

# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

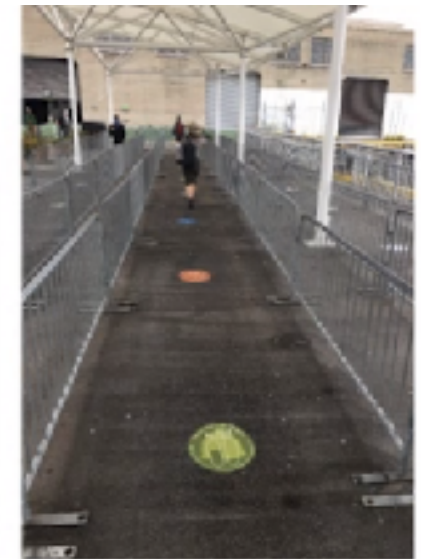
October 2020

Steve Johnson, Editor

### Alcatraz Island Update

Ranger Wendy reported that the average number of visitors to the island has been 300 per day. Labor Day weekend was sold out, with 750 people coming to the island on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. (All GGNRA sites were busy that weekend as well.) Generally, visitors to Alcatraz have stayed about an hour, two hours at the most. Most had never been to Alcatraz before. There are open pavilions at various spots where rangers are stationed to answer visitor's questions or give a very short presentation.

There is a table to separate them from the visitors and there are also some pop-up displays around the island which give some brief facts as people pass by on their walk around the island. Most visitors have been very good about wearing masks and following safety rules.



### Dates to Remember

- **Saturday, Oct. 17th**  
**FOCWA Virtual Meeting**  
**for all members. 10 a.m.**  
You will be sent a link in advance to join the online meeting

### Volunteers Can Return to the Island

Ranger Wendy, the Volunteer Co-ordinator, announced that beginning in October volunteers may come to the island again. However, there are strict conditions that have been imposed in order for volunteers to return. They must attend an online presentation by the GGNRA Safety Officer about Covid-19, how it's transmitted, health risks, and protocols that must be followed at all times (wearing mask, washing hands, safe distancing, etc.). They must also sign a new volunteer agreement, accepting the risks and agreeing to follow all safety measures. At this time volunteers will be needed to assist in roving around the island to make sure people are staying within boundaries. They can also help by answering questions in a pavilion or giving a very brief talk about some aspect of history. If you wish to volunteer, please discuss it with your family first, and if all agree you may contact Ranger Wendy for a volunteer packet which she will send to you by email.

