



THE ALCATRAZ SENTINEL
The Newsletter of Historic Civil War Alcatraz Island
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Army Times top 10 Civil War destinations

The Army Times asked civil War buff and National Park Service spokesman Mike Litterst for His top 10 civil war destinations and he listed Alcatraz Island along with Antietam, Fredericksburg, Shiloh, and others. He said that completed in December 1859, just before the outbreak of the Civil War, a fort on Alcatraz helped defend the Union state of California from possible capture by the Confederacy, The fort served as a training ground for Union troops as well as a prison for Confederates during the war.

Living History Day's

Each and every living history day on Alcatraz gets better and better. The two living history days held in 2011 were 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 2012 living history days. To view photos of past LHD'S visit the FOCWA web site.

Explore the Mysteries of Alcatraz Island for Yourself

Alcatraz Island offers a close-up look at the first lighthouse and US built fort on the West Coast, the infamous federal penitentiary long off-limits to the public, and the 18 month occupation by Indians of All Tribes. Rich in history, there is also a natural side to the Rock – gardens with rare flowers and plants, tide pools, marine wildlife, bird colonies, and bay views beyond compare. This makes a visit to Alcatraz Island an inescapable experience. You'll be astounded by what you learn and see.

Beauty- History- Infamy

Did you know every year thousands of American Indians return to Alcatraz Island to honor the veterans of the 1969 occupation by Indians of All Tribes and continue their political struggle for self determination.

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If you have anything that you want to be included in the Alcatraz Sentinel, The newsletter of the "Friends of Civil War Alcatraz". Please submit it for publication. All articles, photos, or things of interest to our group are always welcome and encouraged.

The following is from the California State Military Museum web site:

History of the Post at Alcatraz Island By Colonel Herbert M. Hart, USMC (retired)
Executive Director, Council on America's Military Past

"Frowning Alcatraz, Key of San Francisco," was the 1860's description of the fortress. "It commands the entrance to the Golden Gate, and forms an effectual defense for the harbor of San Francisco." It is 450 feet wide, 1,650 feet long, irregular in shape, and encircled by powerful batteries, in which are said to be mounted some of the heaviest guns ever cast in America. Alcatraz Islands heavy guns may not have fired in anger in her 81 years as a military post, but they came mighty close to it on October 1, 1863. That was when a suspicious ship was noticed approaching Raccoon Straights and the ensuing confusion included firing between the ship and the island with Fort Point chiming in. Routinely during the Civil War a Revenue Service cutter greeted every arriving ship at the Golden Gate, but on October 1 she left her station to help a wrecked Russian ship. Captain William A. Winder, commanding at Alcatraz, was asked to challenge all ships before permitting them to enter the port.

"The officer of the day reported an armed ship towed by small boats in the direction of Raccoon Straits." reported Winder. After he was unable to recognize her colors (there was no wind and the flag fell in folds) Winder decided her course was so unusual, "I deemed it my duty to bring her to and ascertain her character and the reason. "I therefore fired a blank charge, which apparently not attracting her attention, I directed a gun to be loaded with an empty shell and to be fired 200 or 300 yards ahead of her," he said, his two boats were busy inspecting other ships, but while waiting for one to return so that the newcomer could be inspected. "The ship commenced firing." He thought it might be a salute, but could not be sure because she was firing broadside and was "entirely enveloped in the smoke." As soon as he decided it was a salute, he started to return a 21-gun answer. Before he was finished, "Fort Point commenced firing."

Finally everyone stopped firing. The letter exchange that followed was even more pointed when the ship was identified as Her Majesty's Ship SUTLEF, the flagship of Rear Admiral John Kingcome. The admiral did not take kindly to the unusual welcome, Captain Winder did not appreciate the Sutlej's "unusual course" and in the final outcome, the departmental commander suggested a mild reproof to Alcatraz. "It is expected that the delicate duty devolving on military commanders will be exercised with prudence." he announced in a letter dated five months later.

The embarrassing international situation was all part of the game to Alcatraz, however. With her position recognized as the key to San Francisco Bay, she was in a sensitive situation throughout the war. In 1864, in fact, an even greater reaction set in when commercial photographers were permitted to make 30 photographs that showed ever road and battery.

The War Department heard about the photos, ordered them suppressed and demanded to know who had authorized them. As department head, General McDowell reported to Washington that the photos had been approved by the area engineer and authorized by Winder, whose "motive was one of pride and interest in his important command and a desire to have himself and the command have pictures of the place. McDowell denied any disloyal motive on Winder's part, including rumors that he was influenced by the fact his father was in the Confederate Army. If he wanted to be disloyal, McDowell suggested, as an officer of intelligence he would not "have acted so openly and undisguisedly as he did."

The real losers in the proposition seem to have been the San Francisco firm that claimed it took the views on a \$400 contract from the Army, and had spent \$1,500 in the process. They hoped to recoup the difference by selling their photos for a rumored \$100 to interested soldiers. Instead, the pictures and negatives wound up at the War Department. Had Confederate agents obtained and interpreted the photographs, they would have found that Alcatraz had not changed materially from 1861 when she had 85 cannon and 130 men. In one of his last acts before resigning to join the Confederacy, General Albert S. Johnston had rushed 10,000 muskets and 150,000 cartridges to Alcatraz. His successor, General Sumner, had proposed posing 400 men on the island. And in 1864, an official estimate was that 600 artillerymen were needed to man the works.

This was not to be. In fact, details from Alcatraz were siphoned off frequently. Thirty men spent months guarding Mare Island Navy Yard until they could be relieved by Marines from the USS Lancaster. Another detail was dispatched to man a battery on the south end of Angel Island, later the location of the vegetable garden tended by Alcatraz troopers. Rumors of election riots placed the entire garrison on alert frequently. The bulk of the force was shifted to San Francisco to keep order in 1865 in the unsettled days following Lincoln's assassination.

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Fresh Water on Alcatraz:

The quartermaster general charged with supplying the troops on Alcatraz, informed the Army Corp of Engineers in 1862 that the capacity of underground water cisterns on the island was insufficient for the large number of troops then on the island. It was estimated that Alcatraz required a reservoir of 182,000 gallons in order to have a wartime reserve for 500 men for six months. The corps constructed additional cisterns on the southeastern side of the island which had a capacity of 175,000 gallons. This solved the water problem for the island during the war and well into the future for the Army. Does anyone know if the cisterns still exist?

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Alcatraz Military Guardhouse and Sally Port

The guardhouse built in 1857 is the oldest building on Alcatraz Island. Serving as the first line of defense against enemy landing parties. It could only be reached by an oak drawbridge that spanned a 15 foot deep dry moat. Two gun ports for 24-pound howitzers flanked the entrance, and a chest-high wall with firing positions capped the roof. Soldiers would enter the fort through the guardhouse and its fortified sally port, a passageway with a heavy, iron-studded wooden door at each end. Rifle slits lined the thick walls between the doors. Any invader who made it through the first door would have to run through a gauntlet of fire to reach the inner door. Alcatraz's guardhouse defenses were never tested in battle. By 1862, the building was used to hold suspected Confederate sympathizers and U.S. Army prisoners, and one of the howitzer rooms was converted to a jail cell or stockade.

