

History of alcatraz island: how a fort turned into a federal prison

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Alcatraz Island has quite a distinct history. Many people know that Alcatraz served as a federal prison, but most are reluctant to know that this island served as fort. Built before the Civil War, it served two main purposes. First, that it was to guard the San Francisco bay area from enemy ships against a foreign invasion, and second, to hold hostage prisoners of war or POW's as they were called. In this report, I'll show you how this fortress came to be a federal prison, why it is no longer in operation today, and most importantly, to show why it was built in the first place. When the great " Gold Rush" of 1849 first started, California grew from what would be considered a small, unpopulated state, into what it is now.

California is now one of the most populated states and it was mostly the gold rush that brought attention to California. As the government saw all of this happening, they realized that California was much more important than they ever realized. In their realization, they decided that California must be protected. San Francisco has one of the largest bays in all of California, and so this was where enemy countries would most likely to try to invade the country. So this is where Alcatraz was to lie, to serve as a military fort. It was supposed to serve as a secondary base in companionship to another base located on the other side of Golden Gate Bridge. But with severe problems trying to build this other base, Alcatraz was to remain alone. " Out in the middle of the San Francisco Bay, the island of Alcatraz is definitely a world unto itself. Isolation is just one of the many constants of island life for any inhabitant on Alcatraz Island. It is the most reoccurring theme in the unfolding history of Alcatraz Island.

Alcatraz Island is one of Golden Gate National Recreation Area's most popular destinations, offering a close-up look at a historic and infamous federal prison long off-limits to the public. Visitors to the island can not only explore the remnants of the prison, but learn of the American occupation of 1969 - 1971, early military fortifications and the West Coast's first and oldest operating lighthouse. These structures stand among the island's many natural features - gardens, tidepools, bird nests, and bay views beyond compare." (1) Fortress Alcatraz ran in operation from 1850 - 1933. It served as San Francisco's only major defense. It started off with only eleven cannons, that were transported onto the island in 1854. By the early 1860's, Alcatraz had 111 cannons. Some were enormous, firing a fifteen-inch ball weighing over 450 pounds. Defenses included a row of brick enclosed gun positions called case mates to protect the dock; a fortified gateway or a Sally Port to block the entrance road; and a three-story citadel on top of the island. This served both as an armed barracks and as a last line defense strategy. Even though Alcatraz was built to withstand a foreign invasion, its most important use was during the Civil War, 1861 - 1865.

Seeing as it was the only completed fort in the entire bay, it was vital in the protecting from Confederate Raiders. Early in the war, ten thousand rifles were moved to Alcatraz from the State armory, to prevent them from being used by southern sympathizers. The crew of a Confederate privateer were among the first inmates to be held within "The Rock." Alcatraz's notoriety as a penitentiary overshadows its earlier, and longer use by the Army.

Surprisingly, this small island once was the most powerful fort west of the

Mississippi River. There was some limited modernization of the island's defenses after the Civil War. Rifled cannons were mounted. In 1854 some 450 electrically controlled underwater mines were brought to the island to protect the Bay. However, as the ships of potential enemies became more and more powerful, the defenses were increasingly obsolete. In 1907 Alcatraz officially ceased being a fortress and became Pacific Branch, U. S. Military Prison. Alcatraz Island's use as a prison began in December 1859 with the arrival of the first permanent garrison. Eleven of these soldiers were confined in the Sally Port basement.

The Army recognized that the cold water (53 F) and swift currents surrounding Alcatraz made it an ideal site for a prison, and in 1861 the post was designated as the military prison for the Department of the Pacific - most of the territory west of the Rocky Mountains. The prison population grew during the Civil War with the addition of prisoners from other army posts, the crew of a Confederate privateer, and civilians accused of treason. The Sally Port's basement was filled, then one of the gun rooms, and a wooden stockade was built just to the North of the Sally Port. During the next three decades additional buildings were erected just north of the Sally Port to house up to 150 Army prisoners. These provided hard labor for construction projects both on and off the island. At various times "rebellious" American Indians were also held on Alcatraz. The largest group was nineteen Hopi, held in 1895. The Spanish-American War of 1898 increased the size of the Army enormously, and the prison population also

grew. A prison stockade, known as the " Upper Prison" was hastily built on the parade ground and by 1902 there were 461 prisoners on the Island.

