

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

January 2020

Steve Johnson, Editor

### Who Owned Alcatraz?

When the Bay Area was peopled by the Ohlone tribes, the island we now call Alcatraz was a place where people would go to collect birds eggs and mussels, and to fish. It was not “owned” by any particular tribe, though it would be customary to ask permission of the nearest village to go there as a matter of courtesy and respect. When the Spanish took possession of Alta California, land grants were given by the governor to citizens, usually for service rendered to the king. However, coastal islands were retained by the colonial government — probably because of their strategic importance. The Mexican government continued this policy, but in the last days of Mexican rule Governor Pico granted a man named Workman ownership of Alcatraz, with the provision that he build a navigation light “for the protection of ships that pass by”. But instead of building a

light, Workman soon sold the island to Francis Temple, his son-in-law. Enter John C. Fremont, known as the “Pathfinder” famous for his explorations of the Oregon Territory and the Sierras. He was given the rank of major in the army during the Mexican-American War, and for a time was appointed military governor of California. He was also an entrepreneur, and right away he saw the value of Alcatraz for its military potential. He bought the island from Temple by way of a bond, in his capacity of the governor. This sale was never completed, though, because Fremont was summoned to Washington to face a court-martial for disobeying orders from General Kearney, and for buying Alcatraz when he had no authority to do so. <sup>1</sup> Washington considered the island to be government property (as had the Mexican government). To make this clear, President Polk in 1850 declared all the islands in the bay to be federal lands, and within three years work began on the fortifications for what was to become Fort Alcatraz.



Major - later General - John C. Fremont

Alcatraz remained in military hands for 80 years, first as a fort, then a military prison — later called a disciplinary barracks. But with the Great Depression of the 1930’s, it became too expensive for the army to maintain a prison on the island, and made plans to close it down. It was just at this time that the FBI was looking for a maximum security prison to house some of the most notorious gangsters and escape artists of that period, so the Justice Department made arrangements for the island to be turned over to the Bureau of Prisons in 1933. After spending

### Dates to Remember

**Saturday, January 25, 2020**  
**Civil War Day at Fort Point**  
Living History, from 10 am to 5 pm (tentative - wait for confirmation)

**Saturday, February 15, 2020**  
Volunteer Appreciation Party  
Golden Gate Club, Presidio  
12 pm - 1:30 pm

\$217,000 to upgrade the prison for a new type of inmate, the United States Penitentiary on Alcatraz opened in August of 1934. When that prison closed in 1963, it was for the same reason the army left — it was too expensive to maintain. To house an inmate on Alcatraz cost 10 times more than housing an inmate at the federal penitentiary in Atlanta, for example.

In 1969 American Indians landed on the abandoned island and claimed possession of Alcatraz, based on the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 in which abandoned federal land would be returned to Native Americans. The Indians of All Tribes wanted to build a university, cultural center, and museum on the island, to be a beacon for Indian education and culture. While this did not happen, and the last occupiers were removed in June of 1971, the direct result of the occupation was the the end of the Indian termination policy and the formation of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. This urban park would include Alcatraz and Fort Point as historic sites, under the supervision of the National Park Service. Today, the island of Alcatraz is owned by the American people, who can learn about its long history thanks to the Indian occupiers, the Park Service, the Parks Conservancy, and the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz.

<sup>1</sup> Fremont was cleared of the charges against him, thanks to the efforts of his father-in-law, Senator Benson. However, Fremont later maintained that he bought the island as a personal purchase and still owned the island, and brought a suit against the U.S. to retain possession. His heirs continued the suit into the 1890's, and it was eventually dropped.

## **Memberships Are Now Due**

New and renewing members are encouraged to send in your membership dues to our membership chairwoman, Evelyn Mar. Dues start at \$25/year, and go directly to our mission to support the Park Service (Union uniforms, exhibits, and cannon maintenance), living history days twice a year, and education (school visitations). Information can be found on our website under “membership”. We are a non-profit 501c (3) organization.

## **Island News**

- Matt Connelly is retuning as a ranger to Alcatraz. Matt is very knowledgeable about the island's Civil War history and can do cannon drills and tours in a Union uniform.
- Volunteers are especially needed the week of January 6 - 10
- FOCWA members who have volunteered on Alcatraz are invited to the Volunteer Party on February 15th.

## **Resources**

Thompson, Erwin “The Rock: A History of Alcatraz Island 1847-1972”, published by the Historic Preservation Division of the National Park Service

<https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/alcatrazproclamationandletter.html>

<https://www.nps.gov/alca/learn/historyculture/we-hold-the-rock.htm>

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

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