



THE ALCATRAZ SENTINEL
The Newsletter of Historic Civil War Alcatraz Island
Published by the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz

Volume 5 Number 2
Fall/Winter 2013

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Living History Days

Each and every living history day on Alcatraz gets better and better. The second 2013 living history day that was held on September 28, 2013 was no exception. Visitors to Alcatraz are always surprised to see Union soldiers manning their posts and guarding Confederate prisoners on Alcatraz. As you know, the effort it takes to put on such an event is tremendous. If you want to help, contact Co-chairpersons Fred or Brad. Besides having a great time, the photo opportunities are endless. We hope to see you at the next living history day. To view photos of past LHD'S visit the FOCWA web site.

Board of Directors & Officers Meetings

Visit The Friends of Civil War Alcatraz web site to read the published minutes of all Board of Directors and Officer meetings.

MATTHEW BOROWICK VISITS ALCATRAZ

On July 17, Fred Bohmfalk, Brad Schall, Chuck Gardali and Ranger John Cantwell enjoyed providing a tour of Alcatraz for Matthew Borowick. The three hour tour started on the dock and worked through to the light tower where Ranger John escorted him to the top. Fred and Brad cheered them on as they climbed the 122 stairs.

Matthew has had a lifelong interest in the American Civil War, dating back to his days as a first grader when he took his copy of “The Golden Book of The Civil War” to school daily. In 1992 he joined the Robert E. Lee Civil War Round Table of Central New Jersey, serving as its newsletter editor, advisory board member and webmaster. Later, he helped establish the Civil War Library and Research Center and was its first Executive Director. Today, Matthew is one of four regular columnists for the well-regarded Civil War News, serving as the author of “Round Table Review”, which describes best practices of Civil War round tables from throughout the country. In 2010, he authored and published *The Civil War Round Table Handbook -The Indispensable Guide to Running Yours Right*, which is available on Kindle at Amazon.com.

Matthew earned a B. A. degree in Economics and a MBA in Finance from Seton Hall University and is employed by Seton Hall as its Associate Vice President for Alumni and Government Relations. He and his wife Kathy, who has been to more Civil War battlefields than she cares to admit, live in Monmouth Junction, NJ with their four children.

In a later communication Matthew graciously commented regarding his tour, “I am still flying high from my Alcatraz visit! It was absolutely amazing. I told my kids all about it. Your hospitality, kindness and generous donation of time are greatly appreciated. I had a fantastic time. I hope our paths may cross again. Best wishes for continued success in all your projects.”

Submitted by Fred Bohmfalk

A Brief History of Alcatraz Before the Prison

The name Alcatraz is derived from the Spanish “Alcatraces.” In 1775, the Spanish Explorer Juan Manuel de Ayala was the first to sail into what is now known as San Francisco Bay – his expedition mapped the bay and named one of the three islands Alcatraces. Over time the name was Anglicized to Alcatraz. While the exact meaning is still debated, Alcatraz is usually defined as meaning “pelican” or “strange bird.”

In 1850, a presidential order by Millard Fillmore set aside the island for possible use as a United States Military reservation. The California Gold Rush, the resulting boom in the growth of San Francisco, and the need to protect San Francisco Bay led the U.S. Army to build A Citadel or Fortress, at the top of the island in the early 1850s. The Army also made plans to install more than 100 cannons on the island, making Alcatraz the most heavily fortified military site on the West Coast. Together with Fort Point and Lime Point, Alcatraz formed a “triangle of defense” designed to protect the entrance to the bay. Once fully equipped with weaponry in 1859, the island was deemed Fort Alcatraz.

Having never fired its own weapons in combat, Fort Alcatraz quickly evolved from an island of defense, to an island of detention. In the early 1860s, civilians arrested for treason during the Civil War were housed on the island. With the influx of prisoners, Additional living quarters were built to house 500 men. Alcatraz as a jail would continue for 100 years. Throughout history, the average population of the island hovered between 200 and 300 people, never at maximum capacity.

The first functional lighthouse on the West Coast was built on Alcatraz Island as well,

The Russians Were Here- The Russians Were Here
Or
How the Russian Naval Fleet in San Francisco Bay Influenced the Civil War

On a visit to the military cemetery (dating to 1858) in the Mare Island Heritage Preserve at the south end of the island, I noticed amongst the decayed and mostly illegible plaques three new granite headstones in Russian. In English at the bottom is engraved Russian Sailor. What could that be all about? Back to the Preserve visitor center, we asked Myrna Hayes, director of the preserve and center. She unfolded the story of how San Francisco was very much involved in the Civil War which did not make the history books.

Certainly all the attention has been on the horrific battlefields in the east. However, the Bay Area was extremely important because of the gold shipments financing the war for the north leaving the docks several times a month down to Panama, then across the Isthmus to another ship taking it to New York. The Confederacy was well aware of that and sent one overland expedition from Arizona that was unsuccessful and authorized several of its commerce raider ships to attack the port if the opportunity arose. In addition, the loyalties of the population were divided because of the many southerners that had immigrated here. There was at least one plot to overtake the Union war ship on station in the harbor.

