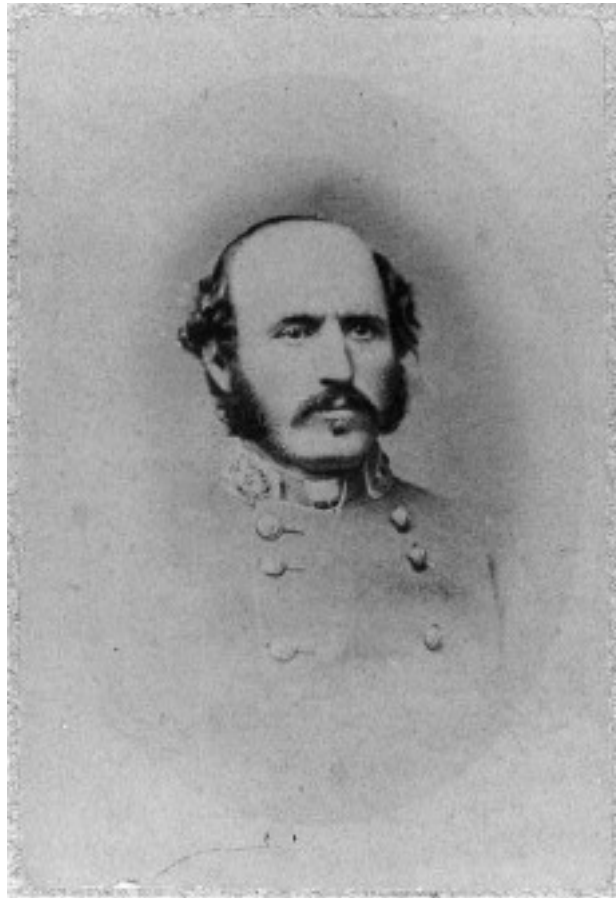


January 1865: 'Galvanized Rebels' sit out war

By Dr. Terry L. Jones
Special to The Journal



Zebulon York (Library of Congress)

During the Civil War, hundreds of Confederate prisoners took oaths of allegiance to the Union and agreed to serve in the Yankee army as a way out of captivity. Known as "Galvanized Yankees," some were sent west to man frontier forts and fight Indians. A lesser known story is the Southern attempt to recruit "Galvanized Rebels."

In the winter of 1864-65, the Louisiana brigade serving in the trenches of Petersburg, Virginia, was down to just a few hundred men. In a desperate attempt to strengthen the unit, officials turned to an unlikely source of manpower Yankee prisoners of war.

The plan was the brainchild of Father Egidius "Giles" Smulders, a Dutch native who served as the 8th Louisiana's chaplain. In an October 1864 letter to President Jefferson Davis, he wrote:
"I understand that there are now in our hands a large number of Irish Catholic prisoners of war, who I think may be induced to enlist in the Confederate Army. . . . I respectfully request that [these prisoners] be collected in one locality, that facilities may be offered me and some other Catholic Priests for conducting religious exercises amongst them and for holding other incourse [sic] with the view of bringing them over to the Confederate cause.

Louisiana was the only Confederate state with a predominantly Catholic population, and officials believed it would be easier to convince the Union prisoners to serve in the Louisiana Tiger regiments than other Protestant-dominated units. It was decided to send Gen. Zebulon York, commander of the Louisiana brigade, to Salisbury, N.C., to recruit among the Irish and German Catholic prisoners of war

being held there.

York was a Maine native who moved to New Orleans and became a prominent lawyer and plantation owner. When the war began, he reportedly was one of the state's richest men, co-owning six plantations and 1,700 slaves. York's bravery in battle was legendary, as was his profanity. After being wounded twice, he was promoted to brigadier general and took command of the Louisiana brigade in 1864. Then, at the Third Battle of Winchester in October, a musket ball shattered York's left wrist, and the surgeon's had to amputate his lower arm.

In November, Secretary of War James Seddon informed Gen. Robert E. Lee of the plan to raise recruits from the Yankee prisoners. Seddon wrote, "Among others, General York, while wounded here, has obtained this permission and proposes to visit the prisons, taking with him one or more Catholic chaplains, whose influence, he thinks, may be profitably exercised upon those of the same religious persuasion."

York traveled to Salisbury with Fathers Smulders and James Sheeran and set up a separate camp for the Galvanized Rebels. The Yankees, who had no hope of being exchanged and were dying at a rate of thirty men a day, seemed grateful to have Catholic priests administer to their religious needs.

On January 17, 1865, York wrote Secretary Seddon: "We have now in our camp between 600 and 700 recruits. The great obstacle has been the difficulty of procuring clothing and supplies from the quartermaster's department. We have also been interfered with by the recruiting officers of Lieutenant-Colonel Tucker. If we could have the exclusive privilege of recruiting in all the prisons for a few weeks we have no doubt but that we could shortly muster a brigade, composed of such material as would reflect no discredit on our noble army. We hope that you will be so kind as to foster this enterprise, and to see that the necessary clothing, etc., be furnished by the quartermaster's department, as we can do nothing without the uniforms. Controversy soon ensued as officials bickered over who had the authority to recruit the Yankees and why uniforms could not be secured. General Lee even waded into the dispute and questioned the authority by which Colonel Tucker was involved in the plan. "General York," he affirmed, "is recruiting for the Louisiana brigade."

After a brief flurry of activity, the plan to raise Yankee recruits failed. No record was left to explain why the hundreds Union prisoners ultimately refused to join the Confederate army.

Father Smulders simply wrote that "few availed themselves of the opportunity." One can speculate, however, that the prisoners only pretended to be interested in the plan as a way to get transferred to the special camp and receive preferential treatment. Whatever the reason, all were returned to the main prison and remained there until the end of the war.

Dr. Terry L. Jones is a professor of history at the University of Louisiana at Monroe and has published six books on the American Civil War.