

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

May 2021

Steve Johnson, Editor

Volunteers Returning to Alcatraz

The Park Service is now allowing volunteers to return to Alcatraz to assist the rangers in their duties. These duties include greeting visitors and showing them how to access the audio tour, roving the island to make sure visitors stay on paths, answering questions in the New Industries Building, and manning information booths. Prior to returning, volunteers have to attend training sessions which deal with safety protocols, job hazard assessment, dealing with the public during the pandemic, etc. Only four volunteers may be on the island on any one day, and they must come on the staff boat to the island. Sometime in the future volunteers will once again be able to conduct programs — and in our case programs about Fort Alcatraz. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer on the island, please contact Steve or Gary Hormel.

Ranger John Cantwell Retiring

Ranger John Cantwell has been on Alcatraz Island since 1976. During that time he acquired a wealth of information about the island's history, and particularly about the history of the inmates during the federal penitentiary years. He organized yearly reunions of both inmates and guards, which was held every August until 2020. In doing so he became very familiar with these men's stories who lived on "The Rock". He became good friends with quite a few of them, such as George Divincenzi, former guard, and Bill Baker, former inmate (shown below) In fact, John officiated at Bill Baker's wedding.



Dates to Remember Saturday, May 22, 2021

FOCWA Virtual Board
Meeting 10 a.m.

Although only board members are required to attend, all members are welcome and will be sent the link to join the meeting

Monday, May 31, 2021 Memorial Day



Photo Courtesy of National Geographic

John also officiated at the renewal of wedding vows of former corrections officer Jim Albright and his wife Kathy at their 60th wedding anniversary, held in A Block. John has made many, many friends over the years, including Native Americans, politicians, authors, celebrities, and fellow rangers.

His outgoing personality, humor, and thoughtfulness was appreciated by staff and visitors alike. Visitors always liked his tours because he had such a treasure trove of stories about every aspect of the island's history, and told them with great enthusiasm. John was also a great supporter of The Friends of Civil War Alcatraz, being well versed in the military history of the island (and of Fort Point, where he had worked previously). He was our liaison with the Park Service, and was instrumental helping us organize our Living History Days on the island. He trained us in how to give Citadel tours safely, and how to open the cell doors without jamming them. He was especially helpful in making sure we had the materials when it was time to paint the cannon and its carriage. John will be sorely missed, and we can only hope that he might join that elite corps of Alcatraz Volunteers in the future. (For the time being, Ranger Matt Connelly will be our NPS liaison). We all wish happy retirement years for our friend, who will always be "Ranger John".

Memorial Day Commemorations Cancelled

Both the Presidio Trust and the Presidio National Cemetery have cancelled all commemoration activities for this year. Although the infection rates are going down locally, both agencies are following the national guidelines of the federal government which will last probably until the end of summer. At the very least, we can fly the flag at our homes to remember those who gave "the last full measure of devotion" to their country.

A Woman Patriot Remembered

Some of you may know something of Pauline Cushman, who is buried at the Presidio National Cemetery, but you may not know her full story. Named Harriet Wood, she was born in 1833 and in her childhood she learned to ride horses, shoot guns, and take canoe trips in nearby rivers. By age 17 she had decided to become an actress, and moved to New York to learn the craft. She returned to her hometown of New Orleans and, taking the stage name of Pauline Cushman, began to perform there. She married a musician, Charles Dickinson, in 1853 and they had two children. When the war came, Charles joined the Union Army but died in 1862 of dysentery. Leaving her children with her parents, Pauline went to Louisville to continue her acting career. A popular story about her time there involved a Confederate officer who said he'd pay her \$350 to give a toast to the Confederacy. She quietly went to see the U.S. Provost Marshal, Col. Orlando Moore, to ask his advice, and he suggested she make the toast and then see him afterward. The next night she made the toast and was fired by the theater. But now, because of her supposed loyalty to the South, Moore recruited her as a spy. One of her first exploits was to discover a plot by a Southern woman to poison the Union troops staying at her boardinghouse; Cushman arranged to have her arrested. On another occasion, she used her acting skills to pose as a man — a Confederate undercover officer — and offered to help a woman who was secretly bringing supplies to the South. Instead the woman was arrested before she could reach the South.



Pauline Cushman, actress

Cushman had been told not to carry any incriminating documents on her person, but in 1863 she crossed into Southern camps “looking for her lost brother”. She met a young soldier who was drawing maps of fortifications for the Army of Tennessee, and when the opportunity came she stole the map and put it in her boot. Unfortunately for her, Confederate pickets searched her, found the map, and arrested her. She was taken before General Braxton Bragg, who had no regard for spies even if they wore skirts. She was sentenced to be hung, but she came down with typhoid fever, so the Confederates decided to wait for her to get better so they could hang her properly. In the meantime federal troops advanced on the town of Shelbyville where Union prisoners were being held, and rescued all of them, including Cushman.

In 1864 Pauline was presented with a uniform by the Union Ladies of Nashville, which she wore in a one-woman show staged by P.T. Barnum. She received an honorary rank of Brevet Major by the President, and after the war appeared before audiences fascinated by this woman spy.

Pauline’s children had died of disease in childhood, and in 1872 she moved to San Francisco and married August Fichtner — who died a year later. Soon after she met Jeremiah Fryer, and moved with him to Casa Grande, Arizona Territory, where they ran a hotel for ten years. After the death of their daughter, the couple separated and Pauline moved back to San Francisco. She applied for, and received, a widow’s pension, but still needed to work as a seamstress and house cleaner. Her health began to decline, suffering great pain from arthritis and rheumatism, and she began taking greater amounts of opium and morphine. She died of an overdose December 2,

1893 at the age of 60. When veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic learned of her death, they arranged for a funeral with full military honors. Today she rests in officer’s row at the Presidio National Cemetery, with a simple headstone “Pauline C. Fryer, Union Spy”



Photo: “Miss Major” Pauline Cushman, National Archives

Resources

“The Actress Who Left the Stage to become a Civil War Spy” by Emily Toomey Aug. 12, 2019

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/actress-who-left-stage-become-civil-war-spy-180972821/>

Military Wikia https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Pauline_Cushman

National Park Service <https://www.nps.gov/people/paulinecushman.htm>

American Battlefield Trust <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/pauline-cushman>

See our own FOCWA member Constance Smith as Pauline Cushman:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=814OtenN34Y>