



SONS OF UNION VETERANS OF THE CIVIL WAR  
General Alfred Pleasonton Camp 24

THE GUIDON NEWSLETTER  
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Editor: Steve Johnson Camp Commander: Robert Mayer

**Camp Meeting Held At Benicia Museum**

On July 24th members of Camp 24 met at the Benicia Historical Museum at the Camel Barns. Present were Commander Robert Mayer, Senior VC Ken Felton, Junior VC Glenn Martin, and Secretary/Treasurer Steve Johnson. Brothers attending were Gary Hormel, Greg LaFramboise, and Dale Smith, who brought his friend Michael as a guest. The minutes of the previous meeting were read and approved, and the treasurer's report was given. Brother Ken reported that we have a prospective member who may be sending in his application soon.

Brother Gary gave a report on Alcatraz, which in summary stated that the island is now receiving 300 passengers every hour, that the rangers need volunteers to help out, and that he and Brother Steve have resumed giving Civil War programs on the island.

Brother Steve reported that Fort Point will be having a Living History Day on August 28th, from 10 am to 5 pm. (All brothers are invited to attend as visitors and encouraged to learn about the fort and its history; come early to see the flag ceremony and take Brother Steve's tour at 11:30).

Brother Ken showed the preliminary layout for our Camp 24 brochure to be passed out to prospective members. Brother Steve will add the graphics and send it to the printers; Brothers Glenn and Dale kindly offered to cover the cost of printing.

After the meeting we all enjoyed boxed lunches in the museum gardens and had the chance to converse with one another, which we hadn't been able to do in person for over a year. Then we took a tour of the Benicia Museum, which had excellent panels and exhibits about Benicia's history and a good amount of Bay Area Civil War history. We agreed that this was a good way to resume our quarterly meetings; the next one will be in October at a location to be determined.

**Commander's Message**

I was very pleased to see the brothers from our camp when we met at the Benicia Museum recently. It was good to be able to talk together without having to look at a

screen. Meeting at a historical location with ties to the Civil War was especially meaningful, and thanks to Brother Steve for arranging the location and picking up the lunches for us. I am grateful to Brother Ken for creating a preliminary layout for our new brochure, and for Brothers Glenn and Dale for offering to cover the cost. I hope we can try various locations for our meetings in the future, but always provide a Zoom connection for those brothers who cannot make it there. At our next meeting in October we will be voting for camp officers for 2022. Nominations will be accepted at the beginning of the month and a ballot will be emailed to you soon after. To see the duties of the camp officers, go to p. 35 of the SUVCW constitution <https://www.suvcw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Blue-Book-2020a.pdf>

### **Original Union Army Uniform on Antique Road Show**

Years ago on the PBS show “Antiques Road Show” a guest brought in a Union army uniform that had been worn by her husband’s great-great grandfather. The uniform was in remarkable condition, having been kept in a steamer trunk most of the time. The single breasted frock coat had the typical balloon sleeves, the pocket in the back of the coat, all the eagle buttons, and still had on the infantry captain’s shoulder bars. The pants were reinforced in the front legs where the boots would rub against them, there was no back pocket, and its color had not faded much. The forage cap was made by Baker & McKinney of New York; Laura Baker was one of the few women who owned a manufacturing company during the war. The uniform also came with a photograph of the captain in his uniform, which increased the value of the clothes greatly because it confirmed who the owner was. The appraiser said that because of their excellent condition, the hat, coat, and pants were each worth about \$4,000! I suspect that uniform may have ended up in the Smithsonian Institution, since it is so rare and is actually a national treasure.

### **The Army Post and Arsenal at Benicia**

In 1847, the U.S. Army acquired 242 acres of land next to Suisun Bay and the town of Benicia. Two years later companies of the 2nd Infantry Regiment and members of the 3rd Artillery encamped there as the barracks were built; these were finished by 1851. It was decided in Washington to make this post the site of the ordinance depot for the West, and in 1852 the depot was named the Benicia Arsenal.<sup>1</sup> By 1859 seven buildings, made from locally quarried sandstone, were built, including a hospital, two storehouses, a guardhouse, magazines, and a clocktower. (Many of these buildings still exist and are part of the Benicia History Museum). Weapons and ammunition arrived from the East and filled the storehouses; the powder was

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<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Roberts, “The Benicia Arsenal” found at <http://www.militarymuseum.org/Benicia.html>

placed in specially built brick magazines which can still be visited today.<sup>2</sup>As time went on weapons and ammunition were distributed to the troops patrolling the border with Mexico and those who were protecting the stagecoach lines. Fort Point and Fort Alcatraz received much of their cannonballs and powder from the Benicia Arsenal. Since troops were being sent on patrol throughout the West, there weren't enough to protect the arsenal, so soldiers from Fort Alcatraz were sent there to provide protection because of rumors of plots by secessionists to raid the armory. Eventually marines from the *U.S.S. Lancaster* arrived to take over that duty. It must have been monotonous, lonely duty at Benicia; the Alcatraz soldiers were actually glad to return to the island.

When the Civil War started, recruits for the Union Army were trained at the army post at Benicia and this continued throughout the war. The arsenal

was expanded, with shops able to produce weapons, cartridges, clothing, and all the equipment the soldiers and cavalry needed. Incidentally, the army post and arsenal remained in service until the end of World War II.

The post at Benicia was also notable because it housed the camels of the army's Camel Corps. This was the brainchild of Major George Crossman, who proposed using camels to supply the army forts in the deserts of the West. The plan was approved by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis in 1855, and 75 camels were imported from the Middle East and brought to Camp Verde in Texas.



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<sup>2</sup> See Powder Magazines 1855 <https://beniciahistoricalmuseum.org/the-powder-magazines-1855/>





At first other army officers balked at supervising supply trains with mules and camels, but they soon realized that the camels were used to carrying large loads, could go days without water, and could outpace the mules. Even Robert E. Lee used them on a reconnaissance mission in 1860 in Texas.

The camels were used mainly in supplying forts and settlements in Texas, but also carried salt, dry goods, and mail between Tucson and Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> Camel enthusiast Edward Beale led an expedition of camels through the deserts and north to Fort Tejon, proving the animal's stamina and strength. But the beginning of the Civil War brought an end to this experiment, as the animals were thought to be too hard to handle. Many were brought to Benicia and housed in the camel barns; the army eventually auctioned them off. For their fate, see the Weisbrode article.

**Photos from previous Living Days at Ft. Point**



<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Weisbrode, "The Short Life of the Camel Corps" <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/27/the-short-life-of-the-camel-corps/>