



# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



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Steve Johnson, Editor

*In this issue: Would Britain Go to War with the U.S.?*

**Island News** Construction has begun on the supports under the pier near the restrooms, so equipment is now taking up a good portion of the dock. This means that dock announcements are shortened and are



done twice as the visitors are getting off the boat. Walking programs now start around the picnic benches,

under the guard tower. This will require changes to the Living History program on June 8th. The weather promises to be sunny that day, with temperatures in the 60s. We can expect many visitors on that Saturday, as the boats have been sold out for the weekends.

### Dates to Remember

June 8, 8 am - 4 pm  
Living History Day  
on Alcatraz

### Memorial Day Program at the Presidio

**National Cemetery on May 27th** was attended by four members of FOCWA - Ken Felton, Glenn Martin, Steve Johnson, and Constance Smith. After greeting visitors and veterans at the main gate, several of us then stood at the gravesites of notable persons from the Civil War and told their stories to those who stopped by to listen. Many were interested in hearing about the statue erected in 1897 to honor those who served in the army and navy to protect the Union. They also were surprised to hear of the stories of how California was instrumental in funding the war effort, and protecting the Southwest from invasion by the Texas Army. We received many thanks by visitors and veterans for being there. Later we helped to take down the huge garrison flag on the main post, which took 10 people to help lower while trying not to be airlifted by the wind gusts; then we folded it in proper military style. We finished by having a quiet picnic together, sheltered from the wind. (photo credit: Cheryl Harrison)



## Would Britain Go to War with the U.S. During the Civil War?

This was the burning question at the beginning of the Civil War. The biggest importer of American cotton was Great Britain, which supplied its textile mills and employed nearly four million people, directly or indirectly, in the cotton trade and textile manufacturing.<sup>1</sup> Would Britain recognize the Confederacy and therefore have access to its cotton, despite the threat of war with the United States? Would it respect the growing blockade of Southern ports? Would it allow ships to be built for the Confederacy in British shipyards?

A month after Fort Sumter was attacked, the government of Great Britain issued a Declaration of Neutrality, which recognized the Confederacy as a belligerent power but not a sovereign nation. Britain had just come out of a bloody conflict in the Crimean War and the populace and the government were not in the mood for a war against the United States. Plus the feelings of the British populace about the American civil war were mixed. Some, like Charles Dickens, did not support the Union because they thought the war stemmed from the heavy tariffs imposed on British goods, which hurt Britain and the South.<sup>2</sup> And aristocrats, including Prime Minister Lord Palmerston and Foreign Minister Lord Russell, secretly felt sympathy for Southern aristocrats, though not for the institution of slavery (which Britain had banned in 1834). They also saw that a weakened United States would benefit British commerce.

Among the middle class and worker class, however, sympathies were generally for the the North because of the South's support of slavery, which was anathema to wage workers. In fact, the hard-pressed textile workers of Manchester even sent a resolution of support to Prersident Lincoln, who responded

I know and deeply deplore the sufferings which the working people of Manchester and in all Europe are called to endure in this crisis...Under the circumstances I cannot but regard your decisive utterances on the question as an instance of sublime Christian heroism which has not been surpassed in any age or in any country. It is indeed an energetic and re-inspiring assurance of the inherent truth and of the ultimate and universal triumph of justice, humanity and freedom. <sup>3</sup>

The closest Britain came to war with the United States - more in gesture than in intent - was the so-called *Trent* affair. In late 1861 the *USS San Jacinto* stopped and boarded the British mail ship *Trent* on the high seas. Captain Charles Wilkes was looking for two Confederate commissioners who were on their way to Britain to seek recognition for the Confederate States as a separate nation. The commissioners were found, taken off the ship, and brought to Boston where they were jailed. Many Northerners were jubilant over this blow to Confederate diplomacy and hailed Captain Wilkes a hero. However, this incident brought strong reaction in many British newspapers, protesting the event as an affront to British sovereignty and neutrality, and calling for military response. Additional troops were sent to Canada, in fact. The government demanded a return of those two Confederate diplomats to Britain within two weeks.

Secretary of State William Seward and President Lincoln drafted a response, stating that

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<sup>1</sup> "Liverpool's Abercromby Square and the Confederacy During the U.S. Civil War" <https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/liverpools-abercromby-square/britain-and-us-civil-war/impact-cotton-trade>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, "British Support During the U.S. Civil War" section

<sup>3</sup> Lincoln's message to the people of Manchester, January 19, 1863, quoted in "The United Kingdom and the American Civil War", Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_Kingdom\\_and\\_the\\_American\\_Civil\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom_and_the_American_Civil_War)

Captain Wilkes was not acting officially, that he should have taken the two Confederates to a neutral port, and the United States would gladly return them to Britain since they weren't real diplomats anyway.<sup>4</sup> This diffused the situation.

Meanwhile, Confederate agents were having raiding ships built in Liverpool, which technically did not violate British neutrality because they weren't armed. But when finished, the ships sailed with Confederate crews to a Portuguese island where they took on arms and armaments.<sup>5</sup> Such ships such as the *CSS Alabama* wreaked havoc on U.S. merchant ships during the war, and prompted numerous protests by the American government.<sup>6</sup> One of those British-made ships was the Confederate raider *CSS Shenandoah*, which sank dozens of whaling ships off the coast of Alaska in the summer of 1865 and caused Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz to double the guards in case it tried to enter San Francisco Bay. As the ship was headed southward it met with a British ship which informed the captain that the war had ended 6 months previously. At that point the *Shenandoah* struck the Confederate naval ensign and returned the ship to Liverpool, having fired the last shots in the Civil War.<sup>7</sup>

### Living History Day on Alcatraz, June 8th

Alcatraz will be filled with military and civilian reenactors on Living History Day, giving visitors a sense of who occupied the island during the Civil War. Soldiers of the infantry and artillery will display soldiers' equipment and weapons, a medical steward will display medical instruments of that time, the head of the U.S. Balloon Corps will show how they were used to view the battlefield, an enlistment officer will demonstrate how men were enlisted, ladies will

be displaying household goods and medicines of the 1860s, and other ladies will have afternoon tea in the gardens. The band returns to play tunes of the 1860s.



From 2023: Constance Smith explains how some medicines of the 1860s were worse than the disease. The Third Artillery Band poses by the Alcatraz sign.



<sup>4</sup> "The Trent Affair: Diplomacy, Britain, and the American Civil War", The National Museum of American Diplomacy, <https://diplomacy.state.gov/stories/the-trent-affair-diplomacy-britain-and-the-american-civil-war/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/liverpools-abercromby-square/britain-and-us-civil-war/supplying-warships>

<sup>6</sup> Britain ultimately paid compensation to the United States for shipping losses caused by British-made vessels flying the Confederate flag

<sup>7</sup> "Shenandoah, 1864-1865", Naval History and Heritage Command [https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/confederate\\_ships/shenandoah.html](https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/confederate_ships/shenandoah.html)