

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

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Steve Johnson, Editor

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Living History Day returns to Alcatraz Island

For the first time in several years, Alcatraz will again be turned into Fort Alcatraz of the 1860s, as both military and civilian re-enactors come to recreate that period in the island's history. Management approved the idea recently, and co-chairs Gary Hormel and Steve Johnson will be meeting soon with the rangers to work out the details. Among them are parking, lunches for the re-enactors, schedule of the day, tours of the citadel, etc. A highlight will be the appearance again of the Third Artillery Brass Band, who will play period tunes throughout the day. At the upcoming board meeting we will start the advanced for this event, and FOCWA members who would like to help with the event are encouraged to attend. The meeting will be held online, and members will be sent the link to the meeting a few days in advance.

Dates to Remember
Board Meeting, June 11
10 am
Living History Day
Saturday, July 30

Memorial Day at the Presidio

Members of FOCWA Ken Felton, Steve Johnson, Gary Hormel, and Constance Smith joined with members of the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War to welcome veterans, their families, and visitors to the Golden Gate National Cemetery in the Presidio last Memorial Day. We passed out flags to children, saluted veterans, and quietly thanked people for coming on that important day.



Greeting people at the cemetery gates. Photo taken in 2021

The VA arranged to have speakers (including Rep. Nancy Pelosi) give short talks, the Air Force Band to play the National Anthem, and a bugler to play "Taps". After the ceremony, several of us stationed ourselves at the headstones of Civil War notables to tell their stories. Among these notables were Captain Stewart (first commander of Fort Alcatraz), Pauline Cushman (Union spy), and Matthew Arthur (Union sailor and Medal of Honor recipient). The story of California and the Civil War was told to a number of visitors by Steve Johnson; many had not heard it before.

Alcatraz Notes

Gary Hormel, Steve Johnson, and Constance Smith have been volunteering on Alcatraz on alternating weeks, and the number of visitors is near pre-pandemic levels, primarily on the weekends. We are getting more visitors from other countries —including Brazil, Britain, Canada, Israel, France, and Italy. Each of our “200 years of History” programs averages 60 people.

We have heard that management is considering taking one of the Rodman cannons from Fort Point and bringing it to Alcatraz, possibly to be placed on the north side of the island (near the officer’s club). This would be a great tool of interpretation when talking about Fort Alcatraz, providing visitors with the sight of how big and powerful those guns were. We will continue to report on this as we receive more information.

The Gardens of Alcatraz

When the army began to build a fort on the bare, windswept island called Alcatraz, there was little greenery on its hard sandstone surface. Starting in 1853, engineers built a dock, roads, barracks, a lighthouse, the parade ground, and a large brick citadel, finishing by 1859. The cannon batteries were on concrete, laid upon the sandstone foundation, with sandstone blocks and walls to protect them.¹ Later it was decided to surround the batteries with mounds of earth, to better protect them by absorbing the shock of incoming cannon balls. Thus dirt was excavated on Angel Island and barged over to Alcatraz to be placed around the batteries.

In the meantime, officers living in the completed Citadel could bring over their wives to live with them, who probably were distressed to see they were living on a bare island.

Soon they were using some of that transported dirt to establish gardens in various parts of the island. At the time, Victorian gardens were extremely popular, and such a garden would have furniture (benches, chairs), statues (often Greek Gods) as well as exotic plants. The rarer the plant, the higher your status in society. Common plants were orchids, tulips, roses, and daisies. On Alcatraz, succulents were favored,

along with fushia and many varieities of roses (one variety, the Bardou Job Rose, was thought to be extinct until found on the island in 1989.²



Officers' wives having tea in the garden, around the 1870's

¹ John A. Martini, Fortress Alcatraz, 1990, Pacific Monograph Press, p. 22

² <http://alcatrazgardens.org/blog/index.php/2019/06/the-victorian-garden-trends-and-representation-on-alcatraz/>

In the 1920's as the now Army Disciplinary Barracks was expanding along with the recently built cellhouse, the citizens of San Francisco were complaining that Alcatraz, with its big concrete cell house and bare rocks, was an eyesore in the middle of the bay. The army responded by offering horticulture classes to the soldiers as part of their effort to reform the men by giving them useful skills. They then put the men to work, planting trees, shrubs, and seeds donated by the California Wild-flower and Spring Blossom Society. The roadway up to the cellhouse was planted with geraniums, the hillsides were planted with pink ice plant and, later, blue Persian carpet.

All that came to an end when the army turned the island over to the Bureau of Prisons in 1933. However, Fred Reichel, a BOP employee living on the island, saw the need to maintain the gardens and convinced Warden Johnston to allow trusted inmates to work in the gardens regularly. This idea had many benefits — it would give the men a useful occupation instead of being locked up all day, it would maintain the beautiful gardens and give color to the drab surroundings. Soon the convict-gardeners were transforming the west side slopes into terraced beds of blooming flowers.³ The wives of the officers also began to maintain the garden plots around the lower levels of the island, and during World War II the children were encouraged to plant Victory Gardens (vegetables to supplement the rationed supply of food in the first years of the war).

One of the inmates who flourished as a gardener was Elliott Michener, who was serving a 30 year sentence for counterfeiting. He became the caretaker of the warden's garden and would often prepare bouquets for the family. When he was released he became the horticulturist for a golf course in Los Angeles.⁴

In 2003, the National Park Service, the GG National Parks Conservancy, and the Garden Conservancy collaborated to restore the five historic garden areas on Alcatraz. They gathered together volunteers who formed a cadre of work crews who ever since have done the planting, watering, pruning, and weeding to keep the gardens a pleasant sight for the island's many visitors. Any time you see the gardeners in their burgandy shirts, be sure to thank them for bringing beauty to a notorious island in the bay.

Here are some of the flowers you may see on the island, painted by various artists that can be viewed on the Alcatraz Florilegium site:

geraniums

dahlias

nasturtiums

roses



³ The Alcatraz Florilegium, page 6. Available for viewing at archive.org

⁴ Ibid, page 7 You can still see the garden Michener started, on the west side of the island past the fig trees