



NEWSLETTER

Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



March 2026

Steve Johnson, Editor

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Island News

The coyote who swam to Alcatraz has not been spotted again by the rangers. The Alcatraz dock was closed for a day for repair work and may need to be closed again at some point for more repairs. The island was busy on the President's Day weekend but visitation since then has just been average. The north wing of the cell house remains closed for extensive repair work; there is no access to the dining room, hospital, or shower room. A fort history tour will be given as a refresher for volunteers by military historian John Martini on March 10th. For details, or to sign up as a volunteer, please contact the editor.

Dates to Remember
Saturday, March 21
Volunteer Appreciation
Party, 10 am - noon

Saturday, April 11
Living History Day
Alcatraz
8 am - 4 pm

Elections of Officers for 2026

The following officers were re-elected to serve another term on the Board of Directors, for the year 2026. They are: Gary Hormel, chairman; Constance Smith, secretary; Steve Johnson, treasurer; John Ferris, membership chairman; Frank Avila, events chairman.

Living History Day at Fort Point last February



On February 7th re-enactors took over Fort Point to demonstrate the life of a soldier there in the 1860s. Members of the 20th Maine performed military drills and did cannon demonstrations. Ladies showed how knitting socks and scarves was well received by the soldiers, and how they prepared food for the troops. An exhibit of the US Balloon Corps was popular with the visitors, along with the medical tools of the period. Music was provided by the Wandering Bow Band and by the fife and drum team. Other exhibits included period writing instruments, weapons, and money of the time.

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Though the numbers of visitors was reduced because the Super Bowl was also that weekend, enough people came by the fort to make the whole day worthwhile.

The Emperor of the United States

Right about the time Fort Alcatraz was beginning operations in 1859, a man in an old army uniform walked into the office of the *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin* newspaper, and gave the editor, George Fitch, a document to publish. The document was a proclamation, which read:

"At the peremptory request of a large majority of the citizens of these United States, I, Joshua Norton, formerly of Algoa Bay, Cape of Good Hope, and now for the past nine years and ten months of San Francisco, California, declare and proclaim myself Emperor of these U.S., and in virtue of the authority thereby in me vested, do hereby order and direct the representatives of the different States of the Union to assemble in the Musical Hall of this city on the 1st day of February next, then and there to make such alterations in the existing laws of the Union as may ameliorate the evils under which the country is laboring, and thereby cause confidence to exist, both at home and abroad, in our stability and integrity.
—NORTON I, Emperor of the United States." ¹

Mr. Fitch, possibly sensing such a preposterous statement would amuse his readers, went ahead and published it. Not only did this amuse San Franciscans, but they embraced the idea of having something no American city had - its own emperor! They began to bow to him on the street and would greet him as "Your Majesty". Restaurants would save him a seat so they could put a sign in the window saying "The Emperor of the United States Eats Here!"

Soon Emperor Norton was issuing proclamations on a regular basis. One of them, in October 1859, abolished Congress because of its "fraud and corruption". When Congress failed to comply, Norton ordered General Winfield Scott to send in the army to "clear the Halls of Congress". When the army didn't comply he abolished the army. Nonetheless, from time to time some officers at the Presidio would provide him with a used uniform to keep him looking "regal". He would spend his time walking the city, inspecting buildings and structures for their safety, and proposed that a bridge be built to connect San Francisco with Oakland. Norton won the heart of the citizens of the city, and they became outraged when he was arrested one day by a security officer for "being a lunatic". The *Daily Alta* newspaper wrote:

Norton was in his day a respectable merchant, and since he has worn the Imperial purple he has shed no blood, robbed nobody, and despoiled the country of no one, which is more than can be said of any of his fellows in that line.

The chief of police released Norton immediately and had to apologize to the citizens for arresting their emperor.



¹ from the Emperor Norton Trust <https://emperornortontrust.org/emperor/life>

Despite his eccentricities, Norton was ahead of his time. He signed a petition to give women the vote. He called for tolerance and stopped a gang of toughs from harassing a Chinese man.

It's not known if the soldiers from Alcatraz on patrol in the city would salute Emperor Norton when they encountered him on the street; it's likely they went along with this charade and acknowledged him as the emperor. After all, this was San Francisco.

Alcatraz Living History Day, Saturday, April 11

Re-enactors will be joining Park Service rangers and volunteers in telling the story of the soldiers who were stationed on Alcatraz during the Civil War. Tours of Fort Alcatraz and many exhibits will show visitors what life was like for the men of the U.S. Third Artillery and the First California Volunteers who manned the cannons to protect San Francisco Bay from 1859 to 1865. Any member of FOCWA is welcome to join in - please contact the editor.

More photos from Fort Point Living History Day in February

Photos taken by NPS photographer Dave Rauenbuehler



More photos can be seen on the Facebook page of the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power". A. Lincoln