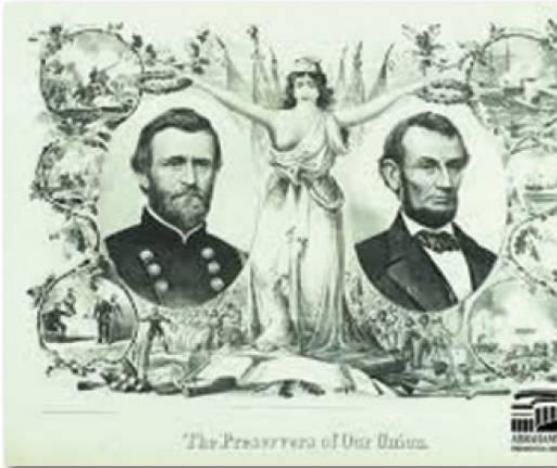
Confederates plotted to free Johnson's Island prisoners - South needed to replenish depleted ranks, sent in undercover agent

By Randy Koch

SANDUSKY

As the long, hot summer of 1864 dragged on, and blood streamed over the saturated ground with an ever widening flow, many wondered how much more suffering and death the divided nation could endure.

In May alone, the Union suffered 50,000 casualties while the Rebels suffered almost 40,000. The casualties in Virginia rapidly transformed the Northern view of Ulysses Grant from that of the military genius who captured Vicksburg and Chattanooga the previous year, to one of a brutal butcher, confirmed by the loss of 13,000 men alone in Cold Harbor the first week of June.



Adding to the North's consternation, Confederate Gen. Jubal Early invaded Maryland, intent upon attacking Washington, D.C. While capturing the city remained unlikely, the massive troop movement's psychological effect would further erode confidence with the Lincoln administration, and hopefully draw substantial Northern troops away from Virginia. Only a valiant Union stand at Monocacy on July 9 stalled the Rebel advance sufficiently to strengthen the capital's defenses without weakening the northern lines in the south.

By the end of July, the North suffered another 50,000 casualties. In Virginia, Grant could only claim stalemate in Petersburg as he stared across the trenches. In Georgia, northerners cringed as Sherman contributed to the bloodletting with his futile attempts to capture Atlanta. Fighting at Kennesaw Mountain, and then near Atlanta, where Clyde native Gen. James McPherson lost his life, proved especially costly.

Although the North suffered greater casualties than the South, the Yankees replenished their army with the draft, the continuing influx of European immigrant volunteers, and the timely decision to allow black men to shoulder arms. The Confederates' military options boiled down to enlisting underage boys and old men, or to placing slaves in the ranks. The latter action, removing a cornerstone from the foundation of the Confederacy, would receive no serious consideration until the war's final days.

Backed into a corner, the Confederacy moved forward with the Northwestern Conspiracy, which would replenish depleted ranks while escalating northern dissent and blocking Lincoln's presidential reelection bid. The primary target of the widespread operation remained the freeing of 10,000 Rebel prisoners from Camp Douglas in Chicago during the Democrat's Nominating Convention, also held in the Windy City. However, postponement of the convention from July to Aug. 16, and to its actual opening on Aug. 29, continually hindered the operation.

Meanwhile, agents continued perfecting plans to free the Johnson's Island's prisoners, perhaps in unison with the Chicago operation. The Confederates assigned Charles Cole as lead agent in Sandusky. Before arriving, Cole scouted the Great Lakes from Buffalo to Chicago to determine Union military strength along the Great Lakes.

The Sandusky Library Archives' guest registry from the West House has Cole arriving on Aug. 11. The Aug. 16 entry records the arrival of a lady assumed to be Annie Brown, a prostitute from Buffalo, who eagerly filled the role of Mrs. Charles Cole.

The smooth-talking Cole masqueraded as the Secretary of the Mount Hope Oil Co., of Harrisburg, Pa.

Significant funds issued by the Confederacy allowed Cole to ingratiate himself with local community leaders and key military officials in Sandusky. Though Johnson's Island's thousand-man garrison presented a sizable obstacle, the largest impediment remained the U.S.S. Michigan, stationed in Sandusky Bay to guard the prison.

An 1842 treaty with Great Britain mandated the United States could maintain only one military vessel, armed with only one gun, on the entire Great Lakes. The Michigan remained that lone vessel, but the British looked the other way as her armament increased to 16 guns.

Instead of viewing the Michigan as an obstacle, the Rebels ingeniously schemed to convert the battleship into their asset. To familiarize himself with the ship, Cole planned to acquaint himself with the ship's commander, Captain Jonathan Carter. Through a complex scheme, the Rebels would commandeer the floating fortress, turn its weaponry on Johnson's Island, and force the Union garrison to surrender.

The task of supplying Cole much of the manpower fell to John Yates Beall, the epitome of southern gentry, and the antithesis of Charlie Cole. A soldier familiar with Cole's military career in Tennessee claimed Cole to be a chronic liar who always managed to become ill when the fighting neared.

Beall, a slaveholder in Jefferson County, Virginia, later to become West Virginia, held duty and honor above all else. He served with a militia unit present at John Brown's execution. When war erupted, Beall enlisted in the famed Stonewall Brigade, although he was seriously wounded in a minor action at Bolivar Heights while home on leave in late 1861.

When recuperating in the Deep South he fell in love and became engaged to Martha O'Bryan. In the summer of 1862 he journeyed to Dubuque County, Iowa, where he managed a flour mill.

Under that disguise, Beall subtly discouraged local men from enlisting in the Union army and also engaged in the Confederacy's widespread but vain attempt to devalue United States currency through manipulating the value of gold. When discovered, he fled to Canada.

In the spring of 1863, Beall traveled to Richmond and received an officer's commission in the Confederate Navy. This allowed him to become a government sanctioned privateer while, if captured, avoiding the consequences of being labeled a pirate under international law.

After a brief but successful stint on Chesapeake Bay and along Virginia's Atlantic Coast, Beall was captured and imprisoned in November. He managed to be exchanged in late winter prior to the cessation of prisoner exchanges. A return visit to Richmond led to Beall's subsequent assignment in Sandusky, where he allegedly arrived in August.

Beall's and Cole's meetings quite possibly could have occurred in the West House, current site of the Sandusky State Theatre. There the responsibility fell to Beall to hijack a civilian vessel departing Detroit to transport men he would recruit from Canada.

The evening of the designated day, with his "oil business" in Sandusky complete, Cole planned to host a farewell party aboard the Michigan in gratitude for the hospitality shown by the ship's officers. Unfortunately, the Sandusky operation was unprepared to proceed by Aug. 29 as planned for the Camp Douglas prisoner extraction.

On the evening of Aug. 28, the Confederate leaders in Chicago waited anxiously for the appearance of hundreds of men expected to infiltrate Chicago to storm the prison. Only several dozen appeared, leaving the operation postponed indefinitely.

However, the belief remained in Richmond that Lincoln's defeat in November would bring Confederate independence. Meanwhile, in Washington, Lincoln confided to a friend, "You think I don't know I am going to be beaten, but I do, and unless some great change takes place, badly beaten"

At the end of August, with Sherman unable to penetrate Atlanta's defenses and Grant unable to move Lee, no end for the costly war appeared in sight. In Sandusky, adrenalin flowed through Cole and Beall as they plotted to capture the Michigan and free 2,500 vengeful Rebel prisoners, eager to lay waste to the peaceful city of Sandusky, before rejoining their comrades to the south.

Randy Koch is a local author, chairman of the Erie County Civil War Sesquicentennial Committee, and president of the Erie County Historical Society.