

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

May 2022

Steve Johnson, Editor

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Board Meeting Notes

The board of directors met on Saturday, April 9th, at 10 a.m. A report on the current visitation on Alcatraz was given by Steve Johnson; numbers of visitors continue to climb and weekend tickets are sold out two weeks in advance. Fort Point will be having a Living History Day in August, with the date to be determined. Member Steve Bogart will be listing Civil War events around the Bay Area on our webpage, as he has done in the past. We discussed ways to recruit more members, including giving talks to local organizations such as Rotary Clubs, SIRS, etc. We had a brief discussion about the Confederate flag at re-enactments; it is now often banned at many public parks, though not at National Parks during a re-enactment (such as at Gettysburg). At the end of the meeting Gary Hormel gave a very interesting slide presentation about Appomattox Court House National Park.

Dates to Remember
Memorial Day, May 30
Board Meeting, June 11
10 am

Alcatraz Notes

On Saturday April 23, Alcatraz held a Junior Ranger Day, during which young visitors could fill out a Junior Ranger booklet and in return would receive a Junior Ranger badge. To make the day even more special, all those Junior Rangers who got their badge could get a special behind-the-scenes tour of the infirmary and (if old enough) the underground Citadel. Perhaps due to spring break and the beautiful spring weather, the island was jammed with visitors and lots of children took advantage of the offer to become a Junior Ranger. The volunteers were a big help to the rangers, assisting in passing out booklets, passing out badges, and giving tours. While on the island I talked to the Head Ranger Christian about the possibility of having a Living History Day on Alcatraz this summer. He was in favor of the idea and will bring this up for discussion with the supervisor. We will know soon if this will happen.



A volunteer assists in giving out Jr Ranger badges after checking through the completed booklet. The booklet has fill-ins, a crossword puzzle, a check-off list of things seen on the island, and a place to draw pictures. Even teen-agers wanted to complete the book!

The Lives of Military Wives

Women who were married to soldiers faced enormous challenges. Besides having to raise the children on their own, they had to tend to the house and the farm, and manage the family finances. They would have to ask relatives to help, or hire help to harvest the crops and care for the animals, and hope a good crop would pay for their labor. If the wife of an enlisted man had no children and wanted to follow along with him (which was not encouraged by the army) she would have to apply as a laundress or medical



Women helping soldiers as they go off to battle. From MilitaryHistoryNow.com

aide. In 1860, the army allowed one laundress for every 19 men, and at Fort Point (and on Alcatraz) there may have been six laundresses.¹ In the 1870s Angel Island had 20 rooms in the barracks for laundresses; at the Benicia military post there were three buildings for married soldiers and laundresses.²

The laundresses at Fort Point had quarters outside the fort; for laundresses out in the field in the East the army would supply them with a tent. Laundering was an all day task, which involved boiling the water, adding the dark, soft soap, pumping the posser³ up and down to wash the clothes, then rinsing - usually twice - and finally hanging the wash to dry. (It must have taken days to dry woolen uniforms in the cool weather around coastal forts). For her efforts, the laundress was paid and was entitled to medical care. By 1878 Congress discontinued the practice of paying laundresses, though military wives continued the practice and were paid directly by the soldiers.

Unlike the British, the American Army did not forbid a soldier to be married. But wives - especially on the campaign trail - were considered a liability. Only a few officers could afford to bring their wives to be near them, and not all women wanted to brave the dangers or the isolation of a frontier fort. Nevertheless, some women made the journey to California and made the best of the situation. The wives on Alcatraz and Angel Island planted gardens and had tea parties. The wives at Fort Point could enjoy the social life in San Francisco; the higher the rank of her husband, the more prestige she had in social circles.

An Army practice that military wives found very disturbing was that of “bumping”, when a lower-ranking family could be evicted from their home or quarters by a higher-ranking officer. This could happen even if a wife had made substantial improvement in the condition of the home. Thus a military

¹ John Martini, *Fort Point National Historic Site*, 1991, page 38

² Annegret Ogden, “Queen or Camp Follower: The life of the Military Wife in Early California” in *The Californians*, March/April 1984, page 12

³ similar to today’s plunger, but the base was made of metal with holes

wive's position in society, her income, and the place where she lived all had to do with her husband's rank, or with the Army's own goals. A case in point is that of Jessie Benton Fremont, who with her own money in 1860 bought the land at Black Point (now part of Fort Mason), remodeled an existing cottage, and built a summer home there. This was going to be the western home of the Fremonts (her husband was the famous John C. Fremont), but when war broke out she returned to the East to be with her husband, now a general. In 1863 the Army decided to confiscate the land as a military reservation, and turned the Fremont home into a residence for the commander of the Army of the Pacific, General McDowell. The Army never compensated the Fremonts for the loss of their property.⁴

Sadly, life for military wives and their families is not much different today: having to scrape by on low wages (especially among enlisted men), having to move from place to place, sometimes being "bumped" out of your home, and at times being isolated from the rest of society. But through it all, military wives continue to show amazing forbearance and dedication, serving their country in their own quiet way.

Memorial Day Vigil and Cemetery Tour

Members of FOCWA will join members of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Camp 24, at the Golden Gate National Cemetery at the Presidio in San Francisco on May 30th, Memorial Day. We will be standing at the gate to the cemetery at 10 am, welcoming veterans, their relatives, and visitors to the cemetery. At noon we will be conducting a Cemetery Tour, during which time a number of us will be standing at the graves of Civil War notables and telling their stories. We can always use more guides and you do not have to be in 1860s clothing to participate. We can help you study a narrative to some of the soldiers buried there that you can share with the public. Send an email to the editor if you would like to help out.

Living History Day Coming in July

We are awaiting final approval from the Park Service for a proposed Living History Day on Alcatraz in July. The Third Artillery Band has agreed to a date and we need final clearance from the supervisors before we can announce the date. Look for an announcement in the June issue.

Resources

<https://blogs.ancestry.com/cm/the-surprising-roles-women-played-in-the-civil-war/>

<https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/women-during-the-civil-war/>

<https://ushistoryscene.com/article/a-short-history-of-u-s-army-wives-1776-1983/>

"If the Army wanted you to have a wife, they would have issued you one."

⁴ Ogden, Ibid., page 13 To see the site of the Fremont house, use this NPS map of Fort Mason to find it <http://npshistory.com/brochures/goga/fort-mason-history-walk.pdf>