



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



May 2025

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Island News

Crews have been working on cleaning the cells on the first floor of the cell house. Crumbling concrete, paint flakes, and years of dust have made many prison cells unsightly, so the Park Service has begun cleaning them, a cell at a time. Because of the lead-based paint used on the original cells, workers had to wear haz-mat suits to avoid breathing the paint dust, which was vacuumed up and sent for proper disposal.

Dates to Remember

Monday, May 26
Memorial Day



On the left, one cell before cleaning. Note the accumulation of debris and the deterioration of the paint on the walls. On the right, a cell that has been cleaned, which happens to be the cell where Officer William Miller was held captive. It was he who hid the only key to the outside door, foiling the attempt of the rioters of 1946 to escape from Alcatraz.¹



In late June the cells on the northern end of the cell block will be closed off for major renovations. The dining hall will remain closed for continued repair and renovation.

Alcatraz Living History Day last April

We were fortunate to have the Third Artillery Band come to the island for our bi-annual Living History Day on Alcatraz. Also present were Tony and John Vranicar, Ernie Manzo, Randall Hawkinson, Kai Maestrano, John Ferris, Stephanie Delich, Robert Mayer, Arthur Hendrick, and long-time NPS volunteers Constance Smith and Steve Johnson. Charter FOCWA member Phil Blake and his friend came to clean the cannon and evaluate when the carriage needs to be painted again. Visitors showed interest in the many exhibit tables which included medicines of the 1860s, soldiers' equipment, weapons and uniforms, and money used during the Civil War.

¹ See "Battle of Alcatraz" Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Alcatraz

Every tour of Fort Alcatraz had 50 people or more, and many folks stopped to listen to the band play tunes of the period. Kudos to everyone for making the day informative and interesting to the many visitors who came to the island that day.



Fort Point Officer's Quarters Gets a Makeover

Thanks to the research, determination, and hard work of NPS volunteer and FOCWA member Constance Smith, the officer's quarters on the second tier of Fort Point has been restored to look more like the period 1860-1865. The previous furnishings had been donated from another site but was not really appropriate for the 1860s when the fort was a significant bastion of defense during the Civil War. Constance was able to find period furniture and quilts that give the look of an officer's room at the fort. We know that when Captain Stewart was assigned to the fort during the Civil War, he had his family with him, and at least one one of his children was born at the fort. That is why you will see a cradle in the room. Under one bed you will see a chamber pot, which was used to make "night deposits" when it was too cold to walk down to the privies at the other end of the fort. On living history days we will be using the room to interpret the life of an officer at the fort and specifically talk about Captain Stewart.



Refurbished officer's room, second tier. Photo by Dave Rauenbuehler, NPS photographer

Drinking Alcohol During the Civil War

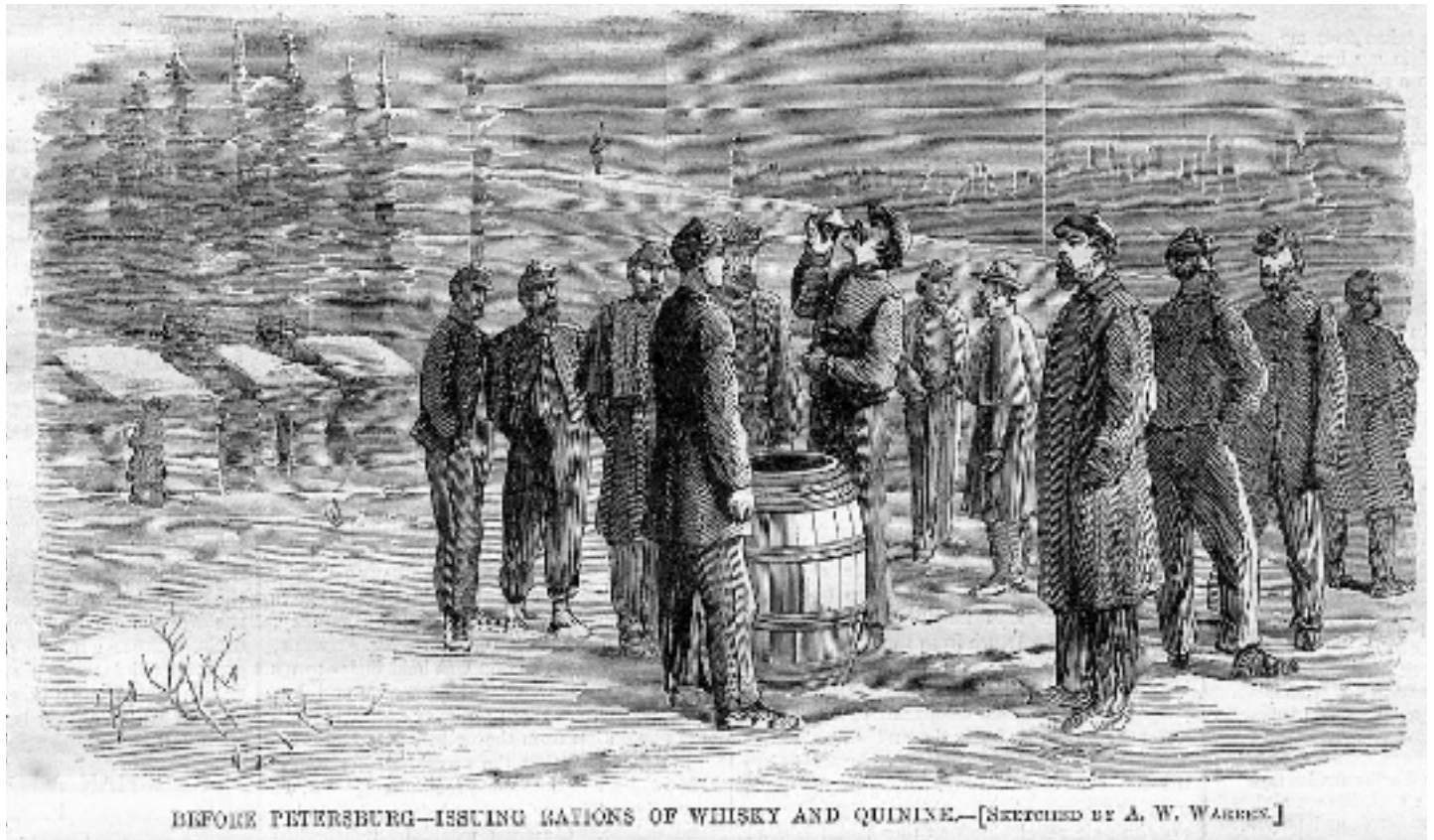
Drinking ale was a common practice in Britain and America because local sources of water could be polluted or carry disease. Also, alcohol was considered to be healthy for the body and doctors would often prescribe whiskey or especially brandy for certain ailments. It was used both as a stimulant and a sedative.² Brandy was given to keep you warm, prescribed for colds and fevers, administered to sedate pregnant women, and used as a painkiller.