So the city population was very nervous during the war. The armaments at Fort Point and Alcatraz were inadequate and The North couldn't spare any additional cannon because of the difficulties back east including the defense of the capitol itself.

Another worry was that a British war ship might attack the Bay. Great Britain and France were inclined to support the Confederacy. They viewed the united North and South as a rapidly growing nation that threatened their world wide dominance at that time. And of course they needed the South's cotton and tobacco supplies.

Meanwhile there were other international maneuverings going on. Poland was rebelling and seeking independence from Russia. Polish émigrés throughout Europe were successfully lobbying governments to support an independent Poland. Strongly worded letters were sent to Moscow particularly from Great Britain and France implying military action. Russia took them seriously enough to begin defense preparations.

The commander of the naval forces built a dozen war ships powered by both sail and steam engine- six in the Baltic and six in Vladivostok in the Pacific. In a masterful stroke in early summer of 1863 he ordered them to leave one by one days apart so as to not create suspicion. In late summer they all arrived one by one –six in New York harbor and the other six in San Francisco Bay.

This action left Britain and France with the dilemma of having a loose sizable fleet of Russian war ships that would not be tied up by winter ice and easy blockades. If war were declared, then they would be available to devastate the European merchant fleets. Particularly, Britain would be vulnerable. So we have strange bedfellows in Russia, the Tsar led autocracy and the Union democracy. Both were trying to suppress rebellious states and worrying about other countries getting involved. Diplomats from both Russia and the Union expressed support for each other. And the North welcomed both Russian fleets on each coast with open arms.

The Russian admiral stationed in the Bay said he would help defend San Francisco against naval attack.

San Francisco was particularly welcoming with many ceremonies and formal fancy balls that lasted a year until summer of 1864 when it became evident that Britain and France were not going to get involved in either country's affairs. In the meantime each of the Russian ships underwent repairs and overhaul at the new shipyard at Mare Island. While there for many weeks, the people of Vallejo also treated the Russians very well. If the Russians ever looked south toward what is now the Crockett shore, there were only bare hills with the Judge Crockett ranch.

When back on station off the San Francisco waterfront, several times when fire broke out in the city, the Russian sailors came ashore to help fight the blazes. In one particularly bad fire on the wharfs, six sailors lost their lives and were subsequently buried with honors at the Mare Island cemetery. The gravestones became decayed and broken so in 2010 the Russian consulate replaced three that could still be identified with new ones that we see so prominently today.

More details about this time can be found in C.D. Kroll's book "Friends in Peace and War": The Russian Navy's Landmark Visit to Civil War San Francisco. The close diplomatic ties that developed in 1863 had much to do with the U.S. bargain purchase of Alaska in 1867.

Submitted by Jeffery Vaillant

Interesting facts you may or may not know:

Alcatraz fortress featured long - range iron cannons and four massive 36,000-pound 15-inch Rodman guns, which were capable of sinking mammoth hostile ships three miles away. The Guns of Alcatraz could fire 6,949 pounds of iron in one barrage, though the fortress would eventually fire one 400-pound cannon round at an unidentified ship, and miss its target, the Island had lived up to its self-made reputation as an icon of U.S. military power. But within a few decades the island's role as a military fortress would start to fade away, and its defenses would become obsolete by the standards of more modern weaponry.

Because of its natural isolation, surrounded by freezing waters and hazardous currents, Alcatraz would soon be considered by the U.S. Army as an ideal location for holding captives. In 1861 the island began receiving Civil War prisoners, and in 1898 the Spanish-American war would bring the prison population from a mere twenty-six to over four hundred and fifty. Then in 1906, following the catastrophic San Francisco earthquake, hundreds of civilian prisoners were transferred to the island for safe confinement. By 1912 a large cell house had been constructed on the island's central crest, and by the late 1920's the three-story structure was nearly at full capacity. Alcatraz was the Army's first long-term prison, and it was already beginning to build its reputation as a tough detention facility.

Bio of Phil Blake

Member of the “Friends of Civil War Alcatraz” Board of Directors and Currently holds the office of Membership.

Editors Corner

I for one want to thank Phil for all that he does as a member of the “Board of Directors” and as an “officer” of the organization. Many, many Kudos to you my friend.

As always I welcome any and all items from members to be included in the Newsletter. Please take the time to put something together of interest for future newsletters.

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A great photo of the water tower

Painting to enhance and interpret Fortress Alcatraz

The Friends of civil War Alcatraz have commissioned artist James Breeden to provide a painting of Fortress Alcatraz to hang in Building 64 to better interrupt the military experience of visitors to Alcatraz. The Friends will donate the painting to the NPS for their use. The NPS has approved sketches of the proposed painting. The painting is scheduled to be completed by August 29, 2013 for visitors to see the Island in pre-prison days and will enhance their understanding of the long Military History of the Island.

A photo taken in the late 1800's or early 1900's will be used as a reference for the commissioned painting. All of the Friends of Civil War Alcatraz and the Park Personnel are anxiously anticipating the completion of the painting. We the Friend of Civil War Alcatraz are very proud of this effort to be able to provide the painting.
