

M. Jeff Thompson

Brigadier General

Missouri State Guard (MSG) Missouri Cavalry Brigade



Very few leaders in the American Civil War experienced the conflict on more levels than M. Jeff Thompson. Between 1861 and 1865 he was a guerrilla leader and a regular commander of Confederate forces, a combatant and a prisoner of war, a cavalryman and a sailor; Thompson was an actor in the military struggle for Missouri and a shrewd writer in the political fight to win the support of its people. For this, he was revered by the pro-secession citizens of Missouri, and reviled by those standing with the Union.

Meriwether Jeff Thompson was born in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, on January 22, 1826. When he was a young boy he became friends with an old scavenger named Jeff Carlisle. Because of this relationship his family began jokingly calling him Jeff. In 1847 and changed his first name to “M. Jeff.”. Though receiving a military education as a young man, he was denied admission into both West Point and the Virginia Military Institute. After failing to get into a military academy, Thompson made his way west working in different clerical positions. He eventually came to Liberty, Missouri, where he worked in a store next to the federal arsenal. This gave him the opportunity to join an overland expedition to the Rocky Mountains. His exploration ended when he met and married Emma Hayes in 1848. After marriage they moved to St. Joseph, Missouri, where Thompson became a prominent citizen. He eventually became president of a gas works and two railroads, and colonel of the local militia. In 1859, he was elected mayor of St. Joseph. During his time as mayor he dispatched the first of the Pony Express riders on April 3, 1860.

John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry and violence across the border in Kansas alarmed Thompson. When Abraham Lincoln was elected president, Thompson felt that the Southern way of life was under full assault. He rode to Jefferson City to use his influence to push for secession. When Missourians voted to remain with the Union, Thompson returned to St. Joseph, where he called out the militia.

Shortly after, he heard of the attack on Fort Sumter and the federal capture of Camp Jackson. These events caused tensions to rise in St. Joseph as pro-Union and pro-South factions fought over the raising of flags over city buildings. When the post office raised the Union flag, Thompson climbed up the building and cut the flag down; the crowd below tore it to pieces. This event biased Lincoln against St. Joseph and probably impacted the decision to have the Union Pacific Railroad go through Omaha, Nebraska, instead.

Frustrated by Missouri’s reluctance to go to war, Thompson made plans to return to his childhood home of Virginia to fight for the Confederacy. When he arrived in Memphis he found it full of Missourians who wanted to get commissions in the Confederate Army. Thompson changed his mind and decided to stay and raise volunteers in Missouri. He formed several bands of volunteers and was elected brigadier general and commander of the Missouri State Guard (MSG) in southeast Missouri. Thompson, after being unable to reach the main force of the MSG in southwest Missouri, began to operate in southeast Missouri, eventually coming under the command of Confederate general Gideon Pillow. Thompson would engage in several small skirmishes, where he often emerged out of the seemingly impassable swamps, earning him the name “Swamp Fox.” Thompson was finally defeated at the Battle of

Fredericktown and forced out of Missouri. He would return as part of both Col. John Marmaduke's first raid and Gen. Sterling Price's raid in 1864.

When the Civil War began, Thompson was already a colonel in the Missouri Militia, and he leveraged that rank and his outspoken support for the secession of Missouri into an appointment to command the First Division of the Missouri State Guard, with the local rank of brigadier general, stationed in the swampy southeastern "bootheel" area of the state. Thompson made such trouble for federal forces in the area that operations to subdue his activities were stymied for months. By the late summer of 1861, he won the grudging admiration of his opponents, including Colonel Ulysses S. Grant, who called him the "swamp fox." The name, like his childhood nickname "Jeff," stuck, and he became known as the "Swamp Fox of the Confederacy."

Thompson counterattacked... promising to "hang, draw, and quarter a minion of Abraham Lincoln."

While Thompson was literally making a name for himself in southeastern Missouri, the federal department commander, Major General John C. Frémont, issued a proclamation in August 1861, designed to curb guerrilla chaos within the state by declaring martial law, summary executions, and the emancipation of slaves owned by those found in arms against the Union. Thompson counterattacked with a proclamation of his own promising to "hang, draw, and quarter a minion of Abraham Lincoln" for every Confederate soldier or Missouri civilian put to death by Frémont's order. This proclamation circulated quickly and became one of the many political and military reasons President Lincoln countermanded Frémont's order. It was also one of Thompson's most important and noteworthy victories.

Ringed proclamations, adept guerrilla raids, and a flashy nickname were not enough against the ever increasing number of federal forces in the southeast Missouri swamps. When Thompson burned an important railroad bridge at Iron Mountain on October 17, 1861, Union forces pursued him to Fredericktown in southeastern Missouri, where, on October 21, he suffered his first defeat. Though the battle was small, it weakened Thompson enough to force him from Missouri and into northeast Arkansas. During the winter and spring of 1862, with federal forces too far away to threaten Thompson's men and his own forces too weak to contest southeast Missouri, Thompson was assigned to duty with the Confederate riverine navy on the Mississippi, defending Memphis, Tennessee. While Thompson's men made the switch from soldiers to sailors manning ship artillery and sharpshooter positions, Thompson advocated a naval offensive to disrupt federal plans and win a much needed victory on the river. The U.S. Navy moved first and destroyed the Confederate ships, including the *CSS General M. Jeff Thompson*, and captured Memphis, where Grant, now a major general, issued an order to expel the families of Confederate soldiers from the city. Thompson wrote a protest to Grant in another widely circulated propaganda effort that had, this time, no significant impact.

With the Confederate navy defending Memphis destroyed, Thompson was sent back to Arkansas, where he spent the remainder of 1862 and most of 1863 raiding across the border into Missouri with his own command, and for larger operations, attached to other units including a large scale expedition under Confederate Major General John S. Marmaduke. After Marmaduke's raid, Union forces in southern Missouri retaliated by raiding into Arkansas, where, on August 24, 1863, M. Jeff Thompson was captured at Pocahontas. Originally held in the St. Louis Gratiot Street Prison, Thompson was

moved to Johnson's Island, Ohio, and eventually, to Fort Delaware, where he adapted to life as a prisoner by writing poetry and becoming a leader among his fellow Confederate captives. His popularity created a small movement among even Union citizens, including Major General Benjamin F. Butler, for Thompson's release finally occurred in a general prisoner exchange held in August 1864, in Charleston, South Carolina.

Making his way across the Confederacy, Thompson was back in Missouri by early October 1864, joining Major General Sterling Price's ill-fated Missouri Expedition. Though Thompson had never been commissioned as a regular Confederate general, holding his rank only in the Missouri State Guard, and initially began the campaign as an informal aide, he was quickly given command of the hard fighting "Iron Brigade" in Brigadier General "Jo" Shelby's division. Thompson capably led these men through the defeat at the Battle of Westport on October 23, 1864, and the disaster two days later at Mine Creek, Kansas, before moving his shattered but still intact brigade into the sanctuary of northwest Arkansas. Thompson assumed command of the Sub-District of Northwest Arkansas in March 1865, but could do little with his scattered, starving, and increasingly demoralized men. Surrendering to Union forces the remnants that had not already deserted or fled with Shelby to Mexico in May 1865, Thompson was paroled and sent home.

With the war over, Thompson left Missouri and became a grocer in Memphis before finally landing in a solid job as chief engineer of the New Orleans Board of Public Works in 1867. The demanding nature of his work and the Louisiana climate over the years made the tuberculosis he contracted while in prison at Fort Delaware worse. M. Jeff Thompson, enfeebled and sick, moved back to St. Joseph, Missouri, where he succumbed to the disease on September 5, 1876, at the age of 50.