



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



March 2024

Steve Johnson, Editor

In this issue: The U.S. Army Balloon Corps

Island News Attendance on the island has slowed during the rainy weather, but visitors to San Francisco still come to see one of the city's main attractions, Alcatraz Island. On a recent day there were visitors from Ireland, Britain, Australia, Belgium, and South America, so the programs have been geared more towards how the inmates coped during the federal prison era with monotony (many wanted to work), boredom (they were allowed to have hobbies, such as playing music), and isolation (they were eventually allowed to have radios). And of course they like to hear escape stories, including those that happened when the island was a military prison (see the January 2019 issue of the FOCWA newsletter) Starting in the spring we will have more programs about the Civil War history of the island.

Dates to Remember
March 9, 10 a.m.
Volunteer Luncheon
Fort Mason
March 16, 10 a.m.
Online Board Meeting

Fort Point Living History Days Brought Many Visitors

Despite the cool and misty weather, a fair amount of visitors came to the Living History Days at Fort Point in February. There they found plenty to see and hear. Photos: Troops Marching. The Wandering Bow concert. A display about the balloon Corps by Kevin Knapp.





Photos: Re-enactors mix with visitors.
Folding the flag. A recruitment officer
writes enlistment papers - or bookmarks if
they aren't ready to join the army.
All photos taken by Dave Rauenbuehler,
NPS photographer.

Board Meeting on Saturday, March 16th

The board of directors will have a virtual, online meeting on Saturday, March 16th, at 10 a.m. Items to be discussed will be: planning for the Living History Day on Alcatraz on April 13th; planning for the visit to the San Mateo middle school on March 22nd; possible field trip to Angel Island on April 21. All members are invited to attend the meeting and will receive the Zoom link several days prior to the meeting.

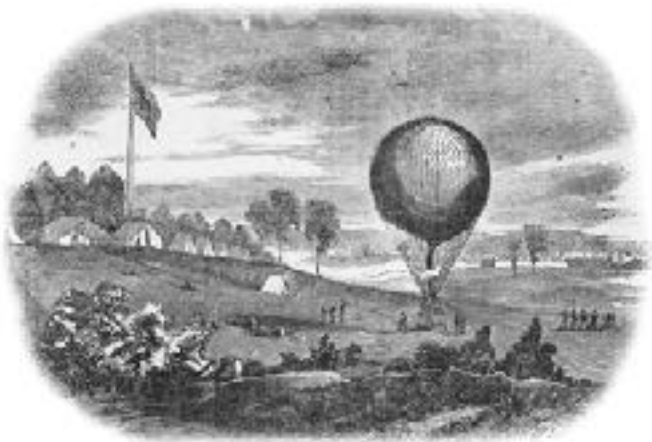
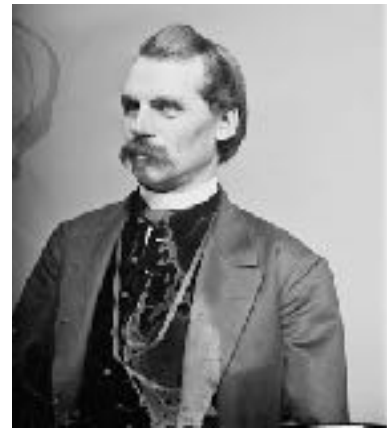
Volunteer Appreciation Party, Saturday March 9, 2024 at Fort Mason

Those of you who have volunteered for the Park Service - including Fort Point, Alcatraz, the Presidio, and the National Cemetery - are welcome to attend the volunteer appreciation party at the General's Residence (just east of the chapel), starting at 10 a.m. Brunch will be served. You must register in advance. https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=urWTBhhLe02TQfMvQApUJ_61a2ShaBNpMJXMS-cXkdUM0RNTzFJNjZYS0xKWUtGQkYzSTINWIYwMS4u Wear your Union Army, 1860s clothing, or volunteer uniform.

The U.S. Balloon Corps

The French were the first to launch a hot air balloon in 1783, and balloons were used to observe battle lines in 1794 during the French revolutionary wars. During the American Civil War they were used for reconnaissance or to direct artillery fire against their opponents. They were used on both sides during the war, though the Confederates had fewer balloons for lack of silk, the fabric used to make the balloon. The balloons were filled with hydrogen that was generated in copper boxes filled with iron pellets; when sulfuric acid was added, hydrogen gas was produced. It was then filtered and run into hoses which filled the balloon, making it lighter than air.

Thaddeus Lowe was an experienced balloon pilot (called at the time “aeronaut”) who offered his services to President Lincoln. He did a demonstration in Washington by ascending in a tethered balloon and sending a message to the nearby White House via a telegraph wire, describing what he saw. He was soon put in charge of the balloon corps; the men in the corps were paid by the government but this was to remain a civilian endeavor. In September 1861 Lowe ascended in a balloon to successfully direct artillery fire at a Confederate encampment a few miles away, which was the first use of a military forward observer.



At the battle of Bull Run, Lowe decided to make an untethered flight near enemy lines, but the wind blew him over to the Confederate side, where he landed unseen and was finally rescued at night. From then on his observation balloons were always tethered. Since they typically could rise to 1000 feet, they were out of range of artillery or muskets.

Lowe had seven balloons built and were useful in the Peninsula campaign. One balloon was tethered to an open barge to cross the Potomac River and the barge became the first aircraft carrier.

We are very fortunate to have Kevin Knapp come to our next Living History Day on Alcatraz. Kevin does a remarkable portrayal of Thaddeus Lowe (he even looks like him), and brings many educational displays of the Balloon Corps with him. He even brings a balloon basket so people can get a sense of how big they were. Though he is a skilled ballonist himself, unfortunately he cannot fly a balloon and land on Alcatraz Island, which would certainly attract attention, especially by the Federal Aviation Administration.

There is much more to learn about the balloon corps, and you can read more by checking out the resources listed below.



Resources

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/air-balloons-in-the-civil-war.htm>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_Army_Balloon_Corps

https://www.faa.gov/sites/faa.gov/files/about/history/pioneers/Civil_War_Ballooning_Article.pdf

Eugene Block, *Above the Civil War: The story of Thaddeus Lowe, balloonist, inventor, railway builder*, 1966