



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



February 2025

Steve Johnson, Editor

In this issue: The U.S. Navy on the West Coast, 1861-1865

Island News

Construction on the north end of the cell house has begun. The infirmary and dining room areas will be closed until the work is completed, probably 2 -3 months.

Dates to Remember
Saturday, February 8
Living History Day
Fort Point, 10 am - 4 pm

Fort Point Living History Day, Saturday, February 8

The Living History Day planned for February 1st was cancelled due to heavy rain. The weather next Saturday, February 8th, will be more favorable and that will be the date of this event. We will be having the following groups in attendance:

The Fort Point Brass Band, playing martial airs

The Wandering Bow Band, playing music of the period

The 20th Maine, demonstrating marching maneuvers and cannon drills

Womens Relief Society, showing what women did at home for the troops on the front lines

The Friends of Civil War Alcatraz, showing 1860s cooking techniques

National Park Service volunteers, giving fort tours and talks on the Civil War in the West

Volunteers are asked to check in by 9:30 to receive a parking pass and for set up. The doors will open to the public at 10 a.m.

Cleaning the Cannon

Since its founding FOCWA has taken upon itself the task of keeping the cannon and its impliments in good order, which includes cleaning and painting the cannon and the undercarriage. In the next couple of weeks we will need volunteers to come to the island for a day to help clean the cannon and make an inventory of the cannon's impliments. We would then spend some time doing cannon drills for the public. If you have some time to spare and would like to help in this endeavor, please contact the editor so we can set a time to be on the island.

What was the U.S. Navy Doing on the West Coast During the Civil War?

While the U.S. Navy was mostly engaged in the blockade of Southern ports, and chasing after blockade runners and privaterrrs on the Atlantic coast, the Navy had concerns about things happening on the West Coast as well. First and foremost was protecting the shipments of gold coming out of the mines of California and being shipped to the east coast. Second, there was the threat of vessels being taken over by Confederate sympathizers and used as privateers. Third, there was the real possibility that Confederate privateers might attack Union merchant vessels or even cities on the West Coast. And fourth, ships were needed to transport troops quickly when needed.



The photo above shows the Mare Island Naval Station after the Civil War. This was the only naval facility on the West Coast, beginning in 1854, which could repair and supply ships of the Pacific Squadron.

To protect the ships of the Pacific Mail Steamship line, and the transfer of gold across the isthmus, the *USS Lancaster* was generally stationed off of Panama City. It was also the flagship of the Pacific Squadron, which consisted of 4 other ships. The *USS Wyoming*, the *USS Narragansett*, the *USS Saranac* and the *USS Cyane*¹ were assigned to cruise along the coasts from Mexico north to the Washington coast to watch for privateers. Later on, the *Cyane* was stationed to specifically protect San Francisco Bay and was on duty when the band of Secessionists onboard their sloop *The Chapman* was stopped from sailing down the coast. They had planned to attack a ship carrying gold and take it to a Southern port, where they would have been seen as heroes.²

In 1864 Captain T.E. Hogg of the Confederate Navy was given the assignment of boarding the merchant *SS San Salvador* in Panama with a group of armed men, and while at sea take over the ship and then act as a privateer. However, the American consul in Panama got wind of this conspiracy, and before the ship was to sail sailors and marines from the *Lancaster* boarded the ship and arrested all the conspirators.

There was also a plot to take over the *USS Shubrick*, a revenue cutter used to protect San Francisco Bay. The US Consul in Victoria, B.C., had received intelligence that there was a plot to seize the *Shubrick* when it was about to visit Victoria harbor. The consul had his own suspicions about Captain Pease, who had expressed sympathies for the Confederate cause. The consul ordered the customs Collector at Puget Sound to discharge Pease and his crew by arranging to put a loyal crew aboard while the regular crew was ashore.

In 1865 the Pacific Squadron looked for the *CSS Shenandoah*, a privateer, after word spread that this raider had sunk two dozen whaling ships off Alaska. The *Shenandoah* was never spotted as it sailed back to England, where it was built. That was very fortunate for the crew, because if they had been caught they could have been hung as pirates, since they had been attacking Union whalers (unbeknown to them) after the war had ended.

¹ See the 2019 newsletter article on the *USS Cyane* here: http://www.friendsofcivilwaralcatraz.org/Newsletters/FOCWA_News_0219.pdf

² “The J.M. Chapman” <https://www.nps.gov/articles/the-civil-war-at-golden-gate.htm>