



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



November 2024

Steve Johnson, Editor

In this issue: Soldiers' Votes in the Election of 1864 There is no newsletter in December

Island News

Starting on November 3 the boats to the island will revert to the winter schedule. The first visitor boat will leave Pier 33 at 8:40 and the boats will run every half hour after that. The last departure will be at 1:35 pm. From then on the boats will be bringing visitors who signed up for the Conservancy tours only. There will be no parking at the garage next to Pier 33, as it is being used for the Election Bureau of San Francisco; this will be until the third week of November. There is parking across the street at 50 Francisco Street; fee is \$19 for all day if in by 9 am.

Fall at Fort Point, Sunday, November 3

Member and Park Volunteer Constance Smith is organizing a "Fall at the Fort Day", with activities to show visitors the kinds of activities Victorian families would do to celebrate the fall. Games, dancing, baked goods, as well as the usual soldiers exhibits and fort tours will be on the schedule. She could always use more volunteers.

Alcatraz Volunteer Appreciation Day on Saturday, November 16

The rangers of Alcatraz are sponsoring a volunteer appreciation day at the Crissy Field Center, which is just down the stairs from the Tunnel Tops. The address is 603 Mason Street, and there is free parking across the street at East Beach parking lot. Bus #30 stops nearby. The event starts at 11 am and goes to 1 pm; if possible, bring a dessert to share. You must reserve by November 1 by sending an email to Ranger Roger Fang roger_fang@nps.gov

Veteran's Day, Monday November 11

Members of FOCWA will join Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War to stand at the gates of the National Cemetery in the Presidio to welcome veterans and their families. We will also give talks at the gravesites of Civil War notables around noon. So far it's just Steve, Constance, and Ken. Around 1 p.m. we will go to the main post to have a picnic. Rain will cancel.

November, 1864 -- A Crucial Election

Just as the 2024 election is crucial for the future of our country, so too was the presidential election 160 years ago, in November of 1864. This was the third year of the Civil War; people were tired of the war, and the Democratic Party was offering an alternative to continuing the war. The so-called "Peace Democrats" had nominated as their candidate the former general of the Army of the Potomac, George McClellan. As you remember, McClellan was sacked by

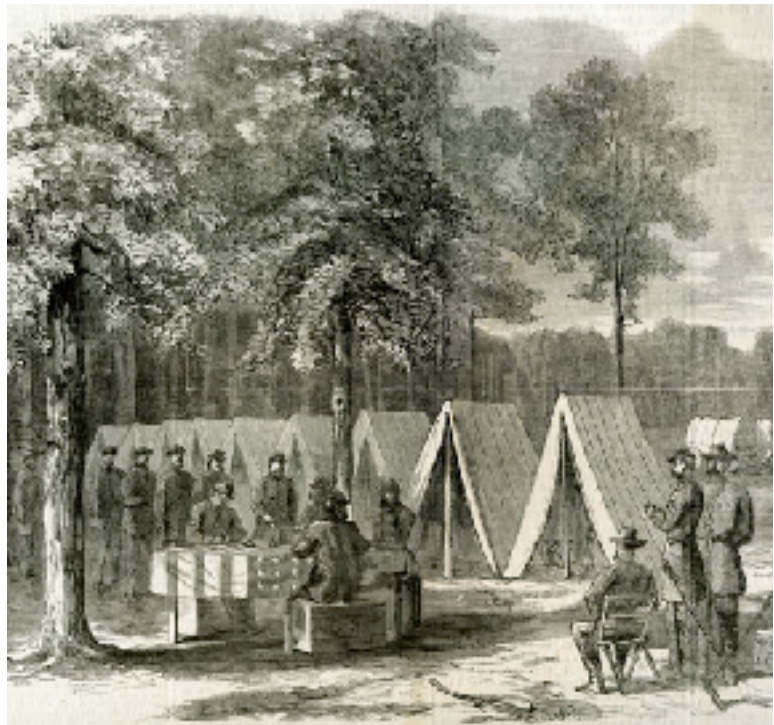
Dates to Remember
Sunday, November 3
"Fall in the Fort" at
Fort Point, 10 am - 4 pm
Monday, November 11
Veteran's Day at the
Presidio National Cemetery
Saturday, November 16
Volunteer Appreciation Day
Crissy Field Center, 11 am

Lincoln for not being aggressive enough in attacking the Confederates, and now he was willing to face off against Lincoln, whom he despised. The platform of this wing of the Democratic Party (not all Democrats wanted to end the war) was to enter into immediate negotiations with the Richmond government and make concessions to bring the war to an end. Among the concessions was to restore slavery and to return the country “as it was” before the war. Republicans began to call these Democrats “copperheads” - after the Eastern snake whose bite is poisonous. Just as in our current atmosphere of vituperation, the Republicans and Democrats were using hard words about the other side in speeches and in newspapers, but the worse came from the Copperheads, as this example shows:

