NEWSLETTER
Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

July 2026 **Steve Johnson, Editor**

In this issue: Book Review - "April 1865" by Jay Winik
Please note: There will be no newsletter in December

Island News

The island is now closed and will remain so while repairs are being made to the island's dock. Alcatraz will reopen on November 18th if all goes well with construction. Rangers have been assigned to other parks during this time.

Dates to Remember

Alcatraz Re-opens November 18

Wednesday, November 11 Veteran's Day

Alcatraz Living History Day in October

Re-enactors arrived on the island on October 3rd to portray soldiers and civilians of the 1860s to educate visitors about the Civil War history of the island. They were joined by the Third Artillery Band, who played period tunes, and ladies who represented the U.S. Sanitary Commission. Exhibits included medical instruments of the time, common medicines (which included mercury and arsenic!), various uniforms, and U.S. and Confederate currency. Hourly tours of Fort Alcatraz were very popular. On the tour, people were surprised to learn that the first civilian prisoners on Alcatraz were sent there in 1863 - they had plotted to steal gold from California and take it to the South. They also learned that army troops from Northern California played an important role during the Civil War by turning back a Texas army in 1862 that was on the way to take over Southern California. You can hear these stories and more by coming to the next Living History Day on Alcatraz, which will be in April.

Your Vote Counts

The current board of directors consists of: Gary Hormel, chairman; Constance Smith, secretary; Steve Johnson treasurer; John Ferris, membership director; and Frank Avila, board member at large. All have agreed to serve another year. You have received a ballot in the mail; please send it in along with your renewal check to John Ferris (see the membership page on our website). It is important that members vote; having an elected board is a requirement for a non-profit organization.

Book Review: *April 1865 – the Month that Saved America* by Jay Winik

Despite the fall of Atlanta, Nashville, and Petersburg in the fall of 1864, Lee's Army of Northern Virginia was still intact with about 15,000 men. In desperation, the Confederate government decided to arm black men to fight in the army alongside white soldiers. Lee led his army out of the trenches of Petersburg when it appeared it could no longer defend the Confederate capital of Richmond. In April 1865 he now headed southwest to Appomattox Courthouse to retrieve supplies stored there for his half-starved men. But Grant had moved ahead and surrounded Lee's Army, forcing Lee to finally surrender. This is the story of the end of the war – or was it? In Jay Winik's book *April 1865 – The Month that Saved America* there are many subplots to this story. Would Lee's army really surrender, or would they revert to "guerilla warfare" and carry on the war in the the hundreds of hills in the South? What about the armies that hadn't surrendered yet - the Army of the Tennessee in North Carolina and the Confederate forces in the West? And when Lincoln was fatally shot by John Wilkes Booth, would the Northern states revert to bloody revenge against the South? Was Andrew Johnson really supposed to become president? Would Lincoln's plan for re-uniting the country be carried out?

Lee surrenders to Grant, April 9, 1865

Winik narrates the stories behind these questions in dramatic style, giving insights into the thinking of the major players in this drama of the last month of the war. He explains why the decisions made by Grant, Lee, Lincoln, Booth, Stanton, and Johnson were to have a major impact on the future of America. The book has extensive notes regarding sources, resources, and added commentary.

It is always good to also read the critics of a book, and it is useful to read this review of Winik's book by William Vodrey of the Cleveland Civil War Roundtable: **https://www.clevelandcivilwarroundtable.com/a-review-of-april-1865-the-month-that-saved-america-by-jay-winik/** The book was published by Perennial Press, 2002, and is available on Amazon or can be ordered by your local bookstore.

Also recommended:

Out of the Storm by Noah Andre Trudeau, the third book in his trilogy about the Civil War.

The Role of Californians at Appomattox

About 500 men, mostly from Northern California, used their bonus money for signing up in the army to pay their passage to Boston. There they were assigned to the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry and spent much of their time in Northern Virginia, chasing after the Confederate guerilla John Mosby. This unit was instrumental in the battles to win the siege of Petersburg, and later spearheaded the Union cavalry's plan to block Lee's army from advancing past Appomattox Courthouse. They were there for Lee's surrender. You can read their story in *California Sabers* by R. James McLean, published by Indiana University Press, 2000.