

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

October 2019

Steve Johnson, Editor

### How Alcatraz Got its Name

In August of 1775 the Spanish ship *San Carlos* sailed into San Francisco Bay - the first European ship to do so. Its captain, Juan Manuel de Ayala, had been given the task of exploring the bay as part of a master plan to establish a presidio and mission in the area. The ship's pilot, Don Jose de Cañizares, spent the next several weeks exploring the bay, and produced the first navigation chart and map of the bay, which was published in 1781. He was the first to attach the name "San Francisco" to the bay, which originally had been given to what is now called Drakes Bay. Among the several islands he described was one that was steep, barren, and filled with birds, "Isla de Alcatrazes".<sup>1</sup> He goes on to describe this island as dividing the channel in two, to the east of which is a "pocket, which at low tide is nearly dry" (the Berkeley mudflats) and to the west are "two harbors" (Mission Bay and Yerba Buena cove). Clearly this island is what we now call Yerba Buena Island. So how did the name get switched to the smaller island now known as Alcatraz? For this we can thank another sailor/explorer, this time from Britain. Captain Frederick William Beechey had been



Captain, later Admiral, Beechey, eventually became head of the Royal Geographic Society



commissioned by the Admiralty to explore the Arctic, the Bering Strait, and the northwest Pacific. With winter coming on, Beechey sailed his ship *Blossom* southward and entered San Francisco Bay on November 6, 1826. Beechey was a fine geographer, and his detailed charts were so good they were the basis for the American charts produced in the 1850's. But for some reason, when drawing his map, Beechey gave the name "Los Alcatrazes" to the island in the middle of the bay instead of the one originally named by the Spanish. Did he do this intentionally? (to "improve" the Spanish map?) or accidentally? (Perhaps Alcatraz had more birds when he visited

### Dates to Remember

#### Tuesday, Oct. 15, 2019

Peninsula C.W. Roundtable  
Lecture TBA

#### Thursday, Oct. 17, 2019

SF Civil War Roundtable talk  
"The War Criminal's Son" by  
Jane Singer, Gold Mirror  
Restaurant, 800 Taraval, S.F.  
6:00 pm dinner, 7:00 pm lecture

#### Friday, October 18, 2019

Jane Singer talk on Capt. Winder  
on Alcatraz, 3 pm

than did Yerba Buena.) We will never know. Beechey spent a week making his charts, and visited the Presidio and two missions. His journal gives descriptions of the missions, Spanish soldiers, and the Presidio during his week-long stay, and are very revealing. He was wise to observe that California “would not long remain in its indolent state - [that] the forces of other powers, and the ...commerce of the Pacific” would bring great changes to the land. So when you meet visitors from Britain on Alcatraz, you can mention that the name of this island, and indeed the reason for building a fort here, can be attributed to the British — whose Pacific naval squadron was seen as a possible threat by the American military, and thus one of the reasons to fortify Alcatraz Island.

### Author to Visit Alcatraz

Jane Singer, the author of “The War Criminal’s Son: The Civil War Saga of William A. Winder” will be visiting Alcatraz on Friday, October 18th. She will be coming on the staff boat and will be giving a talk to the staff at 3 pm about Capt. Winder, who was in command of Fort Alcatraz during three crucial events: the firing on the British warship *The Suttlej*, the *Chapman* conspiracy, and the unauthorized photography of the gun emplacements around Alcatraz. (see the April 2019 issue of this newsletter in the newsletter archives). Jane will be talking about the inspiration for her book, how she did her research, and incidental information she learned about Alcatraz. FOCWA members are especially invited to attend.

### Living History Day in September

FOCWA, along with the Park Service and Alcatraz cruises, sponsored a Living History Day on September 14th. We were fortunate to have the 3rd Artillery Band from Sacramento attend, as well as artillery and infantry re-enactors. Organized by former ranger John Nevins, the event ran smoothly, as many visitors took advantage of fort tours, cannon drills, and concerts by the band. Thanks to members Gary Hormel, Constance Smith, Evelyn Mars, Frank Avila, John Nevins, Greg Tracy, Michelle Atno-Hall, and Mike Bennett for a successful 1861 day.



Clockwise: An officer and his wife, the surgeon’s assistant, a cannon drill, a tour of the fort, a woman’s life in the 1860’s. All photos by NPS photographer Dave Rauenbuehler

**Book Review: Yerba Buena: San Francisco from the Beginning to the Gold Rush, 1769-1849** by Peter Browning, Editor (1998, Great West Books, Lafayette, CA)

The information about Beechey's visit to San Francisco came from this book, which is an excellent compendium of journals written by the many visitors to San Francisco Bay during the period from the first Spanish exploration to the American gold rush. These visiting sailors and scientists - British, Russian, French, German - all had detailed things to say about the native people (though often racist), the padres, the Spanish military, and the land as they saw it. It is an excellent look back in time, before the Gold Rush changed everything. Taken together, these observations give a picture of a place hardly touched by "civilization", which in a few short years was to come like a tidal wave upon an isolated, quiet world.

**San Francisco Civil War Roundtable Talk**

Jane Singer will also give a talk on Thursday, October 17th at the Gold Mirror Restaurant, 800 Taraval Street (at 18th Avenue). Dinner at 6 pm, lecture at 7 pm. For more information, go to their Facebook page listed below.

**Resources**

The San Francisco Civil War Roundtable Facebook page  
<https://www.facebook.com/SanFranciscoCivilWarRoundTable/>

The Peninsula Civil War Roundtable  
<http://www.peninsulacivilwarroundtable.org>

<sup>1</sup> The word "alcatrazes" is the old Spanish word for "pelicans". Some philologists suggest that the word originally came from the Moors, from an Arabic word for "the bucket on a water wheel" - hence the "bucket" on the pelican's bill