



# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



July 2024

Steve Johnson, Editor

*In this issue: Celebrating the Fourth of July, 1876*

### Island News

Ranger Tom is back on the island and has a permanent position. He is a professor of history and is a good person to talk to about the history of San Francisco and of California. Ranger Lauren Anderson is a seasonal ranger and will be on the island through October. She was raised in the East Bay and worked in the Americorps program in Alabama. She was a wildlife educator at both the Oakland Zoo and the Alaska Wildlife Center. This is her first park assignment. Ranger Ray Dillingham, another seasonal ranger, is from South Carolina and is a former teacher. His previous NPS experience was as a ranger at the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia. Both rangers are very excited to be part of the Alcatraz team. In other news, the information booth on the dock is being remodeled, with new flooring and new cabinets; in the meantime there is an information table next to the booth where visitors can ask questions, stamp their parks passport, and get the junior ranger booklets. At this time volunteers can take visitors up to the infirmary, but later this year that northern section of the cellblock will be closed for repairs.

### Dates to Remember

**July 27 - 28 8am-4pm**

Military Timeline of  
History, Angel Island

**August 3, 10 am - 4 pm**

Living History Day  
at Fort Point

**Living History Day on Alcatraz** brought 40 re-enactors to the island, including FOCWA members, park volunteers, members of the American Civil War Association, Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War, and of course the Third Artillery Band. New participants included Kevin Knapp, portraying Thaddeus Lowe (head of the U.S. Balloon Corps), Arthur Henrick, with his collection of weapons and artifacts of the 1860s, Peggy Ripley as an officer's wife, and Rachel Hoffman-Simpson, portraying a laundress on Alcatraz. She brought along two boys, including her son Nathan and friend Kai, both of whom had always dreamed of portraying Civil War drummer-boy soldiers. Visitors to the island stopped by to see the displays of medical instruments (Frank Avila), medicines (Constance Smith





and Stephanie Delich), cannon instruments (Ken Felton), and soldiers' equipment. We feel the event was successful by the number of compliments and thank-yous expressed by the visitors, who were surprised and intrigued with the role Alcatraz played in the American Civil War.



Randy Hawkinson explains soldiers' equipment



Kevin Knapp describes the role of the Balloon Corps



Above: Jeffrey Nibert and Ken Felton by the cannon  
 Right: Glenn Martin has tea with the ladies, Michelle Atno-Hall and Peggy Ripley. Photos by Dan Friedman, NPS



### **Celebrating the Fourth of July, 1876**

July 4th, 1876, was the 100th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and San Francisco, like other American cities, wanted to be part of the big celebration. In fact, the mayor of the city, A.J. Bryant, wanted to get a head start by having the fire bells and church bells start ringing at midnight to begin the day's festivities.<sup>1</sup> On the day before, a crowd estimated to be 85,000 sat on the hills and beaches around the Presidio to watch a planned naval bombardment, aiming at a rock at Lime Point on the Marin side, and then aiming at an old fireboat half-

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Woods, "Centennial Independence Celebration: A Closer Look" in Open SF History, <https://www.opensfhistory.org/osfhcrucible/2020/07/05/centennial-independence-celebration-a-closer-look/>

way between Fort Point and Alcatraz. First naval guns began firing, then four of the Rodman cannons on Alcatraz followed. These cannons did eventually hit the rock, but none of the many cannons firing at the boat hit the target. Finally a tugboat was sent out with a soldier, who placed a charge of gunpowder on the target boat, lit a fuse, and made a hasty retreat. The *U.S.S. Pensacola* fired a blank shot just before the boat blew up to make it look like their cannons had done the job. Incidentally, Alcatraz had allowed visitors to view the naval “battle” from the top of the citadel, and during this time some military prisoners broke into the commanding officer’s reception room and made off with many bottles of fine liquor. The thieves gave themselves away by their drunken behavior and were punished.<sup>2</sup>

Later that day the army staged a mock “battle” on the northern grounds of the Presidio, involving army troops, artillery and cavalry soldiers, and members of the National Guard. It started with soldiers firing blank shots from a ridge, then a barrage of cannon fire, and finally a big charge by troops on horses. It was a spectacular scene, though sometimes blotted out by all the artillery smoke.

On the 4th of July itself, a large parade took place, beginning at Market and Kearny Streets. It started with mounted police and a bugle corps, then four miles of marchers, which included unions of various kinds, societies of many ethnic groups such as the Irish, Germans, and Italians, a Swiss band, the Society of California Pioneers, and many more. In all, it was estimated there were 10,000 marchers and 400,000 spectators.<sup>3</sup> That night, there were fireworks, balls, and parties long into the night. Truly, San Francisco knew how to throw a party in 1876.

### **Angel Island Timeline of Military History, July 27 - 28**

Angel Island will invite military re-enactors to come to Camp Reynolds that weekend to portray all the military units that once were on the island. Soldiers of the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II will display their weapons and equipment to visitors and describe life in the army during those times. If you are interested in participating, please email the editor.



Photo by Carleton Watkins, from the Marilyn Blaisdell collection

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<sup>2</sup> Irwin Thompson, “The Rock: A History of Alcatraz Island, 1847 - 1942”, page 186

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Woods, op. cit., p. 3