

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

February 2020

Steve Johnson, Editor

Privateers in San Francisco Bay? While the populace of San Francisco was naturally focused on the war in the east in the 1860's, another war was taking place south of the border in Mexico. After invading Mexico, initially to recover a debt from the republican government, Napoleon III of France installed Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian of Austria to rule the country as Emperor Maximilian of Mexico. Maximilian had the backing of the wealthy conservatives of Mexico, but the liberal president of the Republic of Mexico, Benito Juarez, never accepted a foreigner to rule his country, and he and his supporters began a civil war to drive out the French. Because the American government was fully engaged in its own civil war, there was little done to intervene in this war going on in Mexico.



Emperor Maximilian I of Mexico

Juarez had much support in California among those of Mexican descent, both in Northern and Southern California. In 1864, Juarez sent one of his generals, Placido Vega, on a secret mission to California to secure arms and funds to support his fight against the French. Vega met with prominent Mexican-American families and even joined the Union Club in San Francisco to find allies for his undertaking. He was able to load a ship with arms and munitions with the co-operation of Thomas Brown, a U.S. Treasury agent, and Edward Beale of the Army Corps of Engineers. The ship then left the dock and was headed for Mexico, to carry arms and possibly act as a privateer against the French navy. However, when General McDowell — commander of the Department of the Pacific — found out about this, he ordered navy cruisers to stop the ship and escort it to Benicia where all the arms were removed and stored. The port officials involved in this were all fired.

McDowell was enforcing the policy of strict neutrality then in place by the U.S. government regarding the affairs in Mexico. Another ship in port, the *Colon*, was being built by the Peruvian government. It too was seized by McDowell under orders that any material for ship building was to be used by the United States for its war needs. Despite the protests of the Peruvian government, the ship remained in port for 6 months until released in 1865.

Dates to Remember

Saturday, February 15, 2020

- Volunteer Appreciation Party Golden Gate Club, Presidio 12 pm - 1:30 pm
- FOCWA Board Meeting at the Presidio, 2 pm.

Thursday, February 20, 2020

SF Civil War Roundtable talk on "The USS Cyane", 6:30 p.m. at the Gold Mirror Restaurant, 800 Taraval St., San Francisco

These events illustrate the tensions going on in San Francisco all the way through 1865, and why Fort Alcatraz had to be ever vigilant against privateers, whether they be the Confederate ship the *Shenandoah*, or vessels serving the needs of foreign governments.

Lecture on the *USS Cyane* The San Francisco Civil War Roundtable is sponsoring a lecture about the *USS Cyane*, a warship of the Pacific fleet in the 1860's. Its mission was to protect San Francisco Bay and patrol the waters off the California coast. It figured prominently in the seizure of the privateer *Chapman* in 1863. For detailed about the lecture, and to make optional dinner reservations, see the link below.

Volunteer Luncheon and FOCWA Board Meeting The Parks Conservancy is hosting a luncheon for all National Park volunteers on Saturday, February 15th, starting at noon. It will take place at the Golden Gate Club in the Presidio. Go to this link for directions to the club house <https://www.presidio.gov/venues/golden-gate-club> RSVP by calling 415-561-3544 After the luncheon, the FOCWA Board of Directors will meet on the Presidio grounds for a planning meeting at 2 pm. The location will be sent to the directors.

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

- Alcatraz volunteers should check out the new volunteer manual on the VIP desk
- FOCWA members who have volunteered on Alcatraz or at Fort Point are invited to the Volunteer Party on February 15th.

Resources

Information for the above article was taken from *The Army of the Pacific 1860 - 1866* by Aurora Hunt (2004, Stackpole Books)

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

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