

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

June 2021

Steve Johnson, Editor

FOCWA Volunteers Return to Alcatraz

Members Gary Hormel, Mike Bennett, and Steve Johnson have resumed their volunteer service on Alcatraz, assisting the rangers by greeting visitors and showing them how to access the audio tour, roving the island, and taking turns in the New Industries Building to monitor the number of visitors coming in and answering questions. We also have staffed the information table situated near the water tank to answer questions and make sure folks are headed up the right road to the Administration entrance to the cell house, where they can start the audio tour. While roving the island, there was plenty of time to take in the views on these pleasant spring days, and to observe the nesting bird populations of cormorants, snowy egrets, and pigeon guillemots. Last year a pair of peregrine falcons nested on the island, and last week some Canadian geese were seen visiting the island.

Dates to Remember

Saturday, June 12, 2021

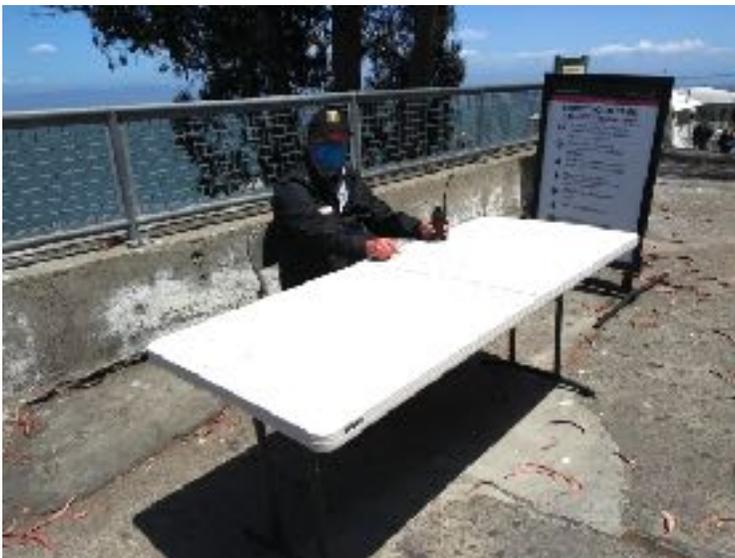
FOCWA Virtual Board

Meeting at 10 a.m.

Although only board members are required to attend, all members are welcome and will be sent the link to join the meeting

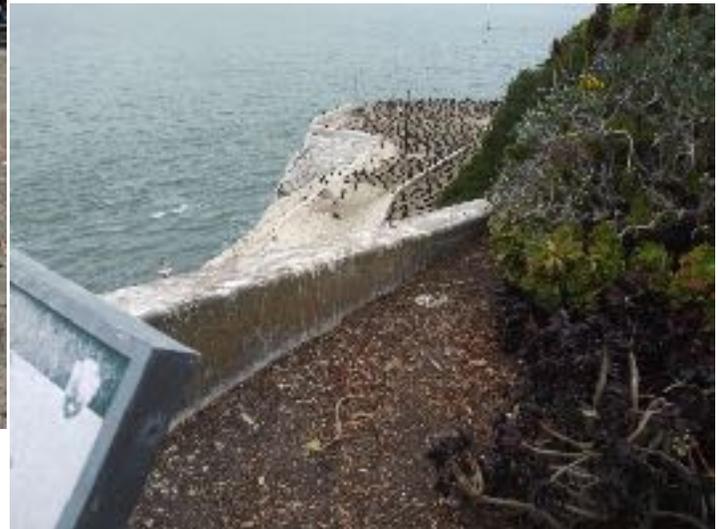
Monday, May 31, 2021

Memorial Day



FOCWA member and NPS Volunteer Gary Hormel mans the info table on the road up to the cell house. Masks are still required on the island.

NPS biologists have counted over 1,500 nesting cormorants on the island this year. This above-average number reflects a good food supply in the Bay.



