

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

April 2022

Steve Johnson, Editor

Board Meeting Scheduled

The board of directors will meet virtually on Saturday, April 9th, at 10 a.m. All members are invited to attend and will be sent the link prior to the meeting. Issues to be discussed are: current visitations to Alcatraz; programs given by volunteers; proposed Living History Day; status of volunteer coordinator; current finances; outreach to visitors on the island.

Dates to Remember
Saturday, April 9
Board Meeting, 10 a.m.

Alcatraz Notes

The island has been receiving more visitors now that the weather is warming up and more people are coming from other countries. San Francisco has re-opened the port to cruise ships, two of which docked recently at Pier 27. The boats on the weekends are sold out for weeks. And since it is mostly volunteers that are doing programs, the number of visitors who go on these programs is usually rather large. We are still looking for more volunteers who can assist the rangers, even if it's only one or two times a month. Also, volunteers can typically give behind-the-scenes tours only before noon; after that the Conservancy guides give those tours to paying customers.

The Amazing Service of the Revenue Cutter *Shubrick*

In 1790 Congress authorized the building of 10 vessels to to enforce trade and tariff laws, and to prevent smuggling into the country. Later these vessels were known as the Revenue Cutter Service, and when called upon also performed life saving duties. One such vessel was the



Shubrick, built in 1857 at the Pennsylvania Navy Yard.

She was 140 feet long and had a displacement of 339 tons and "topped by a flush deck fore and aft. To better withstand buoys scraping her sides, *Shubrick's* hull was painted black, topped with a white ribbon and waist. Red paddle wheels, white paddle boxes, and a black bowsprit, yards and gaffs added a saucy touch to her long and graceful cutwater, with six inches of bright

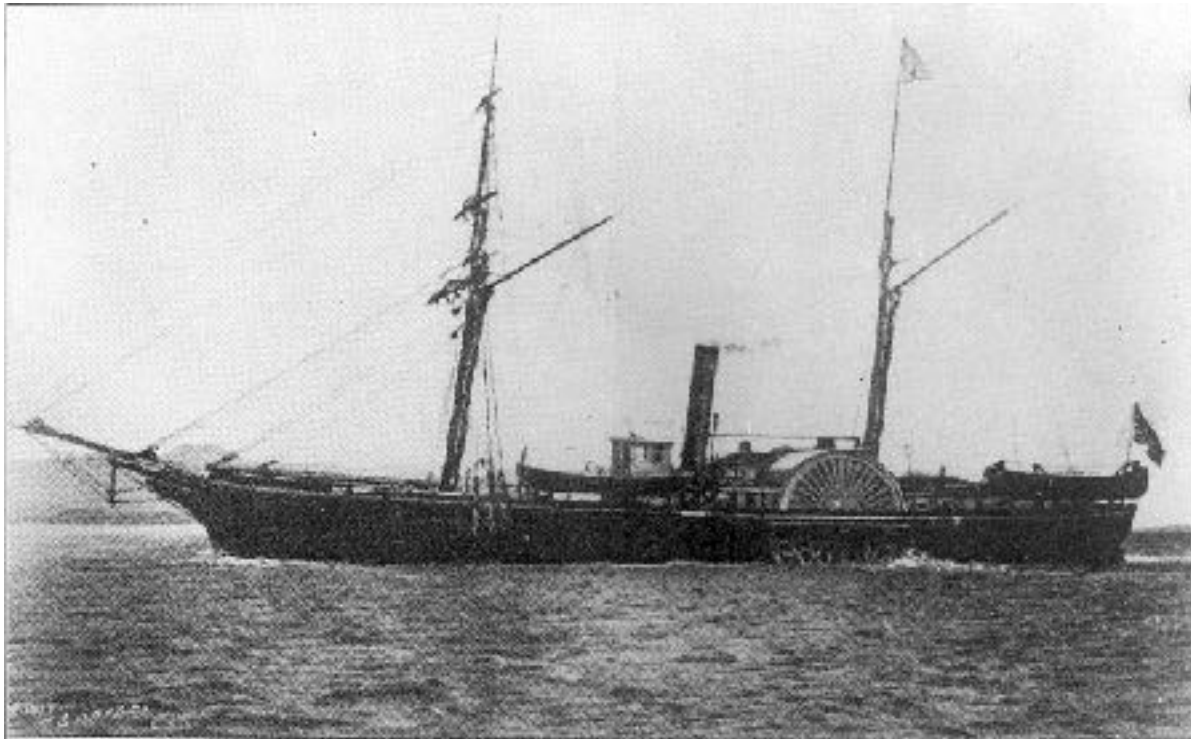


copper shining above the waterline."¹ She was first commissioned as a lighthouse ship, and ordered to sail to the West coast. While crossing the Straits of Magellan at the tip of South America, she ran low on coal, so the crew began breaking up furniture and paneling for fuel. At Valdivia Bay the crew chopped wood for fuel until they could reach Valparaiso to take on coal.² They finally arrived in

