

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

May 2019

Steve Johnson, Editor

**Living History Day on May 11** On the second Saturday of this month FOCWA will again sponsor a Living History Day on the island. The 3rd Artillery Band will be coming to render Civil War era tunes throughout the day, and FOCWA volunteers will be there to provide lunches for the re-enactors and rangers. We will also be giving tours of Fort Alcatraz, setting up a medical exhibit, and taking visitors down to the Citadel in small groups. If you can help out that day, please contact John Nevins. (see the Events page on our website for more information).



FOCWA members Constance Smith and Frank Avila discuss medical procedures during the Civil War. Authentic medical instruments are displayed, many of which are familiar to today's surgeons.

### Dates to Remember

**Saturday, May 11, 2019**  
Alcatraz Living History Day

**Wednesday, May 15, 2019**  
San Francisco CW Roundtable  
"Military Chaplains in the Civil War" by Christopher Webber,  
6:30 pm, Gold Mirror Restaurant,  
800 Taraval, S.F.

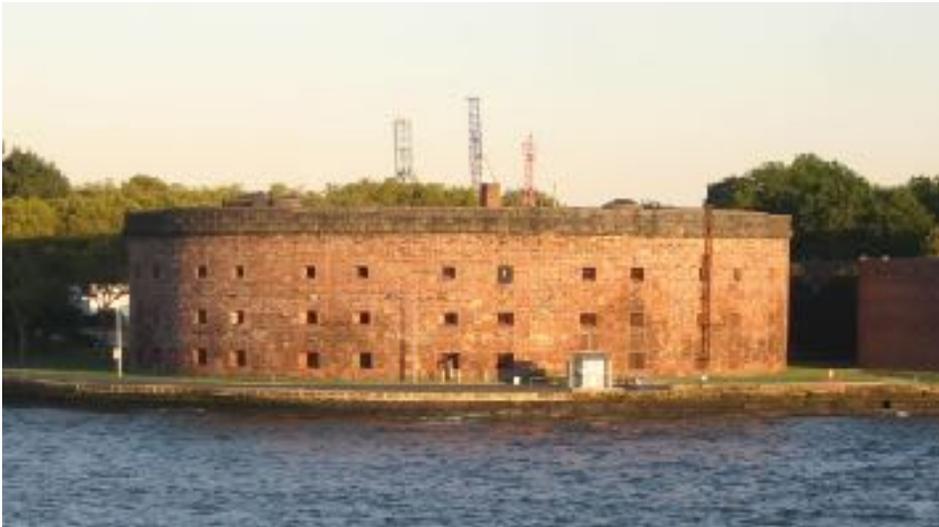
**Monday, May 27, 2019**  
Memorial Day parade and  
commemoration, Presidio of San  
Francisco. 10 a.m.

### Seacoast Forts in the Civil War

In the 19th century, a variety of forts were built to defend the most important harbors of the United States. While the shape of the forts differed, they had several features in common: thick walls (usually brick), heavy guns, and defensive features. Here are a few types of American seacoast forts.

#### Circular Forts

These were early forts with the ability to cover a 360° field of fire. Castle Williams in New York harbor is a prime example of a nearly circular fort. It was built on Governors Island from 1807 - 1811, with walls 40 feet high and 8 feet thick, made of sandstone. This fort became a prototype of future forts because of the casemates enclosing the cannon emplacements on several tiers or levels. Castle Williams has four tiers, which was only duplicated at Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island and at Fort Point here in San Francisco. Each level could hold 26 cannons of different



Castle William in New York Harbor. It was named after Col. Jonathan Williams, commandant of the US Army Corps of Engineers, who designed the fort. Today it is a National Monument administered by the National Park Service.

calibers. During the Civil War it was used mainly to house troops at the beginning of the war and later Confederate prisoners. Interestingly, it became a disciplinary barracks for the east coast at about the same time as Alcatraz became one for the west coast.

### **Star Forts**

No doubt the most famous star fort is Fort McHenry. Star forts were pentagonal or hexagonal in shape, with bastions at the corners. The bastions eliminated blind spots and allowed for coverage fire along all the walls. A feature of most of these forts was a surrounding moat which made attacking the fort difficult; it also served as a refuge for a defending army under the protection of the bastions.

Completed in 1800, Ft. McHenry was bombarded by the British in the War of 1812, and Francis Scott Key — watching from a ship in the harbor — was so moved by the endurance of the defenders and their flag that he wrote “The Star Spangled

Banner” (which, ironically, was set to the music of an old British drinking song). Its commander at the time was Major George Armistead, whose nephew Louis Addison Armistead would become a famous

Confederate general, killed at the battle of Gettysburg. Fort McHenry was used in the Civil War to house Confederate prisoners and sympathizers. In fact, the mayor of Baltimore, the city council, and members of the state legislature were all imprisoned there at one time or other because of their secessionist views.



(continued)



Fort Independence in Boston Harbor

### **Sea forts**

These forts are completely surrounded by water. Sometimes they are located in a harbor, such as Fort Sumter (Charleston harbor), Fort Independence (Boston harbor), or Fort Alcatraz, and sometimes located off the coast on a natural or man-made island, such as Fort Jefferson off the coast of Florida. While the sea provides a natural defensive barrier, it also makes the fort vulnerable since it relies on ships for water, provisions, and ammunition. Every fort had cisterns to hold rainwater; both Fort Point and Alcatraz had large cisterns in case of siege. Provisions for many months were stored in secure areas; on Alcatraz most of those provisions were stored in the Quartermaster Building. And ammunition would be stored in bunkers, such as the ones on the east side of Alcatraz.

All of these forts became obsolete as cannons became more precise and powerful, as seen in the destruction of Fort Pulaski in 1862 by the new rifled cannons. In later years the remaining forts would be used as military prisons, training centers, housing for soldiers, and coastal defense during World War II. Today many forts —like Alcatraz — are historical parks where rangers tell their story and the part they played in American History.

### **Memorial Day**

Members of FOCWA are invited to the parade and commemoration at the Presidio and the National Cemetery in San Francisco on May 27th, 10 a.m.. We will join the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War for a picnic afterward. If you wish to participate, please contact Steve Johnson at [parksvolunteer425@gmail.com](mailto:parksvolunteer425@gmail.com)

### **Resources**

American Coast Defense Forts [www.oocities.org/~jmgould/seacoast.html](http://www.oocities.org/~jmgould/seacoast.html)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seacoast\\_defense\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seacoast_defense_in_the_United_States)