

NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

November 2021

Steve Johnson, Editor

Board Meeting in October

Members of the Board of Directors of FOCWA met online on Saturday, October 30th. Present were board members, Constance Smith, Frank Avila, Evelyn Mar, and Steve Johnson. Also present were members George Foxworth, Chuck Gardali, Michael Bennett, and Matt Hess. The highlights of the meeting were as follows:

1. the winter schedule on Alcatraz will be starting soon, with reduced hours. However, visitors are still coming in large numbers and volunteers are very welcome there
 2. Membership renewal letters have been sent out, and membership cards have been printed
 3. Steve and Constance will be giving presentations at the Presidio to new rangers and volunteers about California & the Civil War and the role of women during that conflict
 4. There may still be a possibility for a mini-living history day on Alcatraz, but it may not take place until next year; the conversation with the NPS about this is ongoing
 5. Some FOCWA members will participate in a Veterans Day activity at the Presidio National Cemetery
- The full minutes of the meeting will be posted soon on our website on the “Communications” page.

Dates to Remember
Thursday, November 11
Veteran’s Day

Thomas Starr King, the Man who Helped California Stay in the Union

Thomas Starr King was the son of a preacher who became a self-educated minister and eventually assumed his father’s position at the Charlestown Universalist Church in Massachusetts. In 1849 he became the pastor at the Hollis Street Church in Boston, where he gained the reputation as one of the finest preachers in all of New England. In 1860 he accepted an invitation to be the minister of the First Unitarian Church in San Francisco. When asked about the difference between the two religions, King said “the Universalists believe God is too good to damn them forever, and the Unitarians believe they are too good for God to damn them forever”¹

Although Thomas immediately loved the beauty of San Francisco, his family did not (his wife called it “Sand Francisco”²) After hearing him preach, Jesse Benton Fremont invited him to attend a lyceum (lecture and discussion session) at the Fremont home at Black Point (now Fort Mason). They soon became good friends and realized a common mission — to make sure California re-



¹ from the Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography, <https://uudb.org/articles/thomasstarrking.html>

² “Thomas Starr King: The man who 'saved' California - and who California forgot” article by Katie Dowd in SFGate, May 26, 2020

mained solidly in and for the Union. This was at a time when there was talk by politicians of California becoming an independent Pacific Republic. King embarked on a journey to visit towns and mining camps all over the northern parts of the state, describing the mystic bonds which tied all Americans together into one inseparable union. He also spoke out against the evils of slavery and advocated for the election of Republican candidates. His powerful speaking voice and use of patriotic imagery attracted hundreds — sometimes thousands — of people to his lectures, and no doubt had an influence in the election of Republican Leland Stanford as governor and California's vote for Lincoln in the election of 1860.

When the war began in the East, and news of the many casualties were reported, the Reverend King once again traveled the speaker circuit and implored the large audiences to donate to the Sanitary Commission, which was running the hospitals to care for the sick and wounded soldiers. Largely through his efforts, California sent \$1.5 million dollars to the Commission — which was 20% of all the states' contributions to that cause.³ Unfortunately, his tireless efforts weakened his already frail health, and in 1864 he died from diphtheria and pneumonia. Over 20,000 mourners came to his funeral. His remains were among the few allowed to remain in the city limits, and his grave can be seen at the First Unitarian Universalist church on Franklin Street. A school, a mountain peak, a giant sequoia, and a street have been named after him. Statues of him are in Golden Gate Park and in the capitol grounds in Sacramento.

The Rev. King left one other legacy to California, besides helping to keep the state in the Union. In his travels King visited Yosemite, whose beauty and majesty he likened to that of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. He began writing letters and enlisting the support of prominent citizens to preserve the valley, which Lincoln did in 1864 — the first federal park in the United States.⁴

Books for the libraries at Fort Point and Alcatraz

Members Constance Smith and Steve Johnson will be giving a presentation to new rangers and staff about the role of California in the Civil War and the role of women at that time. They will be requesting that the FOCWA board approve the purchase of the following books for the libraries at Ft. Point and Alcatraz for the continuing education of park staff:

The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War by Leonard Richards

California and the Civil War by Richard Hurley

Antebellum and Civil War San Francisco by Monica Trobits

Every Day Life during the Civil War, a Guide for Writers, Students and Historians – Michael J Varhola

The Golden State in the Civil War, Thomas Starr King, the Republican Party and the Birth Of Modern California by Glenna Matthew

These books are also recommended to our members.

Note: There will be no newsletter in December

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Starr_King

⁴ <https://opensfhistory.org/news/2020/10/25/the-san-franciscans-thomas-starr-king/>