¹ Richard D. White, Jr., "Saga of the Side-Wheel Steamer *Shubrick*: Pioneer Lighthouse Tender of the Pacific Coast," *The American Neptune* XXCVI, No. 1 (1976), p. 47

² *Shubrick* 1857, on the Coast Guard website <https://www.history.uscg.mil/Browse-by-Topic/Assets/Water/All/Article/2400700/shubrick-1857-uslhs/>

San Francisco in May of 1858. For the next three years the *Shubrick* set buoys and brought supplies to the lighthouses along the Pacific coast. When war broke out in 1861, the ship was transferred to the Cutter Revenue Service under Captain William Pease, and now her duties were to challenge and board ships coming into San Francisco Bay, watch for Confederate raiders, check ships for smuggled items, and as always to perform life-saving actions if need be. This in fact happened in January of 1862, when a series of floods on the Sacramento River and delta caused people and houses to be swept into the river. Now named the *USRS Shubrick*, the ship picked up dozens of men, women, and children from the water and saved their lives.³



The Revenue Cutter *Shubrick* was named after Commodore W.B. Shubrick, the first chairman of the Lighthouse Board of Directors. The ship was capable of 12 knots, and carried one 24-lb Dahlgren gun and one 12-lb. gun. She had a crew of 26.

In 1863 the sailing ship *Chapman* was seized in San Francisco Bay while on its way to attack ships carrying gold to the East coast. Among the papers found aboard was a letter suggesting the idea of seizing the *Shubrick* at some point and turning it into a Confederate privateer. As it turned out, the US Consul in Victoria, B.C., had received intelligence that there was indeed a plot to seize the ship and had his own suspicions about Captain Pease, who had sailed the *Shubrick* into Victoria harbor. He ordered the customs Collector at Puget Sound to discharge Pease and his crew by arranging to put a loyal crew aboard while the regular crew was ashore.⁴

The *Shubrick* returned to San Francisco Bay and resumed the duty of patrolling the harbor and boarding any foreign vessels entering the bay. On October 1, 1863, a warship appeared coming through the Golden Gate and heading north, in the direction of the Mare Island shipyard and the Benicia Armory.

³ *Daily Alta California*, Volume XIV, Number 4354, 21 January 1862

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USLHT_Shubrick

The ship's flag was not discernible due to a lack of wind, and this made Captain Winder on Fort Alcatraz very nervous. Normally the *Shubrick* would have stopped and boarded the ship to ascertain its nationality and intentions, but it had sailed up the coast to assist the Russian corvette *Norvick*, which was foundering on the rocks off of Point Reyes.⁵ Captain Winder felt he had no choice but to stop the ship by firing a blank shot of warning, but when the ship continued north Winder fired a cannonball across the bow of the ship, which stopped it. As it turned out, the warship was the *HMS Sutlej* and the flag ship of the British fleet in the North Pacific. Admiral Kingcombe was not pleased with his reception, which would not have happened that way if the *Shubrick* had been on station.

After the war the *Shubrick* was returned back to the Lighthouse Service and was delivering building materials to the site of the Cape Mendocino lighthouse in 1867 when she ran aground on the rocky Mendocino coast. She was brought back to the San Francisco shipyards and was put back in service in 1869.⁶ In December 1885 she was decommissioned and sold in Astoria, and the owner promptly stripped the ship of anything usable and burned it down to recover the copper. It was a sad ending to a ship that had served so nobly.

Resources

One of the lighthouses the *Shubrick* serviced was the lighthouse on the SE island of the Farallones (built in 1855). You can still see the foundation of the lighthouse and the later-built houses for the Coast Guard light keepers (now occupied by bird researchers). The Oceanic Society takes visitors around the islands by boat.

<https://www.oceanicsociety.org/>



You can visit a retired lightship at Jack London Square. The *Relief* was stationed off the Pacific coast from 1951 - 1975 and is one of the few remaining Coast Guard lightships. Volunteers maintain it and give tours. <http://www.uslightshiprelief.org/>

⁵ Gilbert, Benjamin Franklin. "San Francisco Harbor Defense during the Civil War." *California Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 3, [University of California Press, California Historical Society], 1954, pp. 229-40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25156501> Also available on [JSTOR.org](https://www.jstor.org/)

⁶ Coast Guard website cited above