

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

August 2021

Steve Johnson, Editor

Alcatraz Expands Visitation

Alcatraz NP has increased the number of passengers allowed on the island to 300 per boat, which run every hour. The hours have increased as well, from 10 am to 9 pm. Rangers come onto the island in two shifts, on the 9 am staff boat and the 1:30 boat.

Rangers and volunteers are now giving outdoor programs, and as of now no programs are being given inside the cell house. Masks are still required for everyone on the boat, and unvaccinated people are required to wear masks indoors (though there is no verification of this by the staff). These restrictions may change at any time and can be checked daily on the Alcatraz website:

<https://www.nps.gov/alca/index.htm>

Dates to Remember
Saturday, August 21, 10 am
Board Meeting via Zoom

Saturday, August 28, 2021
Living History Day
Fort Point, 10 am - 5 pm

Learn to be a NPS Volunteer on Alcatraz

Because of the added number of visitors to the island, the rangers Alcatraz could use additional help. FOCWA members can be trained on the island in a day by Ranger Wendy, and members Gary Hormel, Mike Bennett, Steve Johnson, and Constance Smith can train you to do Civil War programs, which are quite popular right now. Both Gary and Steve will be on the island on August 7th, and if you would like to tag along with them to see what FOCWA volunteers do, please contact the editor.

Fort Point Resumes Living History Day

The supervisor and rangers at Fort Point have determined that Living History Days can resume at the fort. They have scheduled one for Saturday, August 28th, from 10 am to 5 pm. There are two things to note: the number of re-enactors is limited to 30; all NPS volunteers and all re-enactors must complete a volunteer form in order to participate. We need FOCWA volunteers to help man the FOCWA information table during this event; they too need to fill out the form. Please contact the editor if you are planning to attend and he will send you the volunteer form. The activities are still being decided but will probably include fort tours, cannon drills, demonstrations, military drills, and flag ceremonies. This is a premier event and a chance for FOCWA to resume its outreach to those interested in Civil War history. Please consider helping out that day. Email the editor if you can.

The Army Post and Arsenal at Benicia

In 1847, the U.S. Army acquired 242 acres of land next to Suisun Bay and the town of Benicia. Two years later companies of the 2nd Infantry Regiment and members of the 3rd Artillery encamped there as the barracks were built; these were finished by 1851. It was decided in Washington to make this post the site of the ordinance depot for the West, and in 1852 the depot was named the Benicia

Arsenal.¹ By 1859 seven buildings, made from locally quarried sandstone, were built, including a hospital, two storehouses, a guardhouse, magazines, and a clocktower. (Many of these buildings still exist and are part of the Benicia History Museum). Weapons and ammunition arrived from the East and filled the storehouses; the powder was placed in specially built brick magazines which can still be visited today.² As time went on weapons and ammunition were distributed to the troops patrolling the border with Mexico and those who were protecting the stagecoach lines. Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz received much of their cannonballs and powder from the Benicia Arsenal. Since troops were being sent on patrol throughout the West, there weren't enough to protect the arsenal, so soldiers from Fort Alcatraz were sent there to provide protection because of rumors of plots by secessionists to raid the armory. Eventually marines from the *U.S.S. Lancaster* arrived to take over that duty. It must have been monotonous, lonely duty at Benicia; the Alcatraz soldiers were actually glad to return to the island!

When the Civil War started, recruits for the Union Army were trained at the army post at Benicia and this continued throughout the war. The arsenal was expanded, with shops able to produce weapons, cartridges, clothing, and all the equipment the soldiers and cavalry needed. Incidentally, the army post and arsenal remained in service until the end of World War II.



The post at Benicia in 1850, consisting of storehouses, barracks, and the commander's house.



By the time of the Civil War the Benicia army post and the arsenal became a mini-city, with a bakery, hospital, officers' houses, several barracks, a foundry, and workshops producing and repairing weapons.

¹ Robert B. Roberts, "The Benicia Arsenal" found at <http://www.militarymuseum.org/Benicia.html>

² See Powder Magazines 1855 <https://beniciahistoricalmuseum.org/the-powder-magazines-1855/>

The post at Benicia was also notable because it housed the camels of the army's Camel Corps. This was the brainchild of Major George Crossman, who proposed using camels to supply the army forts in the deserts of the West. The plan was approved by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis in 1855, and 75 camels were imported from the Middle East and brought to Camp Verde in Texas.



At first other army officers balked at supervising supply trains with mules and camels, but they soon realized that the camels were used to carrying large loads, could go days without water, and could outpace the mules. Even Robert E. Lee used them on a reconnaissance mission in 1860 in Texas.

The camels were used mainly in supplying forts and settlements in Texas, but also carried salt, dry goods, and mail between Tucson and Los Angeles.³ Camel enthusiast Edward Beale led an expedition of camels through the deserts and north to Fort Tejon, proving the animal's stamina and strength. But the beginning of the Civil War brought an end to this experiment, as the animals were thought to be too hard to handle. Many were brought to Benicia and housed in the camel barns; the army eventually auctioned them off. For their fate, see the Weisbrode article.

Next Board Meeting on Saturday, August 21

The board of directors will meet virtually via Zoom on August 21 at 10 a.m. Issues to be discussed are our participation at Fort Point's Living History Day on the 28th, and possible mini-living history events on Alcatraz in the coming months. All members are welcome to attend.

Resources

The Benicia History Museum at the Camel Barns has excellent exhibits about the city's history and also about the Civil War in California. <https://beniciahistoricalmuseum.org/>

Charles River Editors, *The United States Camel Corps: The History of the U.S. Army's Use of Camels in the Southwest during the 19th Century*, 2019, available on Kindle and in paperback

³ Kenneth Weisbrode, "The Short Life of the Camel Corps" <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/27/the-short-life-of-the-camel-corps/>