

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

August 2017

Editor: Steve Johnson

Protecting San Francisco Bay In August of 1849 a joint commission of army and navy officers arrived in San Francisco aboard the army transport *Massachusetts*. Their mission was to plan the defenses of San Francisco Bay by sailing around the bay, taking soundings, and looking for strategic areas to place cannons. However, as soon as the ship docked the crew deserted to the gold fields, so the officers had to wait until a crew could be secured from the Hawaiian Islands. They were finally able to complete their task, recommending that Mare Island would be a good site for a naval base, and that cannons should be placed at Fort Point, Lime Point, Alcatraz Island, Point San Jose (today's Fort Mason), Angel Island, Raccoon Point (today's Tiburon), Yerba Buena Island, and Rincon Point.

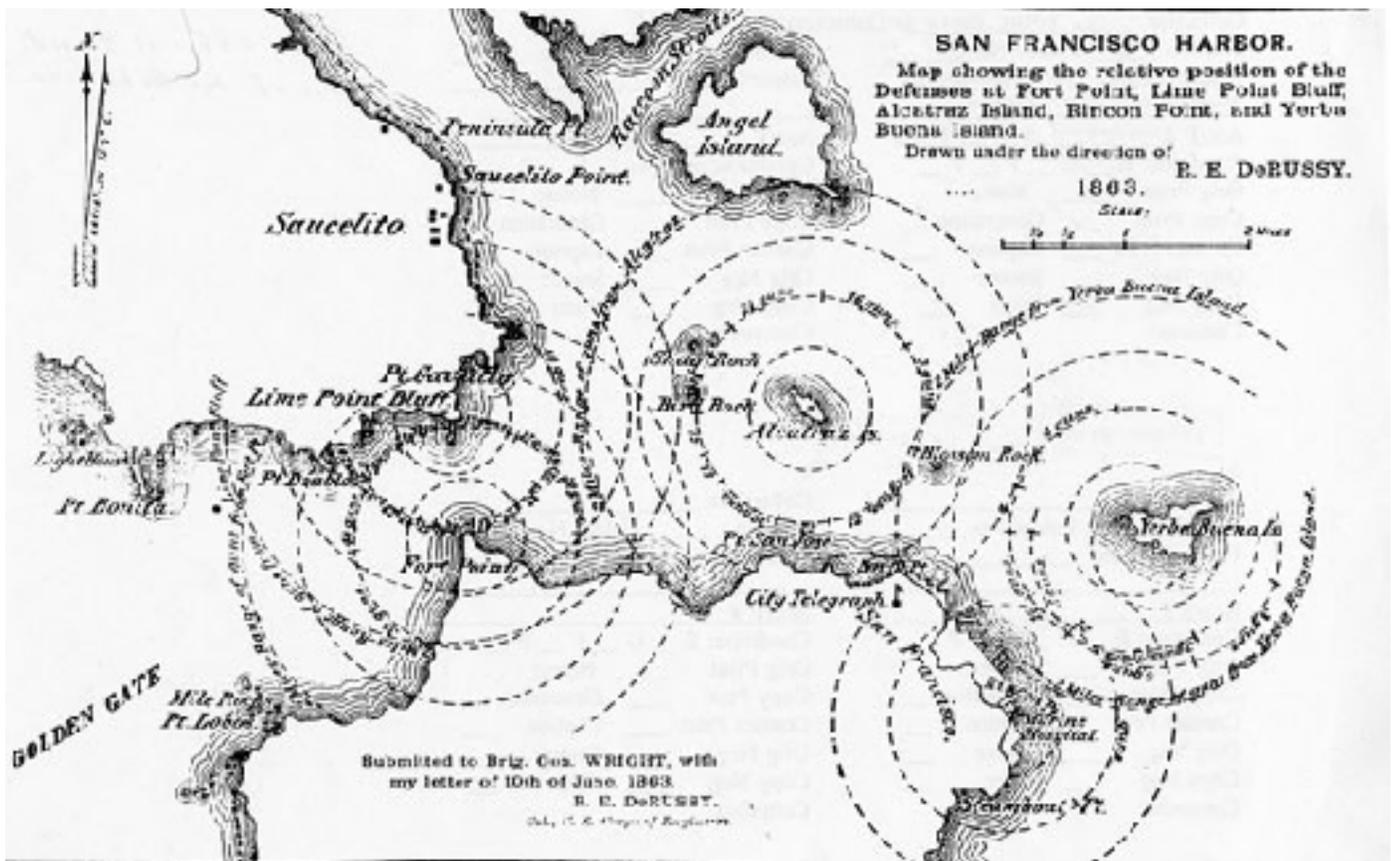
Dates to Remember

Tuesday, August 15, 2017

Peninsula Civil War Roundtable
11:30 am "Sex and Spies"

Saturday, August 19, 2017

Civil War Day at Ft. Point
10 am to 5 pm



This map, submitted in 1863 by Chief Army Engineer Col. De Russy to General Wright, showed an idealized plan for the defense of San Francisco Bay. It showed the gun

emplacements and the effective ranges of the Columbiad cannons if all positions were built.

Congress had allocated funding for the building of a series of forts to protect the bay, starting with Fort Point, Lime Point, and Alcatraz. In 1851, engineers had arrived to oversee the construction of the forts with the idea of providing a triangular field of fire. They realized that a swift vessel sailing in with the tide might pass through the entrance to the bay at a speed of 10 to 12 knots, making it possible to go right past the slow firing canons at Fort Point or Lime Point. So it was crucial for them to have a fort on Alcatraz with many cannons, because the guns would have a wider sweep of the bay and would protect the route to both Mare Island and the rivers north to Sacramento.

As it turned out, batteries at Lime Point weren't built by the army due to a protracted lawsuit with the owner, Samuel Throckmorton (a name very familiar to Marin County residents), who demanded much more than the government was willing to pay. It took 13 years for the government to finally acquire the land. Since Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz were receiving the majority of appropriations, work on Point San Jose wasn't undertaken until 1864. By summer of that year the west battery had 10 10-inch Rodman cannons facing Fort Point, and the east battery had six 42-lb. converted rifles. Other than the guns at Fort Point, these were the only mounted cannons in the city of San Francisco.



