



# NEWSLETTER

## Friends of Civil War Alcatraz



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Steve Johnson, Editor

*In this issue: How Did They Lift Those Huge Cannons into Place?*

**Island News** The Park Service has officially announced the appointment of Ranger Angel Garcia to be the Supervisor of Alcatraz National Park. He had been the supervisor of the South District which included Fort Point, and is well known to those of us who volunteer there. He is very enthusiastic about living history programs (he co-ordinated them when he was the head ranger at Fort McHenry) and a great supporter of volunteers. We look forward very much to now work with him on Alcatraz. In other news, the island is now on the high season schedule, during which boats for the public start at 8:40 a.m. and the last day boat leaves at 6:30 p.m. There are now three boats for the nighttime tours. The winter seasonal rangers will be leaving soon and will eventually be replaced by summer seasonals. We are pleased that Ranger Tom, a man of much historical knowledge, will be returning to the island.

### Dates to Remember

**Saturday April 13th**  
Living History Day on  
Alcatraz, all day

**Monday May 27th**  
Memorial Day at the  
Presidio Cemetery  
10 am - 2 pm

### FOCWA Members Visit a School

A teacher in San Mateo saw on our website that we visit schools and asked if we'd visit her school. Constance Smith, Frank Avila, and Steve Johnson from FOCWA - along with Ranger Erick Cortes from Fort Point - agreed to come to her school and arrived on March 22nd. We brought lots of items for show and tell, which we set up in her classroom. Eighth graders from different classrooms came during their lunch hour to see the items we laid out on several tables: soldiers' equipment, 1860s medicines, surgical tools, and magazines and books of that era. Then with 120 students in attendance in the gymnasium, we gave presentations on California and the Civil War, medical practices of that time, and the role of women. Ranger Erick invited the students to come visit the parks in the



Bay Area that are Civil War sites. The teacher was given a list of resources relating to the Civil War (books, websites, videos), and the Sons of Union Veterans will be donating a Civil War book to the school library. All in all, we felt it was a good visit; the students were interested and attentive, and the teacher was delighted that we enhanced her lessons about the Civil War in a very tangible way.

### **How Did They Lift Those Big Guns and Cannon Balls?**

A question we often get at Fort Point is how did they get those big cannons, weighing thousands of pounds, up to the very top of the fort? They did have cranes in the mid-1800s but they would have been impractical at the fort or on Alcatraz. Instead, the engineers used an age-old device called a gin, which was a tripod with sturdy legs holding a series of pulleys. The pulleys gave the men hauling on the rope a good deal of mechanical advantage, allowing 10 - 12 men the ability to lift a cannon as high as was needed. At Fort Pulaski on the Savannah River in Georgia, you can see one of these gins on



display. (Fort Point had a huge one on display but had to be stored away due to deterioration). A rope was tied to the cannon, then went through two or three pulleys and around a roller. The roller had notches so if the rope slipped the notch would keep the cannon from falling. Men would pull on the rope while a soldier used a lever to advance the rope to the next notch. At Fort Point, the gin was close to the edge of the walkway at the top so the cannon could be hauled up to the second or third level. The cannon was then swung over to a smaller gin and placed onto a carriage. All of this was done without the aid of steam power, which later of course changed the way heavy things were lifted.

Engineers near Savannah remove an 8-inch Columbiad cannon from Fort McAllister, using a tripod gin.

Cannonballs could weigh as much as 300 lbs and needed several men to lift them. The cannonballs had holes in them and tongs would be inserted into the holes so the ball could be lifted and placed into the cannon, after the bags of powder.



Here you can see soldiers on Alcatraz Island about to lift a large cannonball to place into the cannon. Two men are carrying the ammunition case and one man is preparing the fuse. The actual sequence for loading and firing the cannon would be: 1) clean out debris using a “worm”; 2) wet the inside with a sponge to eliminate any sparks; 3) at the same time use a leather thumb covering to block the vent hole from receiving any sparks; 4) ram in the powder bags; 5) ram in the cannonball; 6) prick a hole in the powder bag with a thin, sharp metal rod; 7) put the friction primer into the fuse hole; 8) pull on the lanyard attached to the friction primer to fire the cannon. The men either plugged their ears with their fingers or with cotton balls - neither of which was very effective from the concussion of the blast. (Many artillery men eventually went deaf).

### **Resources**

A very clear and detailed visual demonstration of loading and firing a Civil War cannon. See what a worm looks like, how the fuse works, and the positions of each man at the cannon:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muyNUHJdSFA>