

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

September 2021

Steve Johnson, Editor

### Board Members Meeting in August

Members of the Board of Directors of FOCWA met on August 21st. Present were board members Gary Hormel, Constance Smith, John Fitzpatrick, Frank Avila, Evelyn Mar, and Steve Johnson. Also present were members George Foxworth, Chuck Gardali, Michael Bennett, and new member Matt Hess. The highlights of the meeting were as follows: the Fort Point living history day on August 28th was cancelled due to a rise in Covid; the numbers of visitors coming to Alcatraz is increasing; Steve will approach the head ranger there and on Angel Island with a proposal for a mini living history day event in the fall; we can start planning for school visits in 2022, perhaps in conjunction with the Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War ( a combination of live presentations on the school field with Zoom conversations with the students); we will plan to be at the Golden Gate National Cemetery on Veteran's Day in November.

The full minutes of the meeting can be viewed on our website on the "Communications" page.

**Dates to Remember**  
**Saturday, Sept. 18, 10 am**  
**Board Meeting via Zoom**

### Compliments from a Visitor

It's not often we hear directly from visitors on Alcatraz after giving a tour, as they are usually anxious to explore the rest of the island and are often on tight schedule. But once in awhile we get a compliment, as seen in this message recently received by the rangers on Alcatraz:

I am writing to say thank you to **Gary Hormel** for the excellent guided tour he gave me and my friends at Alcatraz on July 31. My name is Nathan Howard. I am a history professor at the University of Tennessee at Martin and I have been teaching for 25 years. So I have experience to recognize exceptional instruction and communication. Gary was knowledgeable, passionate, patient, and clear as he talked to the large crowd about the many layers of Alcatraz and its past. After the 45-minute to 1-hour tour with the larger crowd, he discussed several elements with me and my 2 friends and he even delayed his lunch to talk with us. The visit to Alcatraz (my first and only visit) would have been memorable without his tour and discussion, but Gary's expertise and experience made it one of the most rewarding trips I've made (of many) to a national park or historic site. Please forward this message to Mr. Hormel and to the administrators of the tour program at Alcatraz.



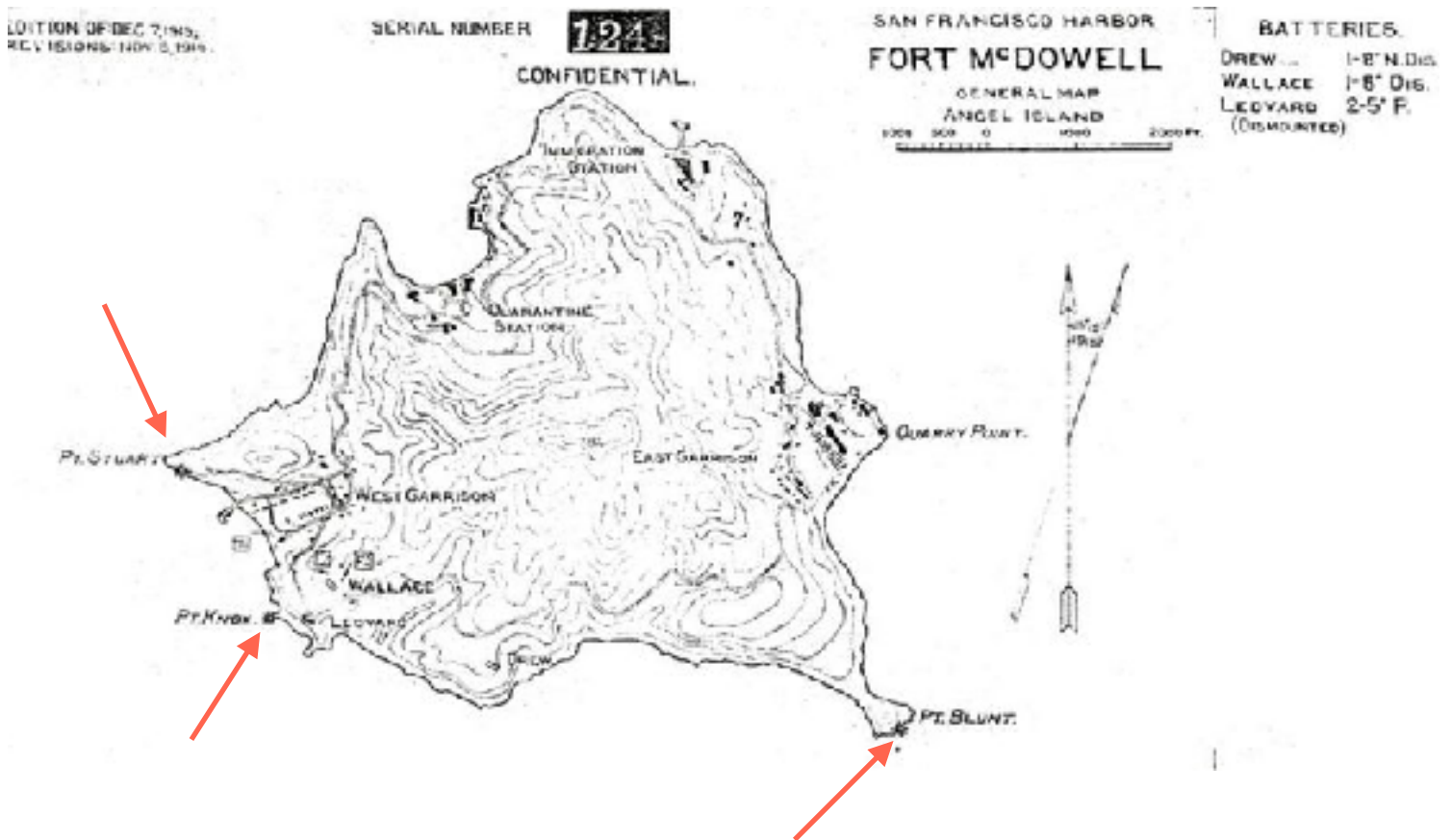
Gary Hormel speaks to a smaller crowd before the big wave of visitors arrive on the island. Lately a crowd of 100 on a tour is not unusual.

