

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

FEBRUARY 2015

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**Living History on Alcatraz** Re-enactors from many areas around Northern California, along with the 5th California Volunteer Infantry Band, will be coming to the island for the FOCWA-sponsored Living History Day. Please check the “Alcatraz Events” page for information about the event.

There will be an important board meeting on the island that day to discuss matters required in the by-laws. Board members should attend this meeting. We need to elect a new secretary, so if you have not held office recently please consider this position.

**Latest News** Recently the cannon expert from Gettysburg, Brian Griffin, visited Alcatraz to check on the plugged fuse hole in the **howitzer** in the sally port. Using a pick and hammer he was able to move the plug down about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of an inch. He will be returning later this month to see if drilling is the next step. To refine last month’s report about the opening of the **Citadel**, the NPS Safety Officer is working on finding a way to keep air circulating below the cellblock to keep mold from developing. One possibility is to replace the metal doors in D Block that lead down to the Citadel with a metal grating, which would allow air to circulate and let visitors see the lower level. The goal is to have this resolved before the close of the Weiwei exhibit (end of April).

**Civil Room Panels Under Revision** The interpretive panels in the proposed Civil War Room are going to be crucial in drawing the attention of the public, and providing information in a succinct but engaging way. They have to conform to the NPS standards for accuracy, as well as to the current move towards relevancy and thematic narration. Thus the current version of the panel information is being re-written by Steve Johnson and Dave Vago, with the help of John Martini. It has also been suggested that Panel 4 be placed either in the sally port or in the Citadel, to be closed to where those detentions actually took place. Here are the panel descriptions as they were submitted, and once they have been re-worked you will see the revised panels in an upcoming issue of the newsletter. (Panel 5, “Prisoners of Conscience”, will be added later, location TBD)

### Dates to Remember

Saturday, February 28

- Living History Day at Alcatraz
- FOCWA Board Meeting



Confederate sympathizer under guard during past Living History Day on Alcatraz

## Civil War Room - Revision 1

### Interpretive Panel 1

THEME: The 1850's - A Time of Conflict and Anxiety

- The Gold Rush made San Francisco the largest American city on the West Coast
- Millions of dollars in gold was being shipped east through San Francisco
- San Francisco was vulnerable to attack by foreign powers
- Other countries had warships in the Pacific, especially Great Britain
- Towards the end of the decade there was great anxiety that the British might support the southern states if they were to secede from the Union
- In the Northwest, there was conflict over the border between British North America and the United States (sub-panel on "The Pig War" of 1859)

### Interpretive Panel 2

THEME: Homeland Security in the 1860's

- The army built a system of forts to protect San Francisco Bay (Fort Point, Fort Alcatraz, batteries on Angel Island and at Black Point)
- Alcatraz became the "Gibraltar of San Francisco Bay" because of its commanding position in the middle of the Bay
- Alcatraz was armed with large cannon around its perimeter, a Citadel housing soldiers and arms, a sally port to defend the island, and 400 troops
- Its large cannons could fire a 440 pound cannonball three miles out to sea
- Its thick walls could withstand naval bombardment
- The US Army's Third Artillery was originally stationed here; later it became a training base for California volunteers in the Union Army

### Interpretive Panel 3

THEME: A Place of Isolation

- From its earliest days, Alcatraz was a cold, windswept, isolated place
- It was the furthestmost western fort in the U.S., isolated from the rest of the states and even from San Francisco
- For the troops here, it was like - in modern times - like being sent to Alaska; far away from their families, few comforts, lonely and monotonous duty
- Eventually homes were built for the officers and non-coms, who could bring their families to live there
- Once women began living on Alcatraz, the face of Alcatraz began to change as gardens were planted and children's voices could be heard

### Interpretive Panel 4

THEME: The Beginnings of a Prison

- Like any army fort, Alcatraz had a stockade to house soldiers who got into trouble
- During the Civil War, Confederate sympathizers were put in a specially-built "political prison" located near the guardhouse
- In the 1890's, as Alcatraz's strategic value as a fort declined, the U.S. Army began to house a growing number of soldier-prisoners on the island
- By 1907 a plan was developed to build a large prison building as a new "Pacific Branch, U.S. Disciplinary Barracks"
- The old Citadel was leveled, and military prisoners on the island to built the massive new prison, which when completed was rumored to be the largest concrete structure in the United States
- Soldier-prisoners from all over the west and as far away as the Philippines were housed in its 600 cells
- Soldiers were given the opportunity to return to active duty by taking classes, doing work, and following military discipline