

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

January 2022

Steve Johnson, Editor

Annual General Meeting

Normally we would have had nominations and elections for board members last fall, but because of the ongoing pandemic this did not happen. The current board has decided to have this take place in January, so that an elected board can carry on the mission of our organization in 2022. Within a week all members will be sent a list of nominees for the board of directors and will be asked to offer their name or the name of others to be on the board. Members will then return the list to the secretary, who will compile the names of all the nominees onto a ballot which will be sent to the membership for voting. These will be returned to a non-board member who will count the results and send them to the secretary. The secretary will announce the results to the members at the January 22nd meeting. It is rather important that all members attend this virtual general meeting, at which time the election will be certified, a discussion will be held concerning the direction we should take in 2022, and committee chairs will be appointed. All members will be sent the link to the meeting, which will start promptly at 10 am.

Dates to Remember

Saturday, January 1

Alcatraz closed

Monday, January 17

M. L. King Jr Holiday

Alcatraz Open 10am - 9pm

Saturday, January 22

Annual General Meeting

News from The Rock

The number of visitors to Alcatraz Island was pretty steady during the holiday period, though the recent rainy and cold weather has diminished the numbers somewhat. Bill Baker, the last remaining federal prisoner imprisoned at Alcatraz, returned recently to the island to sell his book. He is set up near the bookstore in Building 64 where visitors can meet him. Did you know that he was married on Alcatraz? He also earned enough money from his book sales to buy a nice house in Ohio, where he lives most of the year with his wife. As Bill says, "Alcatraz made an honest man out of me".

The rangers at Fort Point removed a good many of the powder kegs from its powder room to make room for some new displays that will be placed there. At the urging of the editor, some kegs were sent to Alcatraz — and were placed in the cannon room. Of course, powder kegs would never be placed near the cannons, but hopefully this is a temporary placement until a space can be dedicated for telling the story of Fort Alcatraz and the barrels can be part of that display.

There are several new volunteers on the island, none of whom are yet ready to give programs. Several of us from FOCWA plan to offer a series of workshops for these volunteers so they can learn the Civil War history of Alcatraz and perhaps eventually give walking tours of Fort Alcatraz.

Book Review: *The President and the Freedom Fighter* by Brian Kilmeade

This book is not just about the remarkable story of how Frederick Douglass escaped slavery and became a powerful voice about the evils of slavery. It is also about how Douglass and Abraham Lincoln lived their lives in tandem during the 1850's and 1860's and later became friends. Both men were self-taught, with little formal education. Both rose in prominence because of their great oratorical skills.

Both spoke about the great evil of slavery — Douglass because of his life’s experience, Lincoln because it “made Americans hypocrites and diminished [t]his country’s influence as a representative to the world of republican values”.¹

How the two men reacted to the major events of that time period are compared and contrasted. For example, after John Brown’s raid, Douglass had to flee to Canada because of his association with Brown; Lincoln called it an absurd attempt to rally slaves to revolt, because they knew it would not succeed.² Douglass at first rejoiced at Lincoln’s election as president, but Lincoln initially tried to appease the South by promising not to interfere with slavery. In 1862, though Lincoln was considering issuing an emancipation proclamation, he invited several black men to the White House to hear his proposal about colonization. He suggested to them that having blacks in the country was the reason for the war and a simple solution would be to send them back to Africa. Douglass was appalled at this suggestion and gave an angry reply. “It is not the innocent horse that makes the horse thief”, he wrote. And if black men, he added, were willing to fight for this country, they were showing more loyalty than the Southerners. Besides, this was their country now as much as any other Americans.³

Later that year Lincoln did issue the Emancipation Proclamation, and though it only freed the slaves in the states in rebellion, Douglass considered it a turning point. By 1863 the two men were closer in their thinking and were aware of each other’s writings and speeches. In August, Douglass was in Washington and decided to pay a call on the President. He was immediately brought in ahead of the line and the two men finally met. Douglass was warmly welcomed and the two talked for a long time. Each man was impressed by the other’s intelligence and honesty. They were to meet twice more, and a real friendship developed between them. No doubt because of their conversations, Lincoln began to change his view of black Americans to the point where he was advocating in 1865 that black men who served in the army should have the right to vote.

This is a fine book about the progression of thought in both of these men during crucial period in our history. It has copious footnotes, 6 pages of recommended reading, and a useful index. Published by Penguin/Random House, 2021



Was Lincoln a Racist?

Here are two really excellent articles on this subject:

¹ p. 65

² p. 83, 96

³ p,154 Douglass wasn’t the only one to object; a petition in Rochester, NY, advocated for deportation not of formerly enslaved people, but of slaveholders.

“Was Abraham Lincoln a Racist?”

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-apr-09-bk-17473-story.html>

If you have trouble with the link, you can see the article on the Friends of the Civil War Alcatraz (sic) Facebook page

“Did Black Lives Matter to Abraham Lincoln? It’s Complicated”

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/14/us/abraham-lincoln-racism-blake/index.html>



Abraham Lincoln, November 1863
Portrait by Alexander Gardner

“Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.”

“You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time.”

“If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?”

“From whence shall we expect the approach of danger? Shall some trans-Atlantic military giant step the earth and crush us at a blow? Never. All the armies of Europe and Asia...could not by force take a drink from the Ohio River or make a track on the Blue Ridge in the trial of a thousand years. No, if destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free men we will live forever or die by suicide.”

“As a nation, we began by declaring that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all men are created equal, except negroes.'

When the Know-Nothings* get control, it will read 'all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics.' When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty – to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.”

*Anti-immigrant party of the 1850s