

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

November 2023

Steve Johnson, Editor

Inside this issue: A Pacific Republic Note: There will be no December newsletter

Living History Day - A pleasant Surprise to Visitors

Visitors coming to the island to see the Federal Penitentiary were surprised to see and hear a military band playing on the Alcatraz dock. This was their introduction to Civil War Day on Alcatraz, where they encountered soldiers and civilians of the 1860s ready to talk about life when the island was called Fort Alcatraz. In the cannon room, they learned from Ken Felton about the defenses of the fort, which included a moat, draw-bridge, and howitzer cannons. Further up the road they met



The 3rd Artillery Band welcomes visitors to the island

two ladies (Constance Smith and Stephanie Delich) who talked about the medicines of the time, often administered by women who had the knowledge of herbal remedies. Halfway to the cellhouse visitors found display tables of military equipment used by soldiers during the Civil War. These were explained by John Ferris and Randall Hawkinson, who demonstrated how to load a musket, how to make coffee, what to pack when on the march, and what to cook if there was no camp kitchen. Visitors could also take advantage of the hourly tours of the island, with an emphasis on the Civil War years, conducted by Gary Hormel, Steve Johnson, Mike Bennett, John Ferris, and Constance Smith. Mike Bennett also took small groups down the steps to the Citadel and showed them the kitchens and cells used to hold prisoners during World War I. Maintaining the information table on the dock was Evelyn Mar (thank you!) and Gary Hormel, with brochures about FOCWA and the Sons of Union Veterans. Our thanks to the members of the band who came from the Sacramento area to be there, to Randall Hawkinson, who travelled from Salinas, and to Gary Hormel who came from Tracy and brought the lunches for everyone. We are also grateful to Ranger Roger Fang, who provided all the tables and chairs, to Ranger Matt Connelly for getting all the permissions, and to NPS photographer Kirk Wrench who took photos of the day. (More can be seen on our Facebook page).

Dates to Remember

Saturday, November 11
Veteran's Day
Presidio of San Francisco

Board Meeting on October 7, 2023

The Zoom meeting of the FOCWA board of directors took place on October 7th at 10 a.m. In attendance were co-chairs Gary Hormel and Steve Johnson (by phone), Secretary Constance Smith, Treasurer Evelyn Mar, and board member Frank Avila. Also attending were members George Foxworth and Phil Blake. The minutes were approved, and the treasurer reported there was in our checking account. Plans for the Living History Day on Alcatraz were discussed. Also discussed was what to do with the \$800 corporate donation we received. We decided we would spend the money for the materials for a new sponge for the howitzer on Alcatraz; Randall Hawkinson will build it for us which we will donate to the NPS. We also will buy some new clothing for the uniform closet on Alcatraz: 2 new Kepi hats, 2 undershirts, 2 sets of wool socks, and possibly 1 pair of wool pants. Steve will find the cost of the items, to be reviewed and approved at our next meeting. Constance will be organizing Victorian Halloween activities on October 29th at Fort Point. We will send out an invitation to members to come to the Presidio on Veteran's Day, Saturday, November 11th, to welcome families to the National Cemetery, and later have a picnic on the main post. Membership notices will go out soon, along with nominations for the board of directors for 2024. The next board meeting will be announced in the coming weeks.

A Pacific Republic

There was a feeling among a small but vocal group of people living in the West in the 1840s that the people in California and Oregon would be better off forming their own republic, independent of the states to the east. Originally this stemmed from the isolation they felt, being so far removed from the politics of the other states and the lack of any benefits received from the federal government. There was also a strong sense of independence and self-reliance of these Western settlers, an attitude of "we can go it alone" This was the motivation of the instigators of the Bear Flag Revolt, when they took down the Mexican flag in Sonoma in 1846 and raised the California Republic flag; most of them were in earnest to be completely independent from the United States. Their plan was thwarted when the U.S. Army put up the American flag in Sonoma 25 days later at the beginning of the Mexican American war.



In the 1850s, after California became a state and Oregon became a territory, there was a steadily increasing concern about being sucked into the growing conflict between the Northern and Southern states. In 1855 *The Standard*, a Portland newspaper, presented this editorial:

If nature ever marked out the division of countries, it has done so in North America. The vast chain of the Rocky Mountains presents an unmistakable boundary, and we believe that these boundaries...ought to be more strictly regarded. Should we secure anything to our advantage by coming into the Union that we could have by and of ourselves? Is it policy for us to join a government, the different sections of which are even now antipodal...and which are cultivating a spirit of disunion by their altercations?¹

¹ *The Standard*, July 1855 cited in Dorothy Hull "The Movement in Oregon for the Establishment of a Pacific Coast Republic" in the *Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, September 1916, p. 183

This sentiment was to be heard in California as well. In his inaugural speech to the state legislature, Governor Weller suggested that if the Union were to be dissolved, California would go neither with the North or the South, but would form a mighty republic of its own.² Indeed, both California Senators Gwin and Milton Latham agreed, with Latham saying to the U.S. Senate

We in California have reasons to induce us to become members of neither the southern confederacy nor of the northern confederacy, and would be able to sustain for ourselves the relations of a free and independent state...Why should we trust to the management of others what we are abundantly able to do ourselves?³

When the war started a number of papers like the *Alameda Gazette* and the *Sonora Democrat* said to let the two sides fight it out while California should form an independent nation of the Pacific and stay out of the conflict.

But other papers came out opposing any talk of an independent republic. They pointed out that California's commercial interests were with the North, that only the north had the ability to build a transcontinental railroad, and that the sentiments of the majority of people in the state were for the Union. Finally, the legislatures of California, Oregon, and Washington all passed resolutions of loyalty to the Union in 1861, which put an end to the talk of a Pacific Republic.

Time to Renew Your Membership

The year will soon be coming to a close, and it is time to renew your FOCWA membership. Please go to our website to renew: <http://www.friendsofcivilwaralcatraz.org/membership.htm>

More Photos of Living History Day (thanks to Kirke Wrench, NPS photographer)



Stephanie Delish describes the medicines of the 1860s to visitors



Steve Johnson and John Ferris show the equipment carried by Civil War soldiers

² *California Senate Journal*, 1860, p. 60 cited in Joseph Ellison, "Designs for a Pacific Republic" in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, December 1930, p. 331

³ *Congressional Globe*, February 3, 1860, cited in Ellison, p. 331. It should be noted that both senators were Democrats and may have just wanted to keep California and its gold out of the war, to the benefit of the South.