In 1904 the upper prison stockade was expanded to house 300 inmates, and the lower prison buildings near the Sally Port were used for other purposes. With modern weaponry making Alcatraz more and more unsuitable as a site for a fort, in 1907 the Army dropped plans to mount new guns, and instead designated the island " Pacific Branch, U. S. Military Prison." The next year, with plentiful prison labor available, work began on the Cellhouse which still stands today. Completed in 1912 with 600 single cells, each with toilet and electricity, the Cellhouse was the largest reinforced concrete building in the world! In 1915 Alcatraz was changed from a military prison to " Pacific Branch, U. S. Disciplinary Barracks." The new name reflected the growing emphasis on rehabilitation as well as punishment. Prisoners with less serious offenses could receive training, education and an opportunity to return to the Army. Prisoners convicted of serious crimes were not given these chances, and were discharged from the Army when their sentences were completed. During the great depression of the 1930s military budgets were cut, and the Army was considering closing the Disciplinary Barracks - a perfect match for the Justice Departments desires for a super prison for incorrigible prisoners. Negotiations moved rapidly, and Alcatraz was transferred to the Bureau of Prisons in October 1933.

By early 1934 eighty years of the U. S. Army on Alcatraz had ended - except for 32 hard case prisoners, who were left to become the first penitentiary inmates. Some of the inmates included Al Capone and Robert Stroud, also

known as the Birdman of Alcatraz. Capone's exact cell is not identified because records are not available. Former prisoners and Correctional Officers indicate that Al Capone's cell is located on the outside west end of Cellblock B. Capone spent more time in the hospital than in the general population (GP). Robert Stroud (Birdman of Alcatraz) arrived in 1942, spent some 90 days in the GP, and was then transferred to D Block. Occupying more than one cell over a period of seventeen years, Stroud stayed in D block cell for approximately six years and was then moved up to the hospital in 1948, staying for eleven years, by request of Warden Swope.

" Many times the prison was almost shut down, but I never thought the government would actually shut this place down. It was the best thing for the country. It lowered crime rates, because it scared the citizens of the U. S. into believing they would go to " The Rock" if they were even remotely bad. They shut it down, Oh God, they shut it down" (2) The prison ran effectively, yet due to cost effectiveness, administrative changes in Washington, a change in BOP's operating philosophy (reinstitution rehabilitation). USPAZ. closed on 21 March 1963 (last prisoners removed on this day); Alcatraz was transferred to the General Services Administration (GSA) in May of 1963. Alcatraz witnessed eight murdered by other inmates (although records indicated only 7), five suicides, and 15 from illness. These were all of the deaths that took place on the island.

Some people heard that many prisoners were killed in the gas chamber located on Alcatraz Island, they are wrong. Although Federal courts do impose capital punishments, the reason why there is a gas chamber, but the actual

carrying out of that sentence is attended to in the nearest State facility (in this case the death sentence was fulfilled at San Quentin State Prison). It was rumored that no one ever escaped this island, but that is not exactly the case. Thirty-six prisoners were involved in attempts: 7 shot and killed, 2 drowned, 5 unaccounted for, the rest recaptured. 2 prisoners made it off the island but were returned, one, in 1945 (Giles) and one in 1962 (Scott). As for June 1962 escape, Morris and the Anglin brothers were successful in escaping both institution and island, but survival is very questionable. So to say that no one ever escaped the island, that is not true. But if they survived, we may never know. Some people heard that many prisoners were killed in the gas chamber located on Alcatraz Island, they are wrong. Although Federal courts do impose capital punishments, the actual carrying out of that sentence is attended to in the nearest State facility which in this case the death sentence would be fulfilled at San Quentin State Prison. There were several families that were housed on the island.

