



# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



**January 2024**

**Steve Johnson, Editor**

*In this issue: Soldier's Hats in the Civil War*

**Island News** The parking space at Pier 31 is now accessible by entering the gate closest to Pier 33. If you need the code please contact the editor. A recent visit a few days before the Christmas holiday surprisingly found almost every boat full; no doubt many of the people were visiting relatives in the Bay Area for the holidays. Rangers were very busy giving dock announcements, and volunteers were helping giving tours (some with 100 people in attendance!) The rangers could use extra help on the 9th due to GGNRA staff meetings.

**Dates to Remember**  
**Saturday, January 20**  
**Board Meeting**  
**10 am (Zoom)**  
  
**Saturday & Sunday**  
**February 3 & 4**  
**Living History Day**  
**Fort Point, 10 a.m.**

### **Native People on Alcatraz on Thanksgiving Day by John Ferris**

Last Thanksgiving Day was the annual gathering of Native People from all over the Bay Area. It was a time for tribes to meet and celebrate their common heritage, to dance, sing, and eat together and renew old friendships - some going way back to the days of the Indian occupation. The hardest thing for me was to get up at 2 in the morning and be at Pier 33 by 3 a.m. to get on one of the boats to Alcatraz (the estimated crowd was 4,000!) The day was clear and everyone gath-



Photo by John Ferris

ered on the parade ground for a circle dance. Our job as volunteers was to make sure no one went outside the boundaries out of safety concerns, and we encountered no problems. What I did encounter on the return ferry was a woman named Alyssa Begay of the Navajo Nation who had come all the way from New Mexico for this event. We had a discussion about

Richard Oakes, who remains close to sainthood for Native Americans, and how much Alcatraz remains a place of historic importance for Indians of all tribes. It was an honor to meet her and to spend the day with the many tribes who had come for this special occasion.

### **Board Meeting on Saturday, January 20**

Our next board meeting will be on Zoom on Saturday, January 20, at 10 a.m. All members are invited to join the board as they discuss plans for 2024 and welcome our newest board member, John Ferris. The Zoom link will be sent to all members. (Haven't renewed? Please do so. We need you).

### **Living History Days at Fort Point, February 3 - 4**

Fort Point will be having a two-day Living History event in February. The re-enactors have been invited to have a sleepover in the enlisted men's bunks on the third tier (the officers may have better quarters in the theater). This is the first time in many years the event has been for the whole weekend, and is part of Ranger Garcia's plan to have more frequent and longer historical events at the fort. Both civilian and military re-enactors have been invited, and there will be the usual activities including cannon and cooking demonstrations, lectures and tours, and music presentations. By the way, the fort has undergone some significant upgrades, with many new media stations around the ground level showing military life in the 1860s, which you can see anytime the fort is open (and especially if you come to volunteer that weekend). If you would like to help out that day, please contact the editor. (We can even outfit you and give you something to do as a re-enactor, if you choose).

### **Soldiers' Hats in the Civil War**

Hats varied on both sides during the Civil War depending on the rank, regiment, and type of service. But there were common types which became associated with the American Civil War, and these were the most familiar:

The so-called **Hardee Hat** was adopted for use by the army in 1858 and named after Major William Hardee, who was the recorder of the Quartermaster Board and who had recommended a similar prototype hat prior to the one adopted in 1858. Somehow his name became attached to that 1858 hat, which was characterized by a broad felt hat with the brim looped up on one side, held in place with a metal eagle, and having a chin strap and ostrich feathers attached. The cavalry had a distinguishing yellow hat cord, with the crossed cannons and the number of the regiment on the officers' hats and the letter of the company on the enlisted men's hats. Originally the officer's hats and that of the cavalry and infantry would be pinned on the right side; the hats of officers and enlisted men of the infantry would be pinned on the left.<sup>1</sup>

This practice proved to be inconsistent. These hats were so generally disliked that soldiers would often buy slouched hats on their own and wore the official hats only for ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> However, the well-known "Iron Brigade" from the Midwest was also called the "Black Hats Brigade" because they always wore the Hardee hats first furnished to regulars.<sup>3</sup> In the



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<sup>1</sup> Edgar M. Howell, "United States Headgear, 1855 - 1902" , Smithsonian Institution, 1982, p. 6

<sup>2</sup> Howell, op. cit., p. 7 [https://repository.si.edu/bitstream/handle/10088/2429/SSHT-0030\\_Lo\\_res.pdf?sequence=2](https://repository.si.edu/bitstream/handle/10088/2429/SSHT-0030_Lo_res.pdf?sequence=2)

<sup>3</sup> They had the highest casualties of any brigade in the war. See their story at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron\\_Brigade](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Brigade)

far West, the Hardees were divested of trim, looped sides, and feathers and turned into broad slouched hats whose the wide brims protected the men from the sun. This was General Grant's favorite hat, since he was a man who preferred simplicity.

The **Kepi Hat** was adopted from the French army and became the most widely used headgear in the war. There were several versions of these hats. The common kepi (a German word for "soft cap") was a fatigue hat, meaning it was worn on non-ceremonial occasions, which meant most of the time. It had a rounded wool cap with a sunken or flat top, a chin strap attached with eagle buttons, and a squared brim. It was first worn by a New York militia company in the 1840s, and other state militias began to use them regularly. Though it was not adopted for regular soldiers officially until 1872, the kepi was produced commercially by many military outfitters and provided by the states when the war began.<sup>4</sup> Though the standard color was blue for the Union and grey for the Confederates, some units chose a distinctive color, such as red for Confederate artillery and the Zouaves, green for the Burdan sharpshooters, and grey sides and red top for the 12th N.Y. Infantry. Officers often wore embroidered kepis similar to the French style.

The so-called **Forage Cap** supposedly got its name from the practice of soldiers using the cap to collect eggs, fruit, and other edibles while campaigning. It had a high-peaked cap made from wool, stiffened at the crown with pasteboard, and a crescent brim made of glazed leather. Soldiers called them "feed bags". Initially soldiers were also issued havelocks, a piece of cloth attached to the back of the cap to protect the neck from sunburn. Soldiers found them annoying and used them instead for coffee filters.<sup>5</sup> General McClelland popularized the "**chasseur**" (**French-style**) cap, with its lower crown and jaunty look, and

this became by far the most commonly used hat on both sides during the war.

Enlisted men were to wear a 1-inch high letter, showing the company to which he belonged. It wasn't until 1863 that brass insignia indicating the branch of service. It should be noted that in 1864 an **artillery cap** was issued to artillery units garrisoned at posts but never worn in battle. (We have one of these stored on Alcatraz.) It was mostly worn for ceremonial occasions because of its impracticality on the battlefield.



Gen. Irvin McDowell wearing a forage-type kepi with a peaked top and crescent brim, and Gen. George McClellan wearing a smaller cap with a flat brim. Each hat became synonymous with the general who wore it. [Wikipedia Commons]



Photo: Isaac Yost of Co. C, 118th Illinois Regiment [Library of Congress]



<sup>4</sup> Michael McAfee, "Forage cap or Kepi?", from *Military Images*, Vol 31, No.5, March 2012, on JSTOR

<sup>5</sup> Howell, op. cit., p. 18