

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

February 2022

Steve Johnson, Editor

Board Meeting Held on January 22

The board of directors meeting took place last month virtually via Zoom. These were the highlights of the meeting: 1) Rangers often rely on volunteers to give programs when the ranger staff is limited; 2) members Johnson, Smith, and Hormel have been leading walking tours on weekends; 3) Co-chair Johnson proposed using FOCWA funds to purchase books on California and the Civil War, for the Alcatraz library; 4) a note of thanks will be sent to the family of the late member Bob Hubbs who left a large donation to FOCWA

Officers and Board Members for 2022

The results of the election held at the end of last were as follows: Gary Hormel and Steve Johnson, Co-chairmen; Constance Smith, Secretary; Evelyn Mar, Treasurer & Membership Chairwoman; Board Members Frank Avila, Jeffrey Vaillant, Brad Schall, John Fitzpatrick, and John Nevins. Our Park Service Liaison is Ranger Matt Connelly.

News from The Rock

Ranger Wendy Solis has been detailed to the Eugene O'Neill National Historic Site in Alamo. She will be on Alcatraz two days a week and will continue in her role as volunteer coordinator for Alcatraz Island. Now that the numbers of visitors to Alcatraz have been to near normal levels, there is now an EMT usually posted on the island. As noted above, three FOCWA members have been giving programs on the island, usually under the title "200 Years of Alcatraz History". These always include the history of Fort Alcatraz, but visitors also want to hear about the military prison era, the Native American occupation, and of course escape stories. FOCWA members are always welcome to come on the island with us and hear our narratives.

Abraham Lincoln and California

As we reflect on the life of Lincoln on the anniversary of his birth, it is important to consider the legacy he left the nation, especially regarding California. Like many Americans, Lincoln was intrigued and fascinated by the stories he heard about California, such as the vast quantities of gold being discovered, the huge trees that were hundreds of feet high, the verdant fields and valleys, and the majestic Sierra Nevada Mountains. In March of 1865 he told his friend, Charles Maltby — who was the superintendent of Indians Affairs in California — the following:

"I have long desired to see California; the production of her gold mines has been a marvel to me, and her stand for the Union, her generous offerings to the Sanitary Commission, and her loyal representatives have endeared your people to me; and nothing would give me more pleasure than a visit to the Pacific shore..."¹

Dates to Remember
Saturday, February 12
Lincoln's birthday
Monday, February 21
Presidents Day Holiday

¹"A Visit to the Pacific Shore: California in the Age of Lincoln", California State Archives. See resources

Unfortunately, Lincoln never made it to California. But while in office he signed into law four important pieces of legislation that directly affected California.

The Yosemite Park Act

Early visitors to Yosemite valley were awestruck by its unique beauty, and one man in particular began to push for its preservation. Frederick Law Olmstead - the famous landscape architect who designed Central Park in New York - believed parks were essential for people to enjoy the beneficial effects of nature and pressured California legislators to introduce legislation to protect the park.²

This happened in March of 1864 when California Senator John Conness introduced the Yosemite Park Act, which granted the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees to California with the stipulation “...that the said State shall accept this grant upon the express conditions that the premises shall be held for public use, resort, and recreation; shall be inalienable for all time”



Painting of Yosemite Valley, 1864, by Albert Bierstadt, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Though it might be stretching it to call Lincoln an environmentalist President, he always had a love of nature from his years in Kentucky, and it no doubt gave him pleasure to sign into law the act that set aside an extraordinary place of natural beauty for all generations to see. This set a precedent for the government to set aside land for parks, for in 1872 President Grant signed the Act of Dedication, making Yellowstone the first National Park. (Yosemite became a national park in 1890).

The Transcontinental Railroad

Talk of building a railroad to connect the East with the West had been going on since the 1830's. By the 1850's Congress authorized surveying parties to study the best route for a transcontinental railroad and in 1861 civil engineer Theodore Judah presented his maps for the proposed route to Congress. Lincoln, who had been a lawyer for the railroads, was a supporter of this plan and in 1862 he signed into law The Pacific Railway Act, which granted two companies lands and bonds to build the railroad from east to west (the Union Pacific) and from west to east (the Central Pacific).³ Lincoln believed it was important to unify the country, both North and South, and East and West. He knew the railroad would provide communication, trade, and travel between the two coasts and bind them closer together.

² “An Unexpected Lincoln Legacy: The Preservation of Yosemite” by Richard Helleesen <https://www.fords.org/blog/post/an-unexpected-lincoln-legacy-the-preservation-of-yosemite/>

³ “The Pacific Railway” <https://railroad.lindahall.org/essays/brief-history.html>

Sadly, he was killed before he could see the completion of the railroad in 1869 when the two railroads met in Utah. Many cities along the route took the name of Lincoln.

Ending Slavery in California

Even though California had come into the Union as a free state, slavery was common - especially in Southern California which was mostly populated by Southerners. It was common for them to bring their slaves from the South to work their farms and mines. This was considered common practice and there was no law enforcement of the no slavery law. The legislature and the courts were filled with Southerners in the 1850's and laws were passed that in effect promoted slavery. Such a law was the 1852 California Fugitive Slave Act which required any slaves who had fled to this state had to be returned to slavery. Native Americans fared no better. Congress never approved the 1852 treaty to give reservation lands to California tribes, most of whom had been dispossessed of their ancestral lands. As a result, many landless natives were considered vagrants and were required to work on farms or as domestic servants — virtual slaves.⁴ Such practices were made illegal when Lincoln signed the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery.

Missions returned to the church

By the time California came into the Union, the 21 Catholic missions were already in decline. Many of the buildings were in disrepair or in ruins, some were used for stables or businesses; only two remained as parish churches on private land. In 1865 Lincoln signed a proclamation returning certain mission lands to the Catholic church. This initiated a movement to restore all mission lands back to the church and today all but two are parish churches — two are California state parks (Sonoma and La Purisima Conception).⁵ While today we see the missions in a different light, being labor camps for captured Native Californians, nevertheless they were part of early California history. San Francisco's own mission, for example, is the oldest intact building in the city and Mission Dolores has the only curator who is a Native Californian, of the Ohlone people. The mission's narrative panels tell the story of the mission from the Indian point of view, and shows the importance of telling a broader history of the missions.



Resources

The StateArchives had an excellent exhibit on Lincoln and California which you can see here: <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/a-visit-to-the-pacific-shore-california-in-the-age-of-lincoln-california-state-archives/QAKyB2KpYi2VJA?hl=en>

The Union Pacific Railroad has a nice video about Lincoln and the railroad: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmdTq9x-naE&t=227s>

⁴ For a condensed version of the fate of California Indians, see this state report <https://nahc.ca.gov/resources/california-indian-history/>

⁵ To see the fate of the missions, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican_secularization_act_of_1833