



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



August 2025

Steve Johnson, Editor

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Island News

NPS volunteers Constance Smith and Steve Johnson, assisted Ranger Roger Fang in moving the Civil War displays from Building 64 to the sally port. This included moving the soldier mannequin, whose uniform had to be replaced due to its deteriorated condition. He was dressed in a better shirt and frock coat, for which he was grateful. Other items moved included photos and diagrams; eventually we hope to have explanatory panels to explain the role of Fort Alcatraz during the Civil War years. In other news, construction on the north end of the cell house will not begin until later in September. Officials from Washington came to visit Alcatraz recently. Here is a report on that visit: <https://www.kqed.org/news/12048367/can-trump-really-reopen-alcatraz-delegation-heads-to-island-to-make-case>

Note that the Conservancy no longer gives refunds for the audio tour if one chooses not to use it while visiting the island. Bill Baker is visiting the island on various days this summer to promote his book.

Dates to Remember

August 2, 2025
Living History Day
at Fort Point
10 a.m. to 5 p.m.



Fort Point Living History Day is This Saturday, August 2, starting at 10 a.m.

Among the participants attending this event are the following:

The 20th Maine re-enactors, doing military drills and cannon demonstrations

The Fort Point Brass Band, playing military tunes

The Wandering Bow String Band, playing tunes of the 1860s

The U.S. Balloon Corps, showing the importance of aerial reconnaissance

Re-enactors portraying Capt. Stewart, fort commander, and Pauline Cushman, Union spy

Medical steward Frank Avila, presenting his exhibits of medical tools of the 1860s

Mother Constance, demonstrating cooking methods of the time

Also included will be tours of the fort, flag ceremonies, money displays, exhibits of muskets and recruitment posters, and talks about California and the Civil War. Admission is free.

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The Sanitary Commission in California

At the very beginning of the war, women in New York organized the Women's Central Association of Relief, which organized ways to send medical supplies and nurses to the front lines. This was the seed for the idea to create a larger organization for providing medical aid and supplies for Union soldiers.¹ In June of 1861 the United States Sanitary Commission was established as a private relief agency to support sick and wounded soldier and sailors. It was created by federal legislation in June of 1861, and was headed by Henry Bellows and Frederick Law Olmsted (who created Central Park in New York City). Eventually the Commission administered 243 in-field and regular hospitals and 30 soldiers' homes for disabled soldiers. They were staffed by military doctors, paid civilian surgeons, and hundreds of volunteers - especially women nurses.

As the war expanded and dragged on, money was desperately needed to supply these hospitals, which needed sheets, bandages, medicines, ambulances, beds, etc. It was primarily women who came up with the idea of holding "sanitary fairs" to raise money to send to the Sanitary Commission; the first ones were held in 1863 at Chicago (raised \$100,000) and at Lowell, Massachusetts (which raised \$4,000).² These fairs could be simple, such as selling tickets for a dinner and dance. More elaborate ones were held in



The colonial kitchen at the Baltimore Sanitary Fair, 1864, serving New England dishes to the fair patrons.



large cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. These were truly fairs as we know them, with booths, exhibitions, auctions, art galleries, dining areas, and ballrooms for dancing. Even children would get involved, selling off their no longer wanted toys, or performing in a children's chorus.

¹ New York Public Library Archives & Manuscripts, "United States Sanitary Commission Records" <https://archives.nypl.org/mss/22266>

² Wikipedia, "Sanitary Fair"

