

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

March 2023

Steve Johnson, Editor

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Summary of February 11th Board Meeting

We had five board members and three members present at the last board meeting. Minutes of the previous meeting were approved and the treasurer reported a checking account balance of \$1787. The board discussed plans for the Living History Day at Fort Point on the 25th, including setting up a FOCWA information table and helping with tours and programs. The date for the next Living History Day on Alcatraz has been approved by the NPS for April 15th. At the last LH Day we spent \$344 on lunches and \$146 for coffee and pastries for the reenactors and rangers, so the board approved a motion to set aside \$500 for purchasing these items for the April event. Currently we have 23 members.

Dates to Remember

Saturday, March 18, 2023
GGNRA volunteer luncheon
10 am - 12 noon
General's House, Fort Mason

Saturday, April 15, 2023
Alcatraz Living History Day
8 am - 4 pm

Living History Day at Fort Point

On Saturday, February 25th, re-enactors of the 20th Maine and of the American and National Civil War Associations assembled at Fort Point for the first Living History Day of the year. Also in attendance were the Fort Point Brass Band, the Wandering Bow String Band, and the Fife & Drum Corps. FOCWA members Ken Felton, Glenn Martin, Phil Blake, and Jeffrey Nibert manned the FOCWA information table, Mike Bennett and Steve Johnson gave fort tours, Frank Avila set out his medical display, Randall Hawkinson assisted with the cannon drills, and Constance Smith did cooking demonstrations all day. It was one of the coldest LH Days in memory, with the temperature never rising above 50 and the wind making it even colder. This would explain the small number of visitors attending compared to previous years. But like the soldiers posted there in the 1860s, we did our duty despite the weather, and we brought the fort to life and educated people about San Francisco's role in the Civil War.

FOCWA members Ken Felton and Jeffrey Nibert talk to a visitor about our organization. Most visitors were from out-of-town but a few San Franciscans had come to the fort for the first time and were pleased to be there on Living History day. More photos of this event are on the FOCWA website.



Volunteering on Alcatraz Island by John Ferris

“Hi, I am Volunteer John and on behalf of the National Park Service, welcome! Please remember the only two public restrooms are at the dock and on top of the island near the Warden’s House”. Words of greeting and practicality. These were the important points Ranger Matt encouraged me to mention before I led my first “200 Years of Alcatraz” tour. Being a volunteer on Alcatraz these past four months (coming out every other Monday on my day off) has been a joy and honor. I know many FOCWA members have volunteered for years, but if you haven’t done so and have an interest, I encourage you to join the volunteer ranks. The experience is more than fine, and your help is truly appreciated by the NPS staff and visitors alike.

Last summer while participating in an Alcatraz Living History Day as a member of the Sons of Union Veterans, I was approached by FOCWA’s Steve Johnson about becoming a NPS volunteer. He said it was a great way to give visitors a better appreciation of the island’s military history as well as the better known Federal Penitentiary years that came later. Steve’s enthusiasm was infectious, and I was intrigued. In the weeks that followed I shadowed Steve and Gary Hormel as they led tours of the island to get a better sense of what they do as volunteers. Hearing the laughter of the crowds as Gary recounted the drunken demise of the Civil War Chapman plot, seeing the awe in the eyes of the adults and kids as they heard the thunder of the thousands of pounds of cell doors being opened and closed, the hushed silence as Steve lead a small group down the Citadel dungeon steps and recounted the sad story of the World War I conscientious objectors Hofer brothers...the reactions of the visitors had me hooked and I couldn’t wait to help as a volunteer in my own modest way.

My training started with meeting Volunteer Coordinator Ranger Wendy on the island and she patiently explained the requirements of an NPS volunteer, reassuring me I could come out whenever it was convenient. Tours could be tailored to my areas of interest and she pointed out the fabulous library volunteers have access to; she outfitted me in a NPS volunteer uniform and over a number of visits toured me around the island sharing its history, while at the same time engaging with guests and managing Alcatraz’s many moving parts via her walkie-talkie. Working with the charming Wendy was inspiring and I discovered she’s emblematic of the dedicated staff the National Park Service has the good fortune to have working for for all us.

During my short time as a National Park Service volunteer on the island, I’ve learned a few things; wearing sunscreen and sunglasses are essential; the summer flies are a nuisance but short-lived; wearing a mic and speaker during tours will save your voice and visitors will not struggle to hear; kids cannot believe the weight of the Cell House keys when allowed to hold them; the rangers really need our help since there can be as few as two rangers covering the entire 22 acres. Your assistance (sometimes even manning the information booth) with guests is essential; on occasion, just a simple smile and a “how are you doing?” is all a tired visitor needs. Finally, I feel it’s a bit of my civic duty to give the Alcatraz visitor — who may have spent a small fortune visiting San Francisco — the extra time and attention that only a volunteer can give.

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The Great Flood of 1862

The current series of rainstorms in San Francisco has brought flooding, downed trees, and caused mudslides in the city and beyond. Normally the city gets about 11 inches of rain by this time of year but so far it has received 22 inches.¹ But this is nothing compared to the rainstorms of 1861 - 1862, which brought flooding to much of California; the great Central Valley became a great Central Lake. In San Francisco it started to rain heavily in December and in the month of January the city received 24 inches of rain.² Streams in the Mission District flooded, making the area impassable. Tenements on the hills of North Beach and Russian Hill had torrents of water run through their buildings. Mudslides wiped out a portion of the wooden flume carrying water from Mountain Lake to the city, preventing firemen from putting out fires and cutting off drinking water to the citizens.

In Sacramento, newly elected Leland Stanford had to be rowed to the capitol building to be inaugurated.³ Steamboats had trouble finding the riverbanks to guide them, since the water was now everywhere.

So what was life like for the soldiers on Alcatraz during this time? One can only surmise, since few records remain of the fort's daily activities, but one can make some basic assumptions. First, all the powder had to be stored securely from getting wet, and the cannons had to be plugged to keep water from getting inside. Second, food may have been rationed since supply boats would have difficulty docking in the wild wind and waves. Third, if their wool uniforms got wet, drying them on rainy days must have been difficult; drying them even when it wasn't raining was not easy. Fourth, going up and down the main road and steps with torrents of water pouring down must have been a drenching experience. And if the ships delivering coal were hampered by the weather, there could have been some cold nights in the barracks. But here was one thing they didn't have to worry about — that the electricity might go off. All we really know is that the Alcatraz soldiers stayed the course and put up with many discomforts while on duty. Just like the soldiers of today.



K Street, Sacramento, 1862 (Courtesy, Bancroft Library, U.C. Berkeley)

¹ "California rain totals" <https://www.sfchronicle.com/projects/2023/california-rain-totals/>

² "A Liquid Time Bomb" by Gary Kamiya *The Examiner*, February 25, 2023

³ "Remembering the Great Flood that Put Northern California Under 30 Feet of Water" <https://www.activenorcal.com/remembering-the-great-flood-that-put-northern-california-under-30-feet-of-water/>