



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



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Island News

The island will be closed from October 26 - November 18 in order to make major repairs to the island's dock. Currently there are about 200 - 250 people per boat arriving on the island as we begin the fall season. The island staff is preparing for the annual Sunrise Gathering of indigenous people on Monday, October 12th. <https://alcatrazcitycruises.com/tickets/sunrise-gathering> Hundreds of tribes gather on that day to celebrate their culture, spirituality, and friendship. The parade ground is being power washed, and weeds are being removed for the occasion. Big crowds on the island are also expected for Fleet Week; the island is an excellent place to view the air show. This year the Blue Angels are returning. <https://fleetweeksf.org/calendar-of-events/>

Dates to Remember
Saturday, October 3
Living History Day
on Alcatraz 9am - 4 pm

October 12
Indigenous Peoples Day

October 26 - November 18
Island closed

Alcatraz Living History Day, October 3

The National Park Service is partnering with the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz to present a Civil War Living History Day on the island, once the site of a powerful fort protecting San Francisco Bay. Re-enactors will have on exhibit medical tools of the period, weapons and equipment used by Union soldiers, and the types of currencies used during the Civil War. Ladies will be there to display household goods and medicines of that era, and will explain the role of women in the U.S. Sanitary Commission (the precursor of the American Red Cross). We are especially pleased that the Third Artillery Brass Band will be back to play tunes of the 1860s. Hourly tours will tell visitors the story of Fort Alcatraz and the importance of San Francisco and of California during the Civil War.



FOCWA Board Meeting, September 22

Last month the board of trustees of the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz met via Zoom to discuss a variety of issues. Present were chairman Gary Hormel, Secretary Constance Smith, Treasurer Steve Johnson, Membership Chairman John Ferris, and board member Frank Avula. The minutes of the last meeting were read and approved, and so was the treasurer's report. The board agreed to partly subsidize lunches for participants and to fully pay for lunches for rangers at Living History Days on Alcatraz as a way of thanking them for their help in making the event successful. It was also decided to begin our membership drive this month by mailing renewal forms to present and past members. Included in the mailing will be a ballot for members to fill out and return by mail, or by email to the secretary. Do you know any Civil War history buffs? Suggest they visit our website http://www.friendsofcivilwaralcatraz.org/about_us.htm so they can see what we do to support Civil War education.

The U.S. Signal Corps

How does an army communicate over distances? On the immediate battlefield, drums and bugles were used to send orders to the troops to advance, retreat, etc. Over long distances, however, a system was needed to send messages faster than a rider could bring them. In 1856 Major Albert James Meyer, an army medical officer, had an interest in sign language for the deaf. This led him to the idea of using flags to communicate over distance using a wig-wag system with a binary code.¹ To see a demonstration how the flags were used, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xpk67YzOn5w> In 1859, Myers proposed his flag system to the army board of examination headed by Lt. Col. Robert E. Lee, who personally thought flags were too slow but nevertheless approved a test of the system. Tests were conducted at various sites, and it showed that the flags could relay messages over a distance of 15 miles. In June 1860 Congress approved funding for the Signal Corps, and Major Meyer was appointed head of the Corps. However, he was given no funding for personnel, and had to entreat other officers to provide men to learn the flag system. It wasn't until 1863 that President Lincoln provided funding for training soldiers specifically to be flag men. During this time a rivalry began between the Signal Corps and the Military Telegraph Service, and when Meyer tried to incorporate telegraphy into the Signal Corps he was removed from the Corps. After the war Meyer was returned to his position as head of the Signal Corps, which by then included the telegraph service. How did Fort Alcatraz communicate with the mainland and Fort point? Mostly by couriers traveling by boats. Underwater cables covered with a latex sap had been used to transmit telegraph signals in New York since 1848, but in San Francisco they were susceptible to damage caused by the swirling currents of the bay. So it is likely they used signal flags to communicate - until the fog would come in. (See also <https://www.civilwarmed.org/signal-corps/>)



¹ Wikipedia, "Signal Corps in the American Civil War" Interestingly, computers use a binary code to convert numeric codes into text and numbers. See how this works at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xpk67YzOn5w>