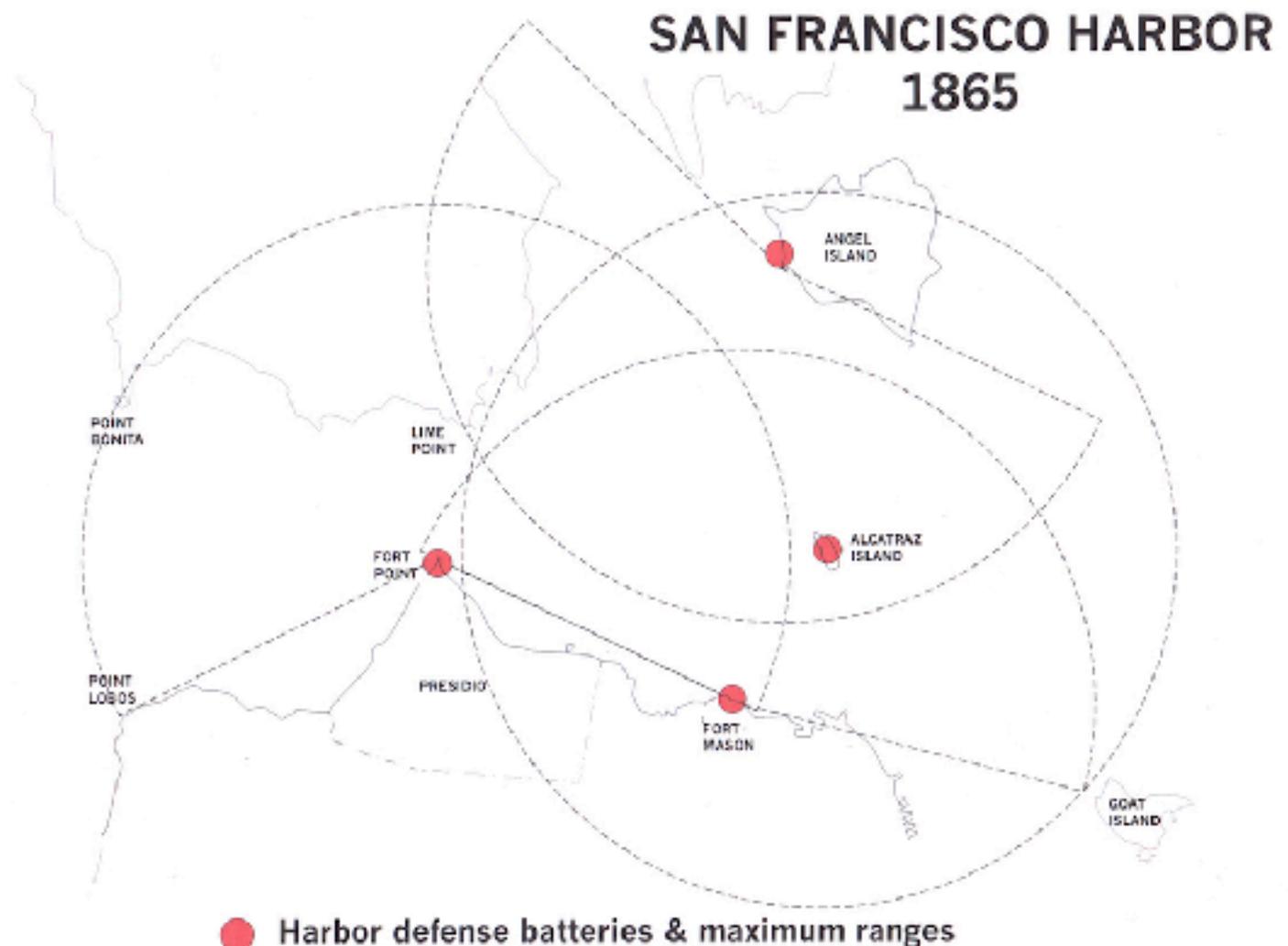
Golden Gate NRA, Park Archives, Rodman Cannon Placement Photographs, May 3, 1994, COCA-3293

A remaining Rodman at Fort Mason. with re-enactors on the parapet.

Money was allocated to build batteries on Angel Island, but first buildings had to be erected for the officers and soldiers, roads laid out, and a wharf completed. By July of 1864 three 32-pound cannons and one Columbiad had been mounted at Point Stewart. However, an army inspector, Col. Alexander, was later to report that the battery was useless for defense because it was so high up a ship could sail past its guns, and there was no earthen protection from enemy fire.

There were never enough funds to build gun emplacements on Rincon Point or Yerba Buena Island. But there were still concerns about protecting the city itself from attack, so much so that when the warship *U.S.S. Cyane* arrived in San Francisco in November of 1863, its first duty was to lay offshore the city to add its guns for the city's protection.

So the actual protection of the Bay fell primarily to Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz, with Point San Jose and Angel Island playing a "back up" roles. This map, prepared by historian John Martini, shows the actual emplacements and their extreme ranges during the Civil War



It shows the maximum ranges of the Columbiad cannons positioned at Fort Point, Point San Jose (Ft. Mason), Alcatraz, and on Angel Island. For a 10-inch Columbiad with a 100-lb. shell, at 30° elevation, the range would be 2.75 miles.

Civil War Day at Fort Point The bi-annual living History day will be held at Fort Point on Saturday, August 19th, from 10 to 5 pm. Members are encouraged to attend and help out. This is always a good opportunity to recruit new members from the ranks of the re-enactors and interested visitors. Anyone who shows an interest in Civil War history is a likely candidate for FOCWA, so see Gary Hormel for brochures to hand out. You should also contact him about getting a parking pass for the day.



Re-enactors prepare to raise the Garrison Flag on a past Living History Day. Photo: Dave Rauenbuehler

Resources:

Armaments in the Civil War: <https://markerhunter.wordpress.com>

“Historic Resource Study: Seacoast Fortifications, San Francisco Harbor”, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, 1979

Peninsula Civil War Roundtable: <http://www.peninsulacivilwarroundtable.org>

Thanks to John Martini, author of “Fort Point” for his editorial and historical assistance.