The families were distributed in 64 Building, four wood frame houses, one duplex and three apartment buildings. Warden resided in large house adjacent to cell house, Captain and Associated Warden lived in duplex. The question that most people wonder, is how many guards actually upheld the island of Alcatraz, their answer is, 90 officers were required to cover the three 8-hour shifts, plus sick leave and vacation time. Two-thirds of the custody staff resided on the island with the rest in the San Francisco and local areas. The actual amount prisoners that were contained on the island is somewhat vague due to the lack of accurate records. But as far as we know,

it is somewhere in the vicinity of 1545 total, with 1576 numbers issued (some 30+ were returned to the institution with same number reissued). The most that was ever held in the prison at one time was 302, and as few as 222, but the typical average was around 260. Born of necessity, perhaps even political expediency, Alcatraz represents the federal government's response to post-Prohibition, post-Depression America. Both the institution and the men confined within its walls are a part of this era, and in order to be studied with any degree of understanding, it must be attended to with a focus on this time period. Prisons are a reflection of society and the reflection offered by Alcatraz is one of great clarity.

The collaborative effort of attorney general Homer Cummings and Director of the Bureau of Prisons, Sanford Bates, produced a legendary prison that seemed both necessary and appropriate to the times. The emergence of persistent assertions about J. Edgar Hoover's interest and influence with regard to Alcatraz cannot be corroborated, but neither have they been completely denied. With the public peace constantly threatened by crime, a response had to be made and Alcatraz was that response. An in-house memo issued by Cummings shortly after taking office addressed the subject of creating a special prison for kidnapers, racketeers, and individuals guilty of predatory crimes. A remote site was sought, one that would prohibit constant communication with the outside world by those confined within its walls.

Although land in Alaska was being considered, the availability of Alcatraz Island conveniently coincided with the government's perceived need for a

super-prison. Having taken possession of the former Army prison and having circumvented the San Francisco citizens who were concerned at the prospect of vicious criminals in the near vicinity, the Bureau of Prisons set about selecting a warden who could do the job. A well-organized, no-nonsense businessman and prison administrator with twelve years of experience in the California Department of Corrections, James A. Johnston was to be that man. Johnston had retired at the time of his appointment by the Department of Justice, and its acceptance resulted in his serving as warden of Alcatraz for the next fourteen years. Classified as a concentration model, where difficult-to-manage prisoners from other institutions would be concentrated under one roof, Alcatraz served as an experiment. Segregation on this scale had not before been practiced, and only time would indicate its success or failure. Warden Johnston and the second Director of the Bureau of Prisons, James V. Bennett, both were men well ahead of their time. Visionaries in the field of penology, their knowledge enabled Alcatraz to function as it had been hoped and to serve later as a model for the federal prison located in Marion, Illinois.

Contrary to popular myth, Alcatraz was to confine only a few of the infamous headline-makers of the era. Of the 1545 men to do time within its walls, the vast majority were not to be found on wanted posters adorning post office walls. " I was doctor on that hell-hole. I served diligently for the better of three years. I attended to some of the most notorious criminals, and I got to really know them. I found out that they were people just like anyone else, but just with a severe case of bad luck." (3) Alcatraz was, of course, home to

Al Capone for slightly under four and a half years. Transferred from USP Atlanta in August of 1934, Capone was among the first “ official” shipment of prisoners to be received. His arrival generated bigger headlines than the opening of the institution, giving birth to the endless myth of Alcatraz. The most difficult aspect of Capone’s management in Atlanta was his constant contact with family members who took up residence at a nearby hotel. Through this channel of communication Capone continued to run his organization in Chicago. He also worked at corrupting officers and enlisting fellow prisoners as personal servants. Influence and privilege were lost at Alcatraz where Capone was assigned menial jobs and treated in accordance with others.

In failing health due to syphilis, he was transferred to FCI Terminal Island in January of 1939, and then on to USP Lewisburg, released from there in November of that same year. “ Yes I served on the rock. I was a prison guard for some of the meanest criminals I’ve ever seen. I still have nightmares today of being there. We were commanded to be cruel. We were taught that the only way we would survive, was to show no fear, or else those criminals would eat you for breakfast. I’ll never forget the look on the inmates face as they came onto Alcatraz, the most repulsive look, like they had nothing else to live for. I’ll never forget happened there, my dreams won’t let me.” (4)

Arriving on the second “ official” shipment to Alcatraz in September of 1934 was George “ Machine Gun” Kelly. Involved first in bootlegging, he was apprehended and sentenced to Leavenworth. At the conclusion of a three-year stay, Kelly emerged from prison in touch with some of America’s best

bank robbers, and immediately pursued a new line of work. From lucrative bank jobs, he advanced to kidnaping in 1933, holding for ransom a wealthy Oklahoma oil magnate. His