

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

March 2021

Steve Johnson, Editor

Summary of Board Meeting on February 20, 2021

The board of directors met online via Zoom on Saturday the 20th of February. Items discussed included the following: the status of Alcatraz NP (closed but opening in March)); financial report (still no expenses); changing our mailing address; existing members will be asked to recruit a new members; the video project is slowly advancing; John Fitzpatrick - a licensed guide at Gettysburg - reported that the Park Service there has no intention of removing statues of Confederate soldiers in the park, and places no restrictions on Confederate re-enactors; Steve Johnson will inquire if cemetery tours will be allowed at the Golden Gate National Cemetery in May. Minutes of the meeting have been posted on our website, on the “communications” page.

Dates to Remember

- **Friday, March 12, 2021**
Alcatraz re-opens to the public
- **Saturday, March 27, 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

Alcatraz Re-opens to the Public

Alcatraz National Park and Fort Point are both planning to open to the public on March 15th. As before, the cell house on the island will be closed and no public programs will be offered. What will be different is that visitors will be required to wear a mask at all times. An audio tour will be available, which will give the highlights of the islands history - mostly about the federal prison years. At Fort Point, visitors will follow a one-way path up to the top tier, with waysides along the way, and one way on the way down. There will be but no public programs.

The Park Service is still a long way off from allowing volunteers on the island. I expect them to only allow volunteers who have been vaccinated and when the incidence of infections in the general populace gets close to zero.

General James B. McPherson, Engineer on Alcatraz

James Birdseye McPherson (his actual middle name) was born in Clyde, Ohio. His father, a blacksmith, had a mental breakdown and James worked as a store clerk to help with his family's finances. Fortunately the store owner saw the young man's abilities and helped him apply to West Point. James was accepted and entered the military academy at the age of 19. He graduated first out of a class of 52 students; among his classmates were Phil Sheridan and John Bell Hood. Because of his outstanding academic work he was appointed to the Corps of

Engineers as a brevet second lieutenant.¹ He soon became an assistant instructor of engineering at West Point (quite an achievement for one so young) and later became the assistant engineer for the harbor defenses of New York. In 1857 he was sent to supervise the construc-

tion work on Alcatraz. On December 31st of that year he took over the command of the engineers and workers from chief engineer Lt. Frederick Prime. Prime had overseen the work on the north, south, and west batteries, and the guardhouse. Work on the citadel and defensive wall were ongoing. McPherson's first task was to complete the barracks for the soldiers who would eventually occupy the island. By June of 1858 he could report that the wing wall of the south battery (which is still there) was completed, excavations for the barracks and cistern had commenced, and the north wall from the north



battery to the guardhouse had been completed. The island now had 70 guns in place.² He was assisted by newly arrived army engineer 2nd lieutenant George Washington Custis Lee (oldest son of Lt. Col. Robert E. Lee).

On the weekends McPherson would leave the island to visit San Francisco. In a letter he wrote:

I get a good wetting [in the whaleboat] about every third time I go over to Town--San Francisco beats all the cities I have ever been in, in the way of Drinking Saloons, Billiard Tables, Cigar Stores and idle men "loafers" genteely dressed, and if you happen accidentally [sic] to make the acquaintance of one of them, before you are aware of it, you will be introduced to any number more--for they have the greatest way of introducing folks I have ever seen-- I often congratulate myself when I am in Town, that I have a place to flee to, where the air is pure and where I can avoid meeting people whom I do not care to know-- for the more of them you know the worse you are off. . . .³

McPherson also said that "Alcatraz beats all countries for wind... I expect that after four years residence here I shall be so much disgusted with the wind I shall fairly hate the sight of anything that goes by wind"⁴. (It's a good thing he was never posted to Fort Point) He often referred to Fort Alcatraz but that never was its official name, which was "Post on Alcatraz Island". When war came in 1861 McPherson volunteered his services and soon became a lieutenant colonel in Grant's army, and by 1864 had risen to the rank of Brigadier General

¹ A brevet was an honorary rank for meritorious service, but did not confer the authority or pay of that rank

² Irwin Thompson "The Rock: A History of Alcatraz Island 1847-1972", Historic Resource Study, GGNRA, page 74

³ William F. Strobebridge, ed. "California Letters of Major General James McPherson, 1858-1860, " Ohio History 81(Winter 1972) :38 as quoted in Thompson

⁴ Quoted in Thompson, *ibid.*, p.70

in the regular army. In March he requested a leave from General Sherman to travel to Baltimore to marry his fiancé Emily Hoffman. At first Sherman agreed but then revoked the leave because he was closing in on Atlanta and wanted McPherson there as commander of the Army of the Tennessee in the coming battle. McPherson was now facing the army of his old classmate, John Bell Hood, and was riding to gather his troops near Bald Mountain when he was shot and killed by Confederate skirmishers. Hood was saddened by the news of his old friend, who said

Neither the years nor the difference of sentiment that had led us to range ourselves on opposite sides in the war had lessened my friendship; indeed the attachment formed in early youth was strengthened by my admiration and gratitude for his conduct toward our people in the vicinity of Vicksburg.⁵

It was reported that Sherman wept at the news and deeply regretted not granting leave to his fellow officer. We are lucky on Alcatraz to have some of his works as a testament to his service to the Union.

FOCWA Cemetery Tour at the GG National Cemetery in May on Hold

I spoke with the superintendent of the Golden Gate National Cemetery, whose office is in San Bruno. She said they are currently only allowing groups of 10 people into that cemetery for small memorial services. There are no plans for a Memorial Day ceremony at the Presidio as far as she knows, but said to check back with her in mid-April to see if the situation changes.

Sources

Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_B._McPherson

Rebecca Blackwell Drake, "Portraits - Generals and Commanders", on <http://battleofraymond.org/command4.htm>

⁵ Quote from About North Georgia website, found at Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_B._McPherson