



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



April 2025

Steve Johnson, Editor

In this issue: Coffee in the U.S. Army During the Civil War

Island News

We are moving from the shoulder tourist season to the high season on Alcatraz. The ferries to the island have been sold out on the weekends and are also very busy on Fridays. The temporary bookstore structure has almost been completed and will be operational soon. This is to allow the north end of the cellhouse to close so that work can continue on major repairs to the building.



Dates to Remember

Saturday, April 12
Living History Day on
Alcatraz, 8 am - 4 pm

No rangers on Alcatraz or at Fort Point have been affected by the recent government layoffs, and at this time all seasonal rangers that have been approved for hiring will be starting in the coming months. It remains to be seen how many visitors from foreign countries will be arriving in San Francisco, due to the chill in international relations. However, on my recent tours for visitors to Alcatraz (each having about 50 people) I met people from Britain, Ireland, Slovenia, Brazil, China, and Mexico, so we are still receiving visitors from other lands.

Alcatraz Living History Day, Saturday, April 12

We have been in the planning stage for the upcoming Living History Day on the island. We do know the Third Artillery Band will be coming and will be playing in the sallyport. We will have medical displays, soldier's equipment displays, ladies having a tea party, and of course tours of Fort Alcatraz and the Citadel. If you are a re-enactor please contact the editor by email as soon as possible to receive information about parking, schedules, and to be put on the box lunch list.

Coffee - the Life Blood of Soldiers During the Civil War

Starting with the boycott of tea during the American Revolution, coffee became more and more the drink of choice in the United States. Coffee beans were being imported to the East Coast from Brazil, and from Central America and Hawaii on the West Coast. By the 1830s, coffee con-

sumption was outstripping tea by five to one.¹ Soon after the Civil War began, the Army -- both North and South -- realized the importance of coffee for the troops. Coffee energized them, was a source of comfort and warmth, and without realizing it, kept the men from getting dysentery because the water was boiled. The U.S. Army was committed to providing 36 pounds of coffee per soldier, but by the second year of the war coffee was harder to import because of the need for ships in the blockade of Southern ports. The great demand for coffee for both soldiers and civilians made it difficult to supply the needs of both, so by late 1862 coffee deliveries were becoming sporadic.



“Coffee Coolers” by Edwin Forbes, 1876. Library of Congress

For the Southern soldiers, the blockade cut off nearly all imports of coffee, and they became adept in making substitutes for coffee. The most common were roasted rye, roasted sweet potato, and roasted chickory root mixed with coffee.² But these could barely take the place of real coffee, and Confederate soldiers were desperate for it. As one wrote “Nobody can soldier without coffee”. If a Union camp retreated, the Confederate soldiers would scour the campground looking for beans. One story is told about how the Confederate soldiers would sail little boats across the Rappahannock River to the Union soldiers during a lull in the battle of Fredericksburg. Notes requested coffee in exchange for tobacco, to sail back when the wind changed.³

The North was able to increase its imports of coffee thanks to the fairly new Republic of Liberia (founded in 1822 as a home for freed slaves). Its president, a free black man born in Maryland, Stephen Benson, promoted coffee farms there and by 1864 was shipping beans to the United States.⁴ Soldiers would make coffee by roasting the green beans in a pan for 15 minutes, then crushing them with a rock (or often with a rifle butt), bring the ground beans to a boil and let steep for 5 minutes. Then it was poured through a cloth to filter out the ground coffee sludge.

In San Francisco, James Folger was hired in 1850 to make a coffee mill (i.e. grinder) for the owner of the Pioneer Steam Coffee & Mill, located a few blocks from the waterfront. At the

¹ Bronwen Everill, “How Coffee Helped the Union Caffeinate Their Way to Victory”, in *Smithsonian Magazine*, July/August 2024

² Patrick Kelly Fischer, “From Chickory to Cigars Stumps: Confederate Coffee Alternatives in the Civil War”, in emergingcivilwar.com

³ Ahley Webb, “Coffee and the Civil War Soldier”, American Battlefields Trust, www.battlefields.org

⁴ Everill, op. cit.

time, most people bought green coffee beans, and roasted and ground the beans themselves. The Pioneer Company roasted and ground the beans, then put them in a tin for commercial sales. This was a big hit in the mining towns, and by 1860 Folger had bought the business and put the family name on the tins.

It's not known if it was Folger's coffee that made it to Fort Alcatraz, but no doubt coffee was served at meals on the island as part of the soldiers' daily ration. The city was receiving plenty of coffee beans -- and lots of chocolate, thanks to Mr. Ghirardelli -- during the 1860s and later. Most of it was coming from Central America, though some came from the coffee plantations in the Kona district on the big island of Hawaii.

All the coffee shops that abound in San Francisco today have their roots in the Gold Rush era and the Civil War period -- when coffee was the stimulant that kept the miners digging and the sentries on Alcatraz from falling asleep.



Recommended Readings - Editor's Picks

Here are a number of books on the Civil War, which I recommend. They are all available - both new and used - from <https://www.thriftbooks.com/>

- James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* Probably the best account of the Civil War, which includes the social, economic, political, and military aspects of the war in a vivid narrative
- Geoffrey Ward, Ken and Ric Burns *The Civil War: An Illustrated History* A companion to the PBS television series, which includes essays from prominent historians
- Bruce Catton *This Hallowed Ground* Catton's easy style of storytelling belies the deep scholarship that underlies his narratives. Reading all his books began my lifelong interest in the Civil War
- Adam Goodheart, *1861: The Civil War Awakening* So much happened in that first year of the war, and Goodheart beautifully describes well known and lesser known events in 1861 which shaped the course of the conflict. He even describes what was happening in the Far West, including on Alcatraz
- Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* Goodwin gets to the heart of why Lincoln succeeded as a politician and leader - his empathy for others, his ability to win over his rivals with humor and insight, and his iron determination



“Allow the president to invade a neighboring nation, whenever he shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion ... and you allow him to make war at pleasure.”

-Abraham Lincoln, February 15, 1848 Speaking against President's Polk's plan to declare war on Mexico