

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

August 2023

Steve Johnson, Editor

*Inside this issue: Other Military Posts around the Bay, 1861 - 1865*

### Island News

Construction crews are beginning to work on Pier 31, which will eventually be turned into a NPS visitor reception area. This means that the parking spaces we have been using there may not be available, or available only to a limited number of spaces. The rangers are trying to work out an arrangement so volunteers can still park there, but this will take some time. We may have to revert to the old plan of parking at Fort Mason and having a van shuttle us to Pier 33 in the morning and at closing time. More information will be forthcoming in the next issue of the newsletter.

**Dates to Remember**  
**Saturday, August 12**  
**Living History Day**  
**Fort Point**  
**10 am - 5 pm**  
**Saturday, September 9**  
**Board Meeting**  
**10 am (Zoom)**

### Living History Day on Alcatraz

The date for the next Living History Day on Alcatraz has been tentatively set for Saturday, October 21st. We will be giving tours, having exhibits of 19th century medicine and soldiers' equipment, and showing visitors around the Citadel. We will provide lunches for all volunteers who help out that day. Details to follow in October's newsletter.

### Board Meeting on September 9th

Our next board meeting will be on Zoom on Saturday, September 9th, at 10 a.m. All members are invited to join the board as they discuss uses for the large donation we received, and working with the NPS in producing a video of persons of note in California during the Civil War.

### What was going on at Other Military Installations in the Bay Area, 1860-1865

We know the importance of Fort Alcatraz during the Civil War - acting as a deterrent with its large cannons against any hostile ships coming into the Bay, jailing secessionists and wayward soldiers, and training California volunteers. But what about the other military posts during that time? Here is a brief look at what was going on at other locations during the war years:

#### Fort Point

Fort Point varied in the number of soldiers at any one time, with the average being 5 officers and 130 enlisted men of the Third Artillery for the first several years, and the number growing to 450 enlisted men and 15 officers by early 1865.<sup>1</sup> Their duties were to maintain the 55 cannons (96 by 1865) and act as sentinels for any ships approaching the entrance to the bay. Life there was pretty routine and mundane, except for occasional incidents like the sudden appearance of the British warship *HMS Sutlej* (see a description of that event in the July 2022 newsletter) and the increased

<sup>1</sup> "Defender of the Gate - the Presidio of San Francisco" by Irwin Thompson GGNRA Historic Resource Study, 1997. p. 72 Can be viewed at <https://www.nps.gov/prsf/learn/historyculture/loader.cfm?csModule=security/getfile&PageID=141690>

preparations in 1865 in case the privateer *CSS Shenandoah* arrived.

### **The Presidio**

During the war years the number of soldiers at the Presidio fluctuated, as units were constantly being deployed elsewhere depending on the need. From 1861 to 1863 five to seven companies of the 9th Infantry remained at the post, though various companies often were dispatched to far-flung places. Three companies of the Third Artillery were assigned to various batteries around the bay.

Some volunteer infantry

companies were sent to the San Juan Islands

to maintain American presence, to Idaho to

protect miners, to

Washington Territory

to protect settlers, and

to Nevada to protect

the stagecoach lines.

Those units that stayed

in San Francisco

would patrol the city

to help with law and

order, remove squat-

ters from the outskirts of

the post, and participate in parades in the city. The band would play at benefits to raise money for

the Sanitary Commission's hospitals back east. A row of houses for officers was built in 1862, a

chapel and wooden barracks were constructed, and a new hospital was built in 1864. These build-

ings can still be seen today at the Presidio. Photo above shows the hospital and the adjoining medical

steward's quarters. This building is close to today's Park Service Visitor Center at the Presidio.