Almost every farmer had hard cider on hand, and for the middle classes rum was the drink of choice. Among wealthier Americans, fine whiskey and imported wines were easily available. In 1830 American adults were drinking an average of 7 gallons of alcohol every year (equivalent to drinking a bottle and a half of 80 proof whiskey a week).³ Although the Army had stopped providing a ration of spirits to soldiers in 1832, officers could give out whiskey to the troops to relieve fatigue and exposure -- but soldiers were expected to be at all times sober and diligent. However, long periods of boredom and loneliness would tempt them to find sources of alcohol. Sometimes it would be found in foraging local farms, sometimes smuggled in packages, and sometimes made secretly in camp. At Fort Monroe, Virginia, officers wondered why sentries would come back drunk from patrol until they discovered the sentries had found a source of

² "Medicinal Brandy" by Henry Guly National Library of Medicine, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3117141/>

³ Cindy Lampert, "Drinking Customs 1630-1830: Why Temperance and Prohibition Became Important" <https://winehistoryproject.org/drinking-customs-1630-1830/>

whiskey nearby and were smuggling the whiskey into the fort in their musket barrels.⁴ For dentistry, whiskey was used to deaden the pain when a tooth was pulled, which meant you might wake up the next day with as sore jaw and a hangover. To make drinking the bitter taste of Quinine (used to prevent malaria) more palatable, whiskey was added to the ration, as seen in this illustration from *Harper's Weekly*.



The most famous drinker was of course Ulysses S. Grant, who allegedly had to resign from the Army in 1854 at Fort Humboldt for drinking on duty. During the war, Grant would drink at irregular intervals, in varying quantities, sometimes when there was a long lull between battles, but never before or during a battle. When Congressmen came to Lincoln complaining about the stories (often exaggerated) about Grant's drinking, Lincoln replied, "I should like to find out what brand of whiskey he used, for if it made fighting generals like Grant, I should like to get some for distribution [to other generals]".⁵

In all, during the Civil War 4,625 Union soldiers were hospitalized or relieved from duty for inebriations; of these, 98 died. Also, 3,284 soldiers were admitted for delirium tremens, which are symptoms of alcohol withdrawal (shaking, fever, high blood pressure, sweating); of these, 423 died.⁶ When you consider over a million served in the Union Army, these numbers are small, but they were enough to add fuel to the temperance movement. This movement was to steadily grow in influence, leading to Prohibition 55 years after the Civil War.

⁴ David Norris, "Forty-rod, Blue Ruin & Oh Be Joyful: Civil War Alcohol Abuse", Warfare History Network, <https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/article/forty-rrod-blue-ruin-oh-be-joyful-civil-war-alcohol-abuse/>

⁵ Rick Beard, "General Grant Takes a Spill" in the Opinionator, *New York Times* <https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/04/general-grant-takes-a-spill/>

⁶ Alfred Jay Bollet, *Civil War Medicine: Challenges and Triumphs* Tucson, AZ Galen Press, 2002. Pg. 323