San Francisco Receives a Monitor in 1863 - Which Promptly Sinks

The famous battle between *USS Monitor* and the *CSS Virginia* (aka the *Merrimack*) in 1862 showed the great advantage iron clad ships had in repelling cannon balls — neither of those vessels were sunk in the engagement despite each other's furious bombardment. Soon after, the Union

shipyards began feverish production of iron-sheathed sailing ships, and iron-hulled steamships and monitors. Monitors were called “a cheese box on a raft” because their low draft made them look like a round box floating on a raft. The deck of the *USS Monitor* was a mere foot and a half above the water, which made this class of monitors very unseaworthy (the *Monitor* in fact sank in a gale in 1862 as it was being towed off the Virginia coast). But on the calmer waters of rivers, lakes, or bays these vessels could travel at 7 - 8 knots, and their low draft made it difficult to hit them at a distance; their iron sides and revolving turret with two cannons made them a formidable weapon on the water.

There was a great deal of anxiety in San Francisco about the possibility of a Confederate raider — such as the *CSS Alabama* — sneaking into the Bay under cover of the commonplace fog and wreaking havoc with the city and its shipping. Washington decided to fortify the Bay’s defenses by building a monitor just for its defense, and it would be named the *Comanche*. It was built in the Secor Brothers shipyards in New Jersey, and once assembled, was taken apart so it could be shipped to the West Coast (this was a first in the history of the Navy).



The *Comanche* off of Mare Island, 1898. Its steel sides were 5 1/2 inches thick, the sides of the turret were 11 in. thick, with an inch of iron on its deck. It had two 15 inch smoothbore cannons in its turret. Its two boilers provided steam for propulsion and for moving the spindle which rotated the turret

The parts of the *Comanche* were loaded aboard the cargo sailing ship, the *Aquila*, which then began its 13,000 miles voyage from the East Coast to San Francisco. Along the way it was damaged by a tremendous gale but managed to sail into San Francisco Bay on November 10th, 1863. It tied up at the pier off of Third Street, along China Basin. The landing of the ship caused great excitement among the city’s population, as it seemed they would finally have the latest in naval protection. But alas, on November 14 a major gale hit San Francisco and the *Aquila*, already weatherbeaten, sank in 40 feet of water. As one sailor noted, “it was the only ironclad sunk by a wooden vessel”. And here was another first in naval history — it was the only Navy vessel to sink before it was launched.

Now came the huge task of raising the *Aquila* and recovering the pieces of the *Comanche*. Divers descended in pitch black water, using submarine lanterns to repair the seams. Then six pumps were



The wreck of the *Aquila* as reported in the January issue of *Harper's Weekly*. To recover sunken items, divers at the time wore a brass helmet attached to a waterproof canvas suit. Air was supplied by leather hoses and was pumped manually to the diver.

used to empty the hold of the thousands of gallons of water inside, until the ship could become buoyant again. The 524 tons of pieces of the monitor were recovered and assembled on a nearby pier. A year later, in November of 1864, the *Comanche* was launched, with thousands of spectators on hand and the 9th Infantry band playing patriotic melodies. Miss Nellie Maguire christened the monitor with a bottle of champagne, and the *Comanche* began her patrol of the Bay. But in four months the war was over, and while *Comanche* continued its patrols, over time there was little use for a monitor, as bigger and faster armored ships came on line. In 1899 the vessel was sold, and the Union Iron Works in Oakland removed its machinery and armor. It was then outfitted as a cargo ship to haul coal, which it did for almost 40 years. After that, the story of the *Comanche* fades away, as there are no reports of its final end. But the history of San Francisco's first iron ship will remain, like Alcatraz, a part of the story of San Francisco's defense during the Civil War.

This article was adapted from these

Resources

“USS Comanche: Ironclad of San Francisco” by Evelyn Rose

<http://www.trampsofsanfrancisco.com/comanche-ironclad-san-francisco/>

Wikipedia “USS Camanche (1864)”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Camanche_\(1864\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Camanche_(1864))

“USS Camanche: Snakebit Monitor” by Jesse N. Bradley

<http://navsource.org/archives/01/pdf/Camanche.pdf>

Photo credit of the Comanche <http://www.navsource.org/archives/01/camanche.htm>

Memorial Day

It seems passé these days for neighborhoods to fly the flag on Memorial Day, but let us not forget to do so.

"Those who have long enjoyed such privileges as we enjoy forget in time that men have died to win them." - Franklin D. Roosevelt