



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



May 2024

Steve Johnson, Editor

In this issue: Laundresses

Island News Currently boats to the island have been sold out for two weeks in advance; on week days the attendance has been smaller but still busy. Several seasonal rangers will be coming onto the island in the coming weeks. The new supervisor of Alcatraz is Ranger Angel Garcia, who was previously the supervisor of the Southern District of the GGNRA (Presidio, Fort Point, Golden Gate Bridge, and lands in San Mateo County). Ranger Garcia is well familiar with Living History programs, having organized them at Fort Point and previously at Fort McHenry in Baltimore harbor. He comes to this position with lots of enthusiasm, good organizational skills, and good relations with staff members. We look forward to working with him, and he'll be with us on the island on June 8th.



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Dates to Remember
Saturday, May 29, 10 - 2
Memorial Day at the
Presidio National Cemetery
Saturday, June 8, all day
Living History Day on
Alcatraz Island

Changes to the Board of Directors

The board of directors has appointed Steve Johnson to be the treasurer of the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz and he has submitted the proper documents to the bank to show the change. The board has also welcomed John Ferris as the newest member of the board. He has kindly offered to be in charge of memberships for the rest of this year. John has gone through the training as a Park Service volunteer and has been giving tours of the island for some time. If you are a member of FOCWA and would like to serve on the board, please contact Chairman Gary Hormel.

Memorial Day at the Presidio

A few members of FOCWA will be joining the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, Camp 24, to attend the Memorial Day program at the National Cemetery in the Presidio. Typically the group stands at the gate to welcome visitors, families, and veterans who have come to pay their respects.

After attending the ceremonies, the group then assembles at various headstones of notable persons from the Civil War to tell their stories. At around 2 pm the group then has a picnic on the grounds of the main post.



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Laundresses in the Army, 160-1865

Congress had approved the official position of laundress as part of the army's organization in 1802, realizing that this important chore should rightly be placed in the hands of women, who knew all the facets of cleaning clothes properly. By the time of the Civil War, each company was allowed four laundresses, or one for every nineteen men. And while the army did not encourage enlisted men to get married, it did allow wives of married men to be hired as laundresses. They were provided housing, one meal per day, and were paid by soldiers (\$1 per month) and officers (\$2.50 per month); this amount was deducted from their monthly pay and given to the laundresses.¹ A busy laundress could earn up to \$40 a month. (Note: an enlisted man's salary was \$13 a month, and the average workingman's salary in 1860 was \$2 a day.) She had to be of good character and receive the endorsement of the fort or camp's commanding officers.

The work of a laundress was very hard and not for the weak. There were many stages to cleaning clothes in the 19th century, invariably done by women. It should be noted that most of the daily laundry was for shirts and underwear; outerware was only cleaned occasionally because it took more work to clean and dry woolen jackets and trousers and thus was more expensive.

The first step was to mend any tears or holes in the clothing. The next step was to soak the garments in warm water for one or two days. During this time, any stains would be removed using a variety of substances: lemon juice (for ink stains), milk (for fruit stains), turpentine (for oil stains), etc.² Colors were preserved by using additives such as salt (for woolens), vinegar (for greens), oxgall (for browns), and so on.

An experienced laundress would know what additives to use, when and at what temperature to add them, and how long the soaking should be. On wash day the clothes were turned inside out and put into another tub, filled with hot water (preferably rain water) and soap. The laundress would now rub the clothes with soap on the scrub board, paying attention to any remaining stains. This was the most physically demanding part of the process, as each piece had to be completely scrubbed by hand. Also exhausting was wringing out each item before going into the rinsing tub. If she was lucky enough to have one, she used a hand-cranked wringer (invented 1847) to remove the water from the garments; otherwise she'd have to do it by hand.³

The next step was more common in military camps than in forts - putting the clothes in boiling water to kill any lice or fleas. In forts this step may have been used if there were outbreaks of pests, and bedding as



Woman laundress and children in camp, 31st Pennsylvania Infantry. Library of Congress

¹ "And I Was Always with Him: The Life of Jane Thorpy, Army Laundress" in *The Journal of Arizona History*, Vol. 38, No.2, (Jan. 1941), seen in JSTOR.org

² Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home*, page 163

³ Melvin Porter, "The Tough Job of The American Civil War Laundresses" in Civil War Talk <https://civilwartalk.com/threads/the-tough-job-of-the-american-civil-war-laundresses.94565/>

well as clothes would be boiled. After boiling came a warm rinse and a cold rinse. Bluing was the added to the water to turn the yellowish color of the clothes (from the soap) to a more favorable white or gray. Then came the task of hanging the clothes outside to dry, which on Alcatraz in certain foggy, wet months must have taken days. On such days the clothes were probably hung inside, near the kitchen areas, usually the warmest parts of the fort.

We know of five laundresses who lived on Alcatraz in 1870, thanks to research by Ranger Siena Hinshelwood. They were housed in the laundresses quarters on the southeastern side of the island. All of them were from Ireland, a very common occurrence in San Francisco, known to be more tolerant of Catholic immigrants than the Anglo-Protestants on the East Coast. Later on in the 19th century, Chinese men and women were employed by the army to be servants and laundresses at various army posts in the Bay Area. By the 1880s the army no longer supported laundresses officially, though no doubt army wives or single women continued to do laundry work on the side for the troops.

In his article about the laundresses in the army during the Mexican-American War, writer Robert Wettemann Jr. states "Isolated from American society due to the nature of military service, these women struggled to create their own domestic realm within the confines of the U.S. Army. Provided for in military regulations and generally well received by the officers and men of the regular regiments, Army laundresses formed part of the extended family of the regular soldier. They (and their children) were in many ways a part of the Army just as were [the men in uniform]"⁴

Resources

Jennifer J. Lawrence, *Soap Suds Row: The Bold Lives of Army Laundresses, 1802-1876*, High Plains Press
Video of laundress re-enactor at Fort Steilacoom <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufXeKe-2PIM>

Living History Day Coming in June

Plans are being made for the next Living History Day on Alcatraz, scheduled for Saturday, June 8th. So far we have the following participants coming that day: the Third Artillery Band; the U.S. Balloon Corps; "Mother Constance" with medicines of the 1860s; several soldiers to talk about soldiers' lives and their equipment; and NPS volunteers to give walking tours of Fort Alcatraz. We may also have one or two ladies portraying the laundresses of Alcatraz. If you are interested in participating, please contact the editor.

Commemoration

This month marks the 160th anniversary of the Battle of the Wilderness. It was one of the most horrific of all the Civil War battles. California troopers in the 2nd Regiment of the Massachusetts Cavalry (many from San Francisco) escorted wounded from that battlefield. Grant would say of the battle "more desperate fighting has not been witnessed on this continent." Despite heavy losses, Grant - unlike previous generals - continued his pursuit of Lee's army. The battle confirmed a warning made by Longstreet to Lee about Grant, that he would fight "every day and every hour till the end of the war".

<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/wilderness>



⁴ Robert Wettemann Jr, "The Girl I Left Behind Me? United States Army Laundresses in the Mexican War", in the Army History Bulletin No. 46, Fall 1998