

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

February 2021

Steve Johnson, Editor

Board Meeting on January 23, 2021

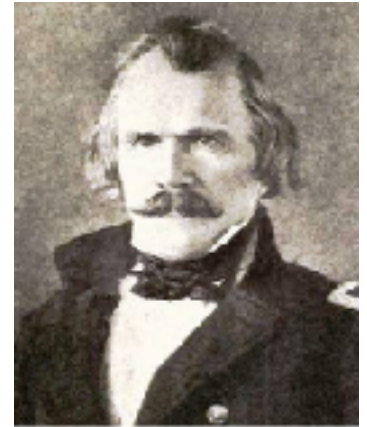
The board of directors met on Saturday the 23rd of January. Items discussed included the following: the status of Alcatraz NP (currently closed); financial report (no expenses since we have not had any events); the GGNRA push for relevance in interpretive programs; a proposal by Constance for creating a diorama of the citadel for the Park Service; and plans to produce a series of short educational videos on various aspects of Fort Alcatraz and Civil War history. They may also be used in co-operation with Ranger Benny, who brings educational programs to San Francisco schools. The complete minutes of the meeting can be found on our website.

Dates to Remember

- **Monday, Feb. 15, 2021**
Presidents Day
- **Saturday, Feb. 20, 2021-**
FOCWA Virtual Board Meeting 10 a.m.
All members are invited. Contact Steve Johnson if you wish to attend and you will be sent the link to the Zoom meeting

Conspiracies, Rebellion, and a Man Under Suspicion

One hundred and sixty years ago San Francisco was rife with rumors of conspiracies that local secessionists were planning to take over the local and state governments. The rumors were actually true, though Confederate sympathizers were doing their best to keep their plans a secret. There were in fact two secret societies in California that supported the secessionist cause, the Knights of the Columbian Star and the Knights of the Golden Circle. Their initial goals were to elect pro-slavery candidates, resist the election of Lincoln in the presidential election - by force if necessary - and to create a separate Republic of the Pacific (which would allow slavery). The Knights of the Golden Circle were particularly active after Lincoln was elected, and planned to use forceful action by taking over over the Presidio, Fort Point, the Mare Island Naval Station, and the Benicia Arsenal with an armed mob. A delegation supposedly approached Kentucky-born General Albert Sydney Johnston, Commander of the Army Department of the Pacific, and appealed to his Southern roots to help them take over control of Fort Point. Rumors had already spread around the city, questioning Johnston's loyalty, and these rumors even reached Washington. At the time they did not know that Johnson had told Governor Downey that he would make sure "not one cartridge case" would fall into the hands of the secessionists, and that he had secured the Army's weapons on



Gen. Albert Sydney Johnston

Fort Alcatraz and fortified Fort Point with 51 cannons to prevent any takeover by any Confederate sympathizers. Nevertheless, when Texas seceded from the Union, Johnston - who had made his home there - felt he needed to support his state, and sent a letter of resignation to the War Department on April 10th by Pony Express.

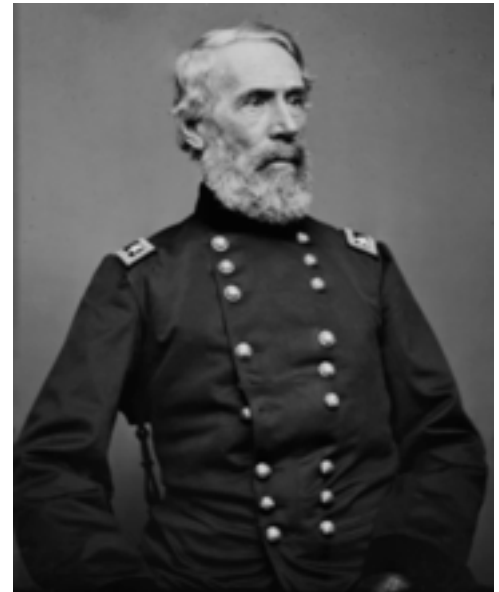
He expected it to reach Army headquarters by the 25th. However, on April 24th Sumner arrived in San Francisco and immediately relieved Johnston of command. Now Johnston realized that he had been dismissed because of all the rumors of his disloyalty. This only solidified his intention to head back to Texas. In the meantime, when Lincoln received news of Johnston's loyalty, he decided to offer him a commission as a major general. But by then it was too late, because Johnston was then on his way to Richmond to become one of General Lee's most trusted generals in the Confederate Army.

Another secret society, the so-called "Committee of Thirty", was composed of Southern men in the Bay Area led by Asbury Harpending who wanted to support the Confederacy by capturing a ship carrying gold to the east coast and instead take it to a Confederate port. The plotters found and purchased a schooner, the *J.M. Chapman*, and their plan was to attack and seize one of the gold-bearing steamers off of Mexico and turn it into a privateer, along with taking the gold to the Confederacy.

However, this was one of the least-kept secrets of the secret conspiracies, because the San Francisco police, customs agents, and a naval officer had been watching the suspicious activities around the *Chapman*. Not to mention that the captain of the boat allegedly told people at a bar, including an undercover detective, about the boat's real mission.

In March 1863 as the *Chapman* began to leave the pier, it was immediately boarded by police and marines from the *USS Cyane*. It was towed to Fort Alcatraz, the hidden weapons were confiscated, and the crew imprisoned there. When news broke in San Francisco about this incident, it fueled more rumors about conspiracies, and anyone from the South was looked upon with great suspicion.

General Johnston was later killed in the battle of Shiloh. Harpending was released after four months in jail and went on to further schemes, notably the "Great Diamond Hoax". (Harpending's role in this is excellently described in an article by Robert Wilson in the *Smithsonian Magazine*) <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-great-diamond-hoax-of-1872-2630188/> Today we are hearing about and witnessing plots and conspiracies against the government, but like many events in history, they have parallels in the past.



Brig. General Edwin Sumner

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Video Project In Progress

FOCWA is planning to produce a series of videos about Fort Alcatraz, the Civil War in California, the life of a Union soldier, Captain Stewart, how to load a cannon, the role of women, and medical treatments in the 1860's. They will be filmed at the homes of the members who are participating in this project. These short videos will ultimately be available to schools and be placed on our website. Do you have something to contribute? If so please contact the editor.

Book Review: *Confederates in the Attic* by Tony Horwitz

This book has been around since 1998 but remains very timely. Horwitz wondered why the Confederate flag still arouses such passions a century and a half after the Civil War, so he decided to visit 10 Southern states to interview re-enactors, museum directors, historians, National Park rangers, members of various organizations such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans, and even managed an interview with the head of the Ku Klux Klan (quite a feat for a Jewish journalist). Horwitz writes with a good deal of humor, irony, and perspective, and like any good journalist tries to remain neutral when reporting his discoveries. Along his journey he visited important battlefields such as Shiloh and Gettysburg and met, among others, re-enactors who are so passionate about re-creating the life of a Confederate soldier that they would march 20 miles without shoes and sleep with only a wool blanket despite the bitter cold, just like their ancestors. He gives insights as to how the "Lost Cause" narrative came to be so prevalent in the South, and analyzes why the Confederate battle flag has many meanings to so many people. The book underscores the fact that the politics of the past still resound in the politics of the present.

Resources

"Albert Sidney Johnston at Fort Point: Where Narratives Collide" an article by Katy Berman at Emerging Civil War <https://emergingcivilwar.com/tag/asbury-harpending/>

<https://civilwartalk.com/threads/confederate-privateers-in-california.92003/>

Confederates in the Attic by Tony Horwitz, New York, Vintage Books, 1998, available in paperback