

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

January 2018

Editor: Steve Johnson

**Who Knew About Fort Alcatraz?** San Francisco in the 1850's and 1860's was the one of the remotest cities in the United States. Both Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz were the among the remotest Army posts in the country. So who actually knew about them? Here are some prominent people who knew very well about these forts:



**General Henry Halleck** General-in-Chief of the U.S. Army (1862). Prior to the Civil War Halleck was stationed in California and in fact was instrumental in writing the state's constitution. He became general of the California State Militia and probably spent time on the island as troops were being trained.

**Jefferson Davis** Before he became President of the Confederacy, Davis was the Secretary of War under President Pierce. He approved the plans for the building of Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz Only 10 years later, in 1863, he approved Asbury Harpending's plan to operate as a privateer and attack gold shipments from California. No doubt he was quite disappointed when that plan failed and Harpending wound up as a prisoner on Alcatraz.



**Brig. General George Washington Custis Lee** Son of Robert E. Lee, he graduated from West Point and went into the Army Corps of Engineers. He was one of the engineers who helped to supervise the building of Fort Point, and he would have known of the plans for Fort Alcatraz as well. He was made a general in the Confederate Army and was aide-de-camp to Jefferson Davis.

### Dates to Remember

**Tuesday, January 16, 2018**  
Peninsula C.W. Roundtable  
Lecture TBD

**Thursday, January 18, 2018**  
S.F. Civil War Roundtable  
6 pm "Aftermath: Burying  
the Dead" by Meg Groeling  
at United Irish Cultural  
Center

**Saturday, January 27, 2018**  
Civil War Day at Fort Point  
10 am to 5 pm



**Albert Sydney Johnston** was commander of the U.S. Army in the Department of the Pacific, which of course included Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz. Johnston was born in Kentucky and had mostly lived in Texas. In 1861 he was asked by a group of fellow Southerners to turn over Fort Point to them, and he honorably refused to do so. However, he did resign his commission, returned to the South, and eventually became one of Lee's best generals in the Confederate Army. He was killed in the battle of Shiloh in 1862.

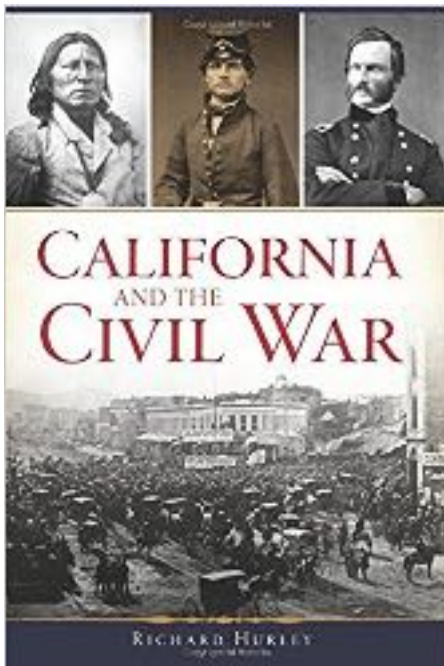
**William Tecumseh Sherman** As a young lieutenant in the Army,

Sherman was assigned to help keep order in California before and after the Gold Rush. He later resigned his commission and became a banker in San Francisco in the 1850's. He would have known about the construction going on at Alcatraz. The bank building where he worked can still be seen on the corner of Montgomery and Jackson Streets. (Note: After the financial bust of 1857, he left the world of banking and later said "I can handle a hundred thousand men in battle, and take the City of the Sun, but I am afraid to manage a lot in the swamp of San Francisco". What would he think now?)



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**Book Review: "California and the Civil War" by Richard Hurley** (2017, History Press,



Charleston SC, 174 pages) Historical books on the specific theme of California's involvement in the Civil War have been few in number. Fortunately, a new paperback from The History Press helps to fill the gap by presenting an overall account of what was going on in California before, during, and after the war. Author Richard Hurley describes how California was full of paradoxes - a free state that nevertheless enslaved Indians, a free Western state whose legislature was pro-South, a divided state that was pro-Union in the northern counties but pro-South in the southern counties. He identifies those individuals who determined the path California was to follow during the war: Jessie Benton Fremont, Thomas Starr King, Edward Baker, Leland Stanford, General Edwin Sumner, and General James Carleton. Several chapters are devoted to the actions of the U.S. Army in the Southwest, at times against Southern forces, and at other times against the Native Americans. Of special interest are chapters describing wartime California, and the Confederate partisans that operated in several areas of the state, especially in

Santa Cruz and Placer counties. There is also an interesting chapter on the Californians who went to

fight on the East Coast, with more details than are found in other books on this subject. Thankfully, near the end of the book is a chapter on California and the Sanitary Commission, a little-known connection that brings to light how our state supplied over 25% of all funds to operate Union field and regimental hospitals. The book has copious pages of explanatory notes, resources, and a useful bibliography. My one criticism of the book is that there is little mention of the roles that Alcatraz and Fort Point played in the defense of San Francisco, though that subject has been well covered by the books of John Martini, *Fortress Alcatraz* and *Fort Point National Historic Site*.

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**Civil War Day at Fort Point** Fort Point will once again hold its winter Civil War Day on Saturday, January 27th, from 10 am to 5 pm. Members are encouraged to help out by manning the FOCWA table inside the fort; this is a good time to tell the public what we do and recruit new members. Coffee and snacks are provided. Dress in your volunteer or Union uniform, and don't forget to wear your long-johns, wool socks, scarf, and ear muffs. Rumors are it is a bit cool at the fort.



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## News from the Island

- A new supervising ranger for Alcatraz will be starting in February; Ranger Benny is still acting supervisor
- Elka Hartman, who photographed the Indian occupation of the island, will be giving a photo presentation on that subject on Alcatraz on January 20th.
- Two new law enforcement rangers have been assigned to rotate between Alcatraz and Muir woods

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**Reminder: Members should send in their dues this month.** Go to the “Membership” page for information on membership levels on the application form, and where to send your check.

## Resources:

San Francisco Civil War Roundtable <https://www.facebook.com/SanFranciscoCivilWarRoundTable/>

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