



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



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Island News

Members Constance Smith and Steve Johnson decided to hold a mini-living history day on Alcatraz on Sunday, February 23rd. Accompanying us was high school student Kai Marcelino, who is a re-enactor with the 20th Maine group and has now been to several living history days at Fort Point and Alcatraz. The day proved to be rather eventful. We lined up as usual to get on the staff boat, and once on board be-

Dates to Remember

Saturday, April 12
Living History Day
Alcatraz, 9 am - 4 pm



gan to schedule the day's activities with the rangers as the boat backed away from the pier. Then the head ranger got a call from security on the dock that two persons had snuck on board the boat, impersonating Civil War soldiers! I guess from now on we will need to show our enlistment papers from the Army before boarding. (The ranger verified we were NPS volunteers). Once on the island we set up the display table and were ready for visitors when we got the message that the power on the island was off and they would have to close the island. The boat company actually started to refund tickets at Pier 33 until they received the message that the electricians had restored power and the island was open. While the numbers of visitors was half the summer crowd, we had good crowds on the fort tours and at the display table. Kai was excellent in describing the soldier's

equipment display and the use of the Springfield musket, while Constance did several tours of the Citadel. We are hoping to do at least one mini-living history day every month, and encourage our members to join us in this endeavor. Notice will go out for future dates.

Fort Point Living History Day, Saturday, February 8

The Living History Day on February 8th at Fort Point had clear but cool weather, and the usual number of visitors on a Saturday discovered the presence of 1860s soldiers and civilians. We were very pleased to have Jack Doyle attending, who gave a fine 1860s rendition of the national anthem on his fife as the flag was raised. The Wandering Bow String Band played music of the period, and the 20th Maine boys did various drills and cannon demonstrations. Ladies were there to represent the US Sanitary Commission, and members Constance Smith and Stephanie Delich had their usual display of medicines of the period. Members Frank Avila showed visitors his display of medical instruments, and Michelle Atno-Hall portrayed Union spy Pauline Cushman. We were grateful to have present both Nancy Whittle (as Harriet Tubman) and Marie Sims (as Sojourner Truth), who came all the way from Fresno to attend the event.



Children learn to write with pen & ink; Constance explains the medicines of the time; cannon demonstration; Harriet Tubman & Sojourner Truth of the Underground Railroad

Chinese Soldiers in the U.S. Army 1861 - 1865

Trade with China began when the first American ship, the *Empress of China*, arrived in Canton in 1784. For decades the trade between the countries consisted of tea, porcelains, and silk in exchange for American silver. Over the next decades American (and British and Spanish) merchants and ship captains recruited Chinese men to work aboard ships as crewmen or cooks, or transported indentured Chinese workers to work in the sugar fields in Hawaii or on plantations in the South or in Cuba. Hundreds were also conscripted to help build the transcontinental railroad in the West.

By 1860 about 200 Chinese lived along the east coast, mostly in New York, and mostly men. They had arrived in a variety of ways: some had been adopted by missionaries; some had escaped from plantations; some had served as seamen; some had completed their indenture. When the Civil War started, 58 of them volunteered to serve -- mainly in the Navy, since many had worked aboard merchant ships.¹ Their stories are remarkable because these men were not citizens and yet wanted to fight for their adopted country.²

¹ Ruthanne Lum McCunn, "A Historian Recounts the Role of Chinese Americans Who Fought in the US Civil War" <https://www.voanews.com/a/surprise-asians-fought-in-the-us-civil-war-120282254/163158.html>

² It should be noted that there were 5 recorded Chinese men who fought for the Confederacy

Joining the military was not easy for them. First of all, they had to go through the process of enlistment. At that time only three races were recognized -- white, black, and mulatto. Enlistment officials were at a loss at how to classify a man from China; some rejected the Chinese altogether, while other officials figured if they weren't black they must be white and enlisted them. Second, the Chinese as a minority in camps were sometimes the butt of jokes and harassment, until they quickly proved themselves to be courageous, disciplined, and tough. Third, the Chinese believed in the 1862 act of Congress that granted citizenship to any honorably discharged foreign veteran. (Later they would find that an earlier law allowed naturalization only for white people).

An excellent resource for information about Chinese men in the military is *Asians and Pacific Islanders and the Civil War* published by Eastern National as a handbook for the National Park Service.³ Among the many interesting stories of Chinese soldiers and sailors are two that are especially notable. Joseph Pierce was born in China and was sold as a slave boy to a ship captain, Amos Peck. The captain detested slavery and returned to his home in Connecticut where the family treated the boy as one of their own. Typically they gave him a Christian name and a surname (after President Pierce). When war broke out and son Matthew Peck joined the army, Joseph soon followed and became part of the 14th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry in July, 1862. Just two months later his regiment was at Antietam and a year later was at Gettysburg. Only 160 out of 1,015 men in the regiment were fit enough to fight, after the battle they lost 62 more. Joseph survived the fighting and was promoted to corporal. After the war, he returned to Connecticut and became an engraver.⁴



Corporal Joseph Pierce

Edward Day Cohota was born in China and was also adopted by a ship's captain, Sargent Day. Edward's name included his adopted father's name and the ship he mastered, the *Cohota*. He joined the 23rd Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in February 1864. Remarkably in the Battle of Drewry's Bluff on the James River he received 8 bullet holes in his clothing but none pierced his body. Later his regiment was at the bloody battle at Cold Harbor where 800 Union men were killed in just minutes during an assault. Edward went to the aid of his comrade, William Low, who suffered a bullet to the jaw; he hid William behind a rock, and later carried him to an ambulance station. After the war he re-enlisted in the Army and served altogether for 30 years. In his later years he resided at a Veteran's home in South Dakota, and although quite infirm he would make his way to the flagpole every day to stand at attention when the flag was lowered.

Apparently there were Chinese cooks at Fort Point during the Civil War and may even have been at Fort Alcatraz. While serving food they too were serving their adopted country.

Resources

<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/chinese-americans-civil-war>

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1112&context=gcjcwe>

<https://civilwartalk.com/threads/chinese-soldiers-in-the-civil-war.78443/>

³ Unfortunately this book is out of print, and my thanks to Kai Marcelino for lending me his copy

⁴ *Asians and Pacific Islanders and the Civil War*, p. 76