

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

March 2020

Steve Johnson, Editor

### A Fortress Against Slavery

Alcatraz, with all its fortifications and weapons, truly was a fortification against slavery. To put this in context, even though slavery was specifically outlawed in the state's constitution, and California came into the Union as a free state, in 1850 there were 1000 black men in the state, many of whom were brought by their Southern masters to work in the mines. There was hardly anyone at the time who did something to stop this practice. In fact, the state legislature (which in the 1850's was dominated by men from the South) passed a series of laws supporting slavery. In 1851 a fugitive slave law was passed authorizing fugitive slaves to be extradited to the South. The state Supreme Court ruled that any slaves brought into the state before statehood were still slaves.

Right from the beginning, when the boundaries of the state were being drawn up at the constitutional convention in Monterey in 1859, the Southern faction proposed having the eastern boundary of the state be the Rocky mountains. The idea was that Congress would never approve a free state with such a large territory, and would make a concession by splitting the state in half and make southern California a slave state. Fortunately the Northern men and Californios (of Spanish/Mexican descent) foiled this plan at the end of the convention. But the idea kept coming up, and in 1859 the both houses of the state legislature passed a bill to formally divide the state around Santa Barbara into free and slave states. While Congress never approved this plan, the pro-slavery faction never ceased its efforts to promote slavery.

Politics changed rapidly with the election of 1860, when the newly formed Republican party won state legislative offices and Leland Stanford (a friend of Lincoln) was elected governor. This was in good part because of European immigrants who wanted no part of an autocratic system, "free soilers" who were against the spread of slavery, and the miners who saw slavery as a threat to their jobs. But as Army General Sumner wrote in 1861, even though there was strong Union sentiment in the state, "the secessionists are much the more active and zealous party, which gives them more influence than they ought to have from their numbers".

Two groups, the Knights of the Golden Circle and the Knights of the Columbian Star, had an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 members in 1862. The former group met in San Francisco soon after the war started, and 800 men were picked to assault and take over Union forts and the arsenal at Benicia. When General Sumner got wind of this he brought troops from



Gen. Edwin Sumner,  
Commander of the  
Department of the  
Pacific

### Dates to Remember

**Sunday, March 8, 2020**

FOCWA General Meeting on Alcatraz, 10 a.m., in library

**Tuesday, March 17, 2020**

Peninsula CW Roundtable "American Revolution vs. the Civil War", 11:30 am at Harry's Hofbrau, Redwood City

**Thursday, March 19, 2020**

Lecture "Geo. Templeton Strong" the famous Civil War diarist, 6:30 pm at the Gold Mirror restaurant, Taraval & 18th Ave, San Francisco

**Saturday, May 9, 2020**

Living History Day on Alcatraz

Washington, Oregon, and northern California to reinforce the troops in San Francisco. Troops were also sent to Southern California to put down the pro-South militias that were forming in Los Angeles and San Bernardino Counties.

Fort Alcatraz and Fort Point thus became bastions of Union power in California. Troops were trained there and sent to put down rebellions. Their armaments were a deterrent to any attacking force. And Fort Alcatraz became a prison for any Californians who took up arms or spoke out against the Union cause. While Fort Alcatraz was never attacked, it was a silent but effective bulwark against those who would do harm to the Union.

### **Board Meeting Held on February 15th**

Members of the board met after the NPS volunteer luncheon at the Presidio last month. These items were discussed:

- Memberships: only 20 people renewed their membership this year. Steve Johnson suggested a plan to recruit on college campuses by the history department building and will look into this.
- San Francisco History Days has been postponed until May, and might not be at the Old Mint; this was a good place to recruit new members
- Income and expenditures are closely matched; a financial report will be given at the general meeting by Constance Smith
- John Nevins has arranged the next Living History Day to be on Saturday, May 9, 2020
- It was decided to have the general meeting on Sunday, March 8, on Alcatraz

### **Island Notes**

- Only rangers will be giving dock announcements
- Volunteers can take visitors to the Citadel, infirmary, and chapel only before 2:30 pm. After that time, scheduled behind-the-scenes tours will take place
- There are new procedures for the New Industries building and recording your volunteer stats — see Ranger Wendy for that information

### **General Meeting on Alcatraz**

All members are encouraged to attend the required general meeting on Sunday, March 8, at 10 a.m. on Alcatraz. At this meeting we will be discussing memberships, finances, and future activities on Alcatraz. If you plan to come and do not have a volunteer uniform, you must email Steve Johnson so he can arrange your boat passage, at [parksvolunteer425@gmail.com](mailto:parksvolunteer425@gmail.com)

### **Resources**

The above article was excerpted from an article by Imogene Spaulding, “The Attitude of California to the Civil War”, found on <http://www.militarymuseum.org>

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

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