### **The Mare Island Naval Station**

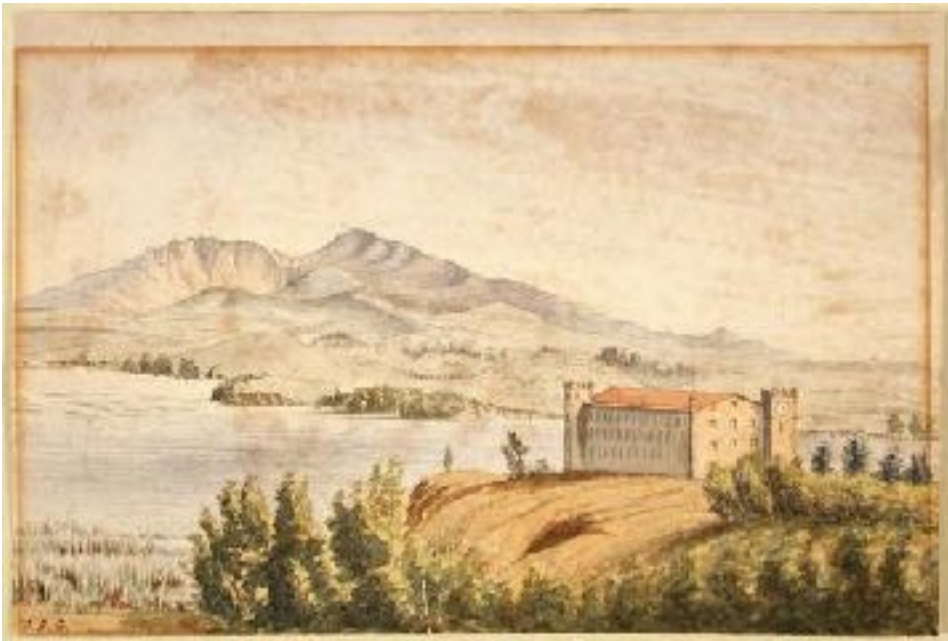
This was the first naval facility on the Pacific Ocean, established in 1854 under the command of Commander David Farragut. Its mission was to build, repair, and supply U.S. naval ships of the Pacific squadron. On occasion it also repaired Russian and Japanese ships and merchant vessels. At the beginning of the Civil War there were many rumors and threats about secessionist groups plotting to capture the gunpowder stored there, so the government sent a detachment of marines in early 1862 to guard the base. Most of the ships stationed in the Pacific squadron, such as the *Saginaw*, were engaged either in escorting mail steamers laden with gold to and from Panama, or searching for Confederate privateers along the coasts of Mexico and South America.<sup>2</sup> Many of the large brick buildings of the naval base remaining standing today, along with the naval commander's residence and the large smithery (Building 46) which houses the Naval Museum.

### **The Benicia Arsenal**

Land next to the town of Benicia was set aside in 1847 for a military reservation. In April 1849 two companies of the 2nd Infantry Regiment and members of the Third Artillery arrived to construct barracks and the ammunition depot building. You can still see the bunkers where ammunition was stored during the Civil War. Barns were also built for the short-lived Camel Corps and today house

---

<sup>2</sup> Naval History and Heritage Command, "Mare Island Naval Shipyard" <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/organization-and-administration/historic-bases/mare-island.html>



The arsenal at Benicia. Painting by Joseph Girard, courtesy of the Huntington Library

a fine history museum. Besides gunpowder, the arsenal stored muskets and other weapons and had facilities for repairing them. In the first year of the war troops from Alcatraz were sent to protect the arsenal out of fear of attacks by Southern sympathizers until Marines arrived to take their place.

Later, troops arriving for duty in the Western states were trained here and outfitted before heading to their assignments. Among the officers who were stationed at Benicia were Ulysses Grant, Edward Ord

(whose forces at the battle of Appomattox led to Lee's surrender), and Joseph Hooker.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Batteries at Black Point**

As fears about Confederate raiders in the Pacific grew, the army decided to fortify the harbor with even more cannons. A battery was placed on the bluffs at Black Point (at the northeast edge of today's Fort



Mason). It consisted of six smoothbore 10" Rodman cannons mounted on iron carriages. The earthworks were fortified with masonry walls and had small shell storage bunkers between the cannons. A cannon is on display today in the original location.

### **Camp Reynolds, Angel Island**

The army command was also concerned that if an enemy vessel somehow made it past Fort Alcatraz it could slip through Raccoon Strait (between Tiburon and Angel Island) and head for the naval station and armory 20 miles away. In September 1863 fifty-six men of Company B, Third Artillery, ar-

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benicia\\_Arsenal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benicia_Arsenal)

rived on the island, along with army engineers who began working on the sites for three batteries. The men spent the rest of the year in tents, because construction of barracks and houses for the officers was slow. It wasn't until the next year that the soldiers could move into housing. 1864 was also the year that the batteries at Point Knox (seven 32-pounders, 1 8-inch and two 10-inch Rodmans) and Point Stuart (one 10-inch Columbiad, seven 32-pounders) were completed. The island stored 7,400 pounds of powder and 2,600 rounds of shot. At one time the camp housed 120 soldiers and three officers.<sup>4</sup>

Many buildings of Camp Reynolds are still there today on the island, now a state park. The large brick quartermaster building remains, as well as the housing for junior officers on the right. At the top of the parade ground is the bake house and an officer's house. The park supports overnight stays by school groups as part of a living history program where the students learn about the life of soldiers who were stationed there during the Civil War.



**Resources:**

“Images of America: Angel Island” by Branwell Fanning and William Wong, Arcadia Publishing, 2006

If you are interested you can watch a tour of Angel Island given by Huell Howser in the “California’s Gold” series of the 1990s. It covers the whole history of the island, including both the military history through the Cold War, and the history of the immigration station.

<https://blogs.chapman.edu/huell-howser-archives/1993/12/10/angel-island-californias-gold-408/>

---

<sup>4</sup> “Military History of Angel Island” by John Soennnichen <https://www.militarymuseum.org/CpReynolds.html>