



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



January 2025

Steve Johnson, Editor

In this issue: Swimming from Alcatraz, Santa Claus in the Civil War

Island News

Alcatraz has two new permanent rangers, Anna Christie and Ray Dillingham, assigned to the night program. They bring the compliment of rangers now to 10. Ranger Angel Garcia has officially begun his tenure as the site supervisor. Construction on seismic refitting of the north end of the cell house begins in February. The bookstore will be moved to a temporary building on Eagle Plaza. The tunnel in Building 64, and the stairs on the north side of the building, are closed for repairs.

Dates to Remember

Saturday, February 1
Living History Day
Fort Point, 10 am - 4 pm

Fort Point Living History Day, February 1st

Members of FOCWA have begun to work on the organization of the first Living History Day of the year at Fort Point. The plan is to provide tours of the fort and a series of talks about how the Civil War had an impact on California, and how California played a vital role in the war. The members of 20th Maine will be present to conduct military drills, cannon demonstrations, and will have on display various weapons of the period. Medicines of the time will be on display and cooking demonstrations will take place.

FOCWA Visits the Schools

Members Steve Johnson and Glenn Martin have been invited to speak at local high schools about the Civil War. They will be wearing Union uniforms and will talk about the issues of slavery, motivations and strategies on both sides, conscription, emancipation, and the lasting effects of the war. Special attention will be given to California's role in the war. Is your local high school interested in having a guest speaker talk about the Civil War? Or your local Rotary or American Legion Post? If so, contact the editor.

Santa Was Born During the Civil War

In 1823 Clement Clarke Moore wrote a poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas," now known as "The Night Before Christmas". It became very popular, and was the inspiration for Thomas Nast, an illustrator for *Harper's Weekly* magazine, the country's most popular periodical. It was he who popularized the image of a jolly Santa Claus, a portly bearded fellow with a hearty smile, driving a sleigh pulled by reindeer. In the year 1862, the nation was reeling over the terrible loss of life from the battles of Fredricksburg and Antietam, and the unending misery of war. Nash wanted to pick up the spirits of the readers and of the soldiers on the front lines. So he illustrated a scene of Santa Claus passing out gifts for the troops, with the message that goodness and peace would eventually



prevail.¹ The best Christmas presents for the troops were letters and packages sent from home that included socks, canned fruit, knit scarves, and yes, fruitcakes.

“Santa Claus in Camp”, on the cover of *Harper's Weekly*, December 1862.

Notice Santa is wearing a suit with stars and stripes.

Swimming from Alcatraz

Most San Franciscans know about the annual swim from Alcatraz, now called the ‘Alcatraz Open’, during which hundreds of swimmers jump into the water off Alcatraz and make the 1.4 mile swim to Aquatic Park. The swimmers go at slack tide, with lots of monitors in kayaks

along the way for safety. The water is typically 55°F (12°C) and biting cold.² The swim on average takes about 45 minutes, and swimmers of all ages participate. In 2016 a nine-year old boy was the youngest to make the swim³, and the oldest swimmer to complete the swim was 87, in 2022⁴

Of course, these swimmers trained all year, getting used to the cold water and splashing waves and currents of the bay. Those who were inmates when Alcatraz was a federal penitentiary and who tried to escape by swimming away all failed -- except for one inmate named John Paul Scott. In 1962 he and another prisoner, Darl Parker, broke out through a kitchen window in the cell house and made their way into the water. Darl ended up clinging to the small rock west of the island and was captured. John Paul made it all the way to the rocks around Fort Point, where two boys found him unconscious. He recovered in the prison hospital, and was then was arrested and placed in solitary for escaping.



¹ “How a Tragic Civil War Christmas Gave Us Santa Claus”, by Dr. Elizabeth McArthur, in the Blue & Gray Dispatch, <https://t.e2ma.net/message/vyetng/rvh2svb>

² To read what the experience is like, go to <https://www.quora.com/Has-anyone-ever-swam-from-San-Francisco-to-Alcatraz-for-fun-if-so-when-was-the-last-time-this-happened-how-long-did-it-take-them-and-how-difficult-was-it-for-them>

³ <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Record-breaker-9-year-old-boy-swims-to-Alcatraz-8195430.php>

⁴ <https://www.mantecabulletin.com/news/local-news/manteca-man-oldest-swim-sf-alcatraz/>

But even earlier, when Alcatraz was a fort, there was an attempted escape by water. An 1868 article in the *Stockton Independent* reported that three soldiers deserted Alcatraz by jumping into the water; their last names were King, Frank, and Swaney. The paper stated that the men were “headed for Lime Point” - near the base of today’s north tower of the Golden Gate Bridge - a distance of four miles. (More likely the current was taking them there.) According to the paper, the “sea was boisterous” and the men used logs to keep from sinking. The soldier named Frank drowned, and Swaney was picked up off Fort Point, “having been in the water for over five hours”. (Unless Swaney had made a makeshift raft out of those logs, it’s hard to imagine him lasting in the water for that long). Even more remarkable was the paper’s claim that King not only lasted 6 1/2 hours in the water and escaped, but posted a letter from San Jose to the commander of Alcatraz, sending his compliments and stating he had arrived safely at his destination.⁵

Exhibit of Photos by NPS Photographers at Fort Point

From now until May there will be an exhibit of photos by NPS photographers, taken all around the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Here are some photos of our last Living History Day, taken by NPS volunteer photographer Dave Rauenbuehler.



⁵ *Stockton Independent*, Volume XV, Number 16, 19 August 1868