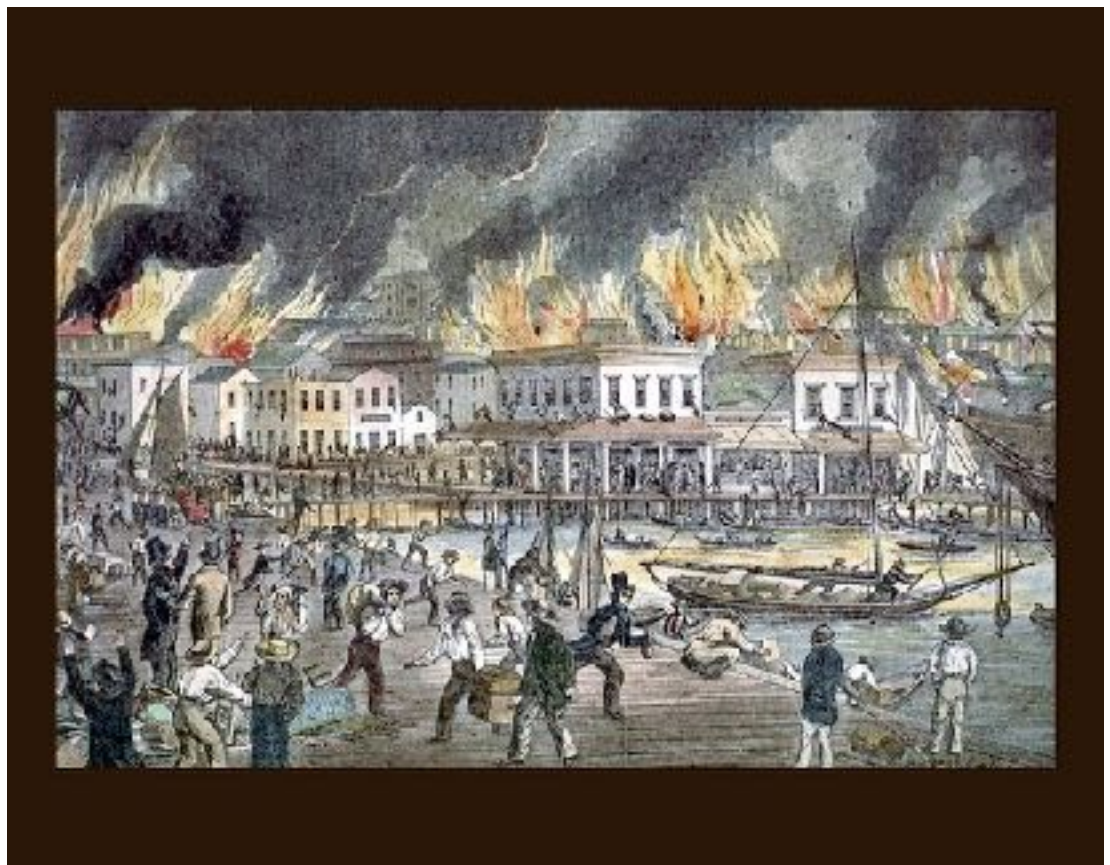
## San Francisco History Days

For the past several years FOCWA has participated in the San Francisco History Days held at the Old Mint at 5th & Mission Streets, every March. We would have a table set up with brochures and soldier and civilian items representing life in the 1860's, and let the public know about our organization and the history of Fort Alcatraz. This year the event was postponed because of the pandemic until September and most of it was online as various organizations put together virtual tours or talks about their piece of San Francisco history. Not to be left out, several of us put together a presentation, and this will be uploaded on our website very soon. Also, member Steve Johnson gave a live online presentation on Friday the 25th which covered a brief history of San Francisco and the Civil War, and a description of our organization and its activities. It was attended by 28 viewers. Steve also gave a talk at the Black Point site (Point San Jose, west battery in 1863) at Fort Mason on Sunday the 27th which was attended by 6 people. (More might have attended if it wasn't one of the hottest days of the year in the city.) Nevertheless, both presentations were good publicity for FOCWA, and virtual presentations apparently are the wave of the future.

## Firefighting in the 1860's, San Francisco

Since we are in an historic fire season in California, it might be instructive to know how people fought fires in the 1860's. We know nothing about any fires that may have occurred on Alcatraz Island during the Civil War era, but we do have a lot of information about fire fighting in San Francisco from the earliest days as a city. As the population of San Francisco grew during and after the Gold Rush, buildings, houses, warehouses, and shacks were built out of wood, usually close to one another, and these became fuel for a succession of several fires in both 1850 and 1851.

The great fire of June 1850 started a month after a previous fire destroyed many buildings around Portsmouth Square. This fire destroyed 300 buildings and burned from Kearney Street down to the bay. It was after this devastating fire the city officials decided to build a cistern for water storage near the square, and to form a fire department. More buildings were being built of brick, some of which can be seen today around Jackson Square.



One fire destroyed almost three-fourths of the city. The only way to stop fires at the time was to quickly dismantle the adjoining structures to keep the fire from spreading. Obviously a better method had to be employed, so the city aldermen purchased one of the city's first fire apparatus from New York — a hand pumper that took 6 men pull to the fire and to operate the hand pump; it also took many citizens to form a bucket brigade to supply the pan with water for the pump. The nozzle could shoot water 120 feet into the air but the apparatus had to be brought up close to the fire to be effective —on occasion it got singed. At the beginning of 1849 the city had three volunteer fire companies who would compete with one another on who would get to the fire first, on occasion getting into fights over who really was the first to arrive.

The first hoses were made from buffalo hide and were very heavy; they were pulled on a cart to a fire. Hook and ladder teams would also run to a fire pulling the ladders on a cart behind them with ropes. The hooks were used to tear away the roofs from adjoining buildings so they wouldn't catch fire.

Cisterns began to be built in various areas around the downtown area to supply water for fire-fighting, and the first hydrants were installed in 1858. In 1863 the city received its first steamer engine, pulled by three horses. The horses were so well trained that at the sound of the bell they would back into their positions at the front of the engine on their own and within minutes they were harnessed and out the door. Horse-drawn steamers were used all the way up to 1921 when they were replaced by motorized fire trucks.



One of San Francisco's first fire-fighting machines. A bucket brigade poured water into the basin and up to 8 men pumped the handbars. The nozzle could swivel and shoot a stream of water 137 feet. It is on display at the SF Fire Department Museum

The first electric alarm system was completed by 1865. It was basically a telegraph system, so that when a lever at a firebox was pulled, a series of impulses rang a bell at the nearest station; the number of bells indicated which box the alarm came from. (These red fire call boxes are still in use today; they have been useful in emergencies when phone or cell phone service has been disrupted.)

No doubt at the various Army forts around the bay in the 1860s, there were buckets filled with sand or water nearby if there was a fire, particularly in the kitchen areas, and soldiers were familiar with bucket brigades if it came to that. On Alcatraz there were large cisterns to hold water which soldiers had access to for firefighting. Unknown to them, fire fighting in the future would take place on land with tanker trucks, on the water (San Francisco now has two fireboats), and in the air (currently the largest firefighting plane in the world is being used to attack the fires north of San Francisco).

**Resource:** <https://www.guardiansofthecity.org/sffd/index.html>