“[Lincoln is a] fungus from the corrupt womb of bigotry and fanaticism” and a “worse tyrant and more inhuman butcher than has existed since the days of Nero ... The man who votes for Lincoln now is a traitor and murderer ... And if he is elected to misgovern for another four years, we trust some bold hand will pierce his heart with dagger point for the public good”.¹

Because the war had been going badly, Lincoln was concerned he wasn’t going to be re-elected, and in August even privately wrote out a concession speech offering to assist the next president in saving the Union, if it was possible to do so. He kept the speech in his desk, just in case.² But on September 3, 1864, Atlanta fell to infantry and cavalry under the command of General William T. Sherman, making this a major victory for the Union. General Sheridan’s victories in the Shenandoah valley and Rear Adm. Farragut’s victory in Mobile Bay also helped to revive hopes that the war would soon be over. Because of these victories, McClellan lost interest in the election. Worse still for the Democrats, their actions to provoke draft riots in New York, interfere with the draft, and their criticisms of soldiers, all angered the Union soldiers in the field. Many soldiers registered as Republicans because of this.

Mail-in ballots were first used in the Civil War, because so many men (over a million) were away from their home town where they would ordinarily vote. Pennsylvania was the first state to allow voting by mail, and other Northern states followed.³ New Jersey, Indiana, and Illinois were not able to pass an amendment to their state’s constitution to allow soldiers to vote outside the state. The usual procedure was to have state clerks with voting lists visit the battlefields and set up polling places so soldiers



Soldiers voting, from *Harper's Weekly*, October 1864

¹ Marcus Pomery, editor of the *La Crosse Democrat*, quoted in the Wikipedia article “Copperhead” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copperhead_\(politics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copperhead_(politics))

² Jon Meacham, *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle*, p.335

³ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/how-mail-in-voting-began-on-civil-war-battlefields>

could cast their votes. Ship commanders were ordered to set up polling places on ships.⁴ The Democrats, knowing that the soldiers loved Lincoln, tried to prevent soldiers from absentee voting, calling it unconstitutional and subject to fraud. (Sound familiar?) There were indeed some attempts at fraud, particularly one in New York that was discovered in time.⁵ But overall, the voting went smoothly, and the 70,000 soldiers who voted chose Lincoln four-to-one over McClellan. They viewed McClellan as someone who would undo all they had fought for, and the sacrifice made by their dead comrades would be for nothing. This was the theme in many letters sent home by soldiers after the election.⁶ Interestingly, in 1864 Lincoln won by a large plurality in the San Francisco Bay counties, and not so well in the counties of central or southern California. Soldiers in the state voted overwhelmingly for Lincoln - 91%.⁷

We don't know if soldiers stationed at Alcatraz - mostly California volunteers at that time - were given leave to vote in their town, or if a polling place was set up for them on the island or in San Francisco. All we know is that those who could vote probably did so, since it was a crucial election. And that is still a guiding principle today.

The Next Living History Days in 2025

Fort Point is scheduled for Living History Day on Saturday, February 1, 2025.

Alcatraz is tentatively scheduled for Living History Day on Saturday, April 12, 2025.

Buffalo Soldiers Coming to Fresno on March 22, 2025

Fresno State University is hosting a "Taste of Freedom" event to celebrate Black History, to be held at O'Neill Park in Fresno. At this event Buffalo Soldier re-enactors will be bringing their horses, along with some black cowboys, to show their riding skills and talk about their contribution to the history of the West. The organizers would very much like other Union soldiers to attend and set up exhibits like we do at Fort Point. If you haven't seen Buffalo Soldiers ride in columns on their horses, it's very impressive -- and this will be your chance to see them and meet with them in person. More details later.



Members of the 10th U.S. Cavalry, Co. G, in Sacramento

⁴ Michael Forsyth, "The Military Provides Lincoln a Mandate", U.S. Army Center of Military History https://www.history.army.mil/html/bookshelves/resmat/civil_war/articles/article_from_AH53w.pdf

⁵ You can read about this in a Washington Post article, "Mail in ballots were part of a plot to deny Lincoln re-election in 1864" <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/08/22/mail-in-voting-civil-war-election-conspiracy-lincoln/>

⁶ Forsyth, op. cit.

⁷ Wikipedia, "1864 United States Presidential Election in California" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1864_United_States_presidential_election_in_California