This is high praise indeed, coming from an educator. Gary had done a tour which encompassed more than just the Civil War history of the island, and visitors really appreciate this since the audio tour only covers the history of the federal prison. This reflects well on our organization and stresses the need for more FOCWA volunteers to be on the island. A good way for you to start — take one of Gary’s tours!

### Camp Reynolds on Angel Island

By 1863 it was decided by the army that more defenses were needed to protect the passage to the north and west of Alcatraz which led to the Mare Island Naval Station and the Benicia Armory. Angel Island — just 1 1/2 miles NE of Alcatraz — was a perfect location for placing cannon to overlook this passage. Col. Rene Edward De Russy, who had supervised the beginning construction of Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz, was sent back to California at the age of 71 (there was no retirement plan for officers) to supervise construction on Angel Island. He and the other engineers planned out the sites for cannons as well as barracks for the enlisted men, a few houses for the officers, a hospital and a brick quartermaster building. The whole island was named Fort McDowell, and the western garrison was named for Major General John Reynolds, who was killed by a sniper’s bullet in the battle of Gettysburg.

Earthen batteries were placed on the western side of the island at 3 key points - Point Stewart with one 10-in. Columbiad and three 32-pounders, Point Knox with two 10-in. and one 8-in. Rodman’s and seven 32-pounders, and Point Blunt with seven 32-pounders.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> from Fort Wiki [http://www.fortwiki.com/Fort\\_McDowell\\_\(1\)](http://www.fortwiki.com/Fort_McDowell_(1))

Men from Company B of the Third Artillery were sent over from Alcatraz to man the guns, but unfortunately they had to spend the winter of 1863 in tents because the barracks weren't completed until 1864. Because all the roads hadn't been built yet, it was easier to send soldiers from Alcatraz to Point Blunt directly by boat. Besides manning the guns and building roads, the soldiers also had the duty of removing squatters who had been on the island for years, along with their goats and cattle.



West garrison, also known as Camp Reynolds, as it appeared in 1864. The big quartermaster building, foreground, and the houses in the rear are still there, as well as some on the right side. (Library of Congress)

It wasn't until the cannons were in place that the army inspectors noted that the guns at Pt. Stewart were placed so high on the bluff that they couldn't be lowered to fire on ships passing just below them, thus making them ineffective. By then the war was coming to a close and it wasn't long before the old cannons were replaced by more modern ones.

Angel Island did provide a useful function for the soldiers on Alcatraz. First, the western bluffs were a good target when the cannoneers on Alcatraz wanted to practice their skills — though once they commenced firing without warning and the road crew on the island had to duck for cover. Second, there were gardens on Angel Island which provided fresh vegetables for the Alcatraz soldiers, which lowered the chance of them coming down with scurvy — this was still a big problem in the army as well as in the navy in the 1860's.<sup>2</sup>

Today Angel Island is a state park, which annually commemorates the Civil War period of its history by hosting Civil War Days every June (except for the past two years). Re-enactors put on a battle —

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Allen Mayberry, "Scurvy and Vitamin C", Food and Law Class, Harvard Law School <https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/8852139/Mayberry.html>

which never happened on the island — just to give visitors a sense of what a battle in the Civil War smelled and sounded and looked like. Cannons and muskets are fired, charges are made, men fall and are tended by women, and the Stars and Stripes are defended. Children can help make bread in the bake house, and visitors can tour the officer's home where women are sewing and knitting. Members of FOCWA participate in this living history day, which hopefully will resume in 2022.



Camp Reynolds today, part of Angel Island State Park. Old barracks on the left, Quartermaster Building in the distance. Sausalito across the water. Below: Scenes from past Civil War Days

