



# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



June 2025

Steve Johnson, Editor

*In this issue: Alcatraz - Watcher of Ships*

### Island News

Among the duties of volunteers on the island is to assist with medical issues that visitors might have while on the island. One such incident happened when I was giving a tour recently and

noticed a woman was holding her eye closed while sitting on the bench. Her mate said she had something very irritating in her eye and needed some saline solution. I called on the radio for a medic and within 5 minutes the island EMT arrived and produced a bottle of saline solution and offered to help remove whatever was causing the problem. The couple were appreciative and decided to try on their own to remove the irritant.



Aron & Valentina, visitors from Australia

I stuck around to make sure the problem got resolved. After many drops and maneuverings they were able to wash out the irritant - her contact lens had split apart! Both sections got removed and the couple was very grateful to the EMT and to me for helping. It's another reason why volunteering on the island is so satisfying -- being there when help is needed.

In other news, the island has not yet received the summer seasonal rangers while the human resources department reviews their employment. In the meantime, volunteers are helping the staff by giving programs, giving cell door demonstrations, giving tours of the citadel, and providing information to the visitors. The new, temporary bookstore on Eagle Plaza is not yet open and will probably do so next month. Bill Baker, one of the last of the 60s era inmates, has returned to the island to sell his book. - SJ

### Dates to Remember

**Saturday, August 2**  
**Living History Day at**  
**Fort Point, 10 am - 4 pm**



### Memorial Day at the Presidio

Several members of FOCWA were present for the Memorial Day commemoration at the San Francisco National Cemetery at the Presidio on May 26th. Constance Smith, Steve Johnson, Glenn Martin, Stephanie Delich, Gary Hormel, and Tony Vranicar greeted visitors at the gate as they came for the ceremonies, and afterward we gave some graveside talks about Union sailors, soldiers, and a woman spy buried in the cemetery. We ended the afternoon with a picnic and enjoyed the baked goods Mother Constance brought for us.

## Alcatraz: Watcher of Ships

During the Civil War, Fort Alcatraz - because of its 360° view of the Bay - became the main observer of all ships as they entered San Francisco Bay. Sentries had to be alert in observing ships coming in through the Golden Gate strait, and keeping an eye on where they were headed. They also had to be aware of ships going to and coming from the Sacramento River, naval vessels coming to and from the Mare Island naval station, ships headed north to the Petaluma River, and ships headed south to the port of Redwood City.

During the first years of the war, the Army was especially nervous about the British naval squadron in the Pacific, which might attempt to invade San Francisco if Britain decided to go to war with the United States over the blockade of Southern cotton, which Britain needed for its textile mills. (Seems far-fetched to us now, but back then it was a real fear). The Army was also concerned about Southern sympathizers who might try to attack federal property or try to steal the gold California was shipping to the East Coast.<sup>1</sup>

During the latter years of the war, the Army and Navy were more concerned about Confederate privateers, especially the *CSS Shenandoah*, known to be operating in the Pacific. During this time unknown or unexpected ships entering through the Golden Gate were required to anchor off Alcatraz and to be boarded by a crew from the cutter *Shubrick* to be inspected. Failure to do so could result in being fired upon, as happened in 1863 when a British warship appeared in 1863 and failed to follow this protocol.<sup>2</sup>

What ships were typically coming into the harbor of San Francisco in the 1860s? A few clipper ships were still bringing immigrants, travelers, and goods from New York and Boston, such as the *White Swallow*, which could make the journey from the East Coast and around the Horn to San Francisco in 120 days.<sup>3</sup> Whaling ships would stop in San Francisco for provisions on their way to Hawaii or Alaska. Whalers that headed north in 1865 were attacked and sunk by that Confederate privateer mentioned above.<sup>4</sup> Mer-



chant ships were bringing the many goods that the city needed; for example, meat and sugar from Hawaii, lumber from the Northwest, and coffee from Central America. By 1862 trade with China had increased dramatically, with grain and silver being shipped from San Francisco to Hong Kong, and ships returning with tea, silk, and immigrants. In 1862 alone, 44 ships arrived from China into the port of San Francisco.

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<sup>1</sup> An attempt to steal gold actually happened in 1863; see “J.M. Chapman” at <https://www.nps.gov/alca/learn/historyculture/the-post-on-alcatrazes.htm>

<sup>2</sup> For the story see “HMS Sutlej” at <https://www.nps.gov/alca/learn/historyculture/the-post-on-alcatrazes.htm>

<sup>3</sup> In 1868 the *White Swallow* brought a steam engine to San Francisco, to be used by the Central Pacific Railroad

<sup>4</sup> See the story of this raider here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CSS\\_Shenandoah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CSS_Shenandoah)

A more common sight was one of the ships of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, which was making the regular run from Panama City to San Francisco every month. They were contracted to carry mail and also carried passengers who had taken the train across Panama from the Atlantic side, after sailing from New York to Panama on the Atlantic line of that company. On the return trip, these ships would also carry gold headed to the East Coast; soldiers were placed onboard to protect the ship if attacked.



Pacific Mail Steamship Sonora

Fort Alcatraz also worked with the port authorities to make sure that weapons weren't being smuggled out of San Francisco for the Confederacy, or that privateers weren't being secretly built in one of the local shipyards, as almost happened in 1864.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the large number and variety of ships sailing in and out of San Francisco during this time, the city remained safe because of the vigilance of the soldiers at Fort Alcatraz. Despite the cold, the fog, and the isolation, the men stationed there did their duty, doing their part to keep California's gold out of the hands of the secessionists and San Francisco secure from any possible attacks by sea.

## Diving Deep into California & the Civil War

If readers are interested in further studying California and the Civil War, here is a link below to a bibliography on that subject. Some of the resources are no longer in print, and some issues of the *California Historical Society Quarterly* are not easy to find, but the essay by Benjamin Gilbert is instructive just on its own. <https://www.militarymuseum.org/CAandtheCW.pdf>

## Peninsula Roundtable Speakers

The Peninsula Civil War Roundtable will have a series of speakers this summer:

[June 17, 2025](#) — Mark Costin on “The Battle of Buena Vista: Training Ground for the Civil War”

[July 15, 2025](#) — Jim Rhetta on “England and Recognition of the Confederacy”

[August 19, 2025](#) — Wayne Padgett on “Grierson's Raid”

[September 16, 2025](#) — Alice Mansel on “Benito Juarez and Lincoln”

They meet at Harry's Hofbrau, 1909 El Camino Real, in Redwood City at 11 am

“A nation that does not honor its heroes will not long endure.”  
-Abraham Lincoln



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<sup>5</sup> See the article in the FOCWA newsletter of February 2020  
[http://www.friendsofcivilwaralcatraz.org/Newsletters/FOCWA\\_News\\_0220.pdf](http://www.friendsofcivilwaralcatraz.org/Newsletters/FOCWA_News_0220.pdf)