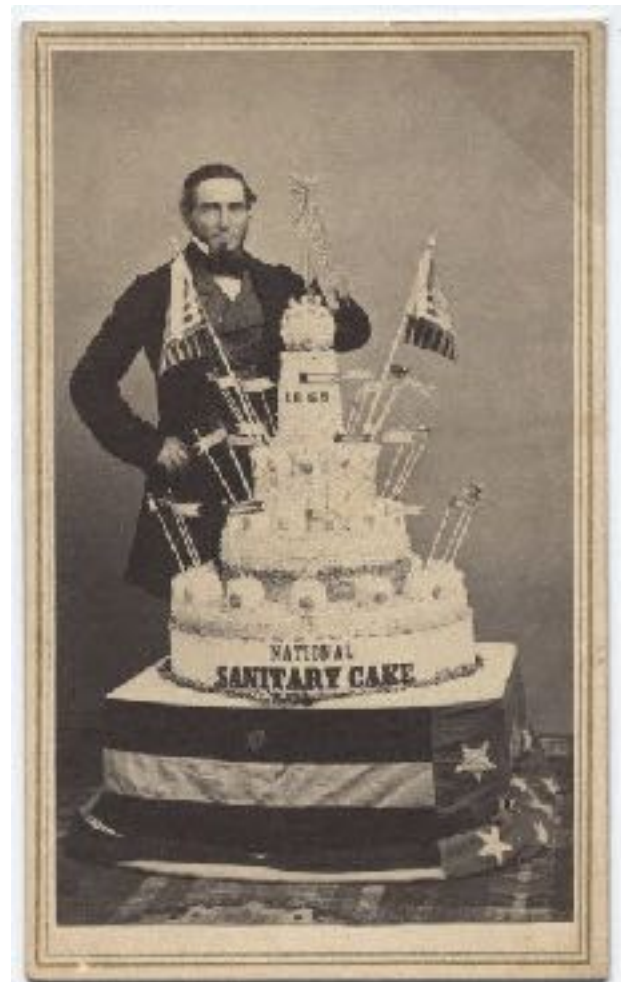
Californians, though far away from the major battles of the war, also wanted to show their loyalty to the Union. In September 1862 the Soldier's Relief Fund opened its office on Montgomery Street in San Francisco. (It officially became a branch of the USSC in 1864) Its goal was to primarily raise money for the Sanitary Commission in the East. One of its members, the preacher Thomas Starr King, tirelessly visited mining camps and small towns, reading patriotic poems and appealing to Californians to show their loyalty to the Union. In 1861, on George Washington's birthday, he spoke for two hours to a crowd of a thousand people on how they should remember Washington by preserving the Union. His efforts alone perhaps raised 1 million dollars for the Sanitary Commission.³

In August 1864, San Francisco church women banded together to promote a "Grand Fair of the Ladies' Christian Commission, for the Benefit of Our Sick and Wounded Soldiers and Sailors". The Union Hall on Howard Street did not charge them a rental fee for the occasion, and the San Francisco and San Jose RR gave reduced fares to those attending. The hall was filled with flags, garlands and small pavilions selling a variety of items. Visitors could partake of a luncheon, an ice cream parlor, an art gallery, an exhibit of quilts for sale, and a concert by the 9th Infantry Band from the Presidio. Later there was a grand ball for dancing and the necessary speeches. Hundreds of people attended the week long affair, and the fair raised \$24,000 in total.⁴

All in all, California raised 1.2 million dollars for the Sanitary Commission, almost one quarter of their funding during the war. As Professor Luisa Brandt wrote:

"Californians' gold sent to the Sanitary Fund and the strong degree of civic engagement expressed that this far Western state was politically and morally tethered to the Union. Indeed, USSC Secretary Stillé affirmed that because of these donations, "California took her place in the National ranks...as lustrous as the brightest in the glorious sisterhood of stars that were ever dimmed by treason."⁵

Medal sold at the Philadelphia Sanitary Fair, showing a woman giving water to soldiers. Obverse reads: "We gave our wealth to those who gave their health for us"



A "National Sanitary Cake" presented at the Arcata Sanitary Fair, 1864



³ Wikipedia "Thomas Starr King"

⁴ Dorothy Huggins, "Women in War-time San Francisco", 1864 <https://www.militarymuseum.org/CWWomen.pdf>

⁵ Louisa Brandt, "Worth Its Weight in Gold: Californian Benevolence and Respectability during the Civil War" in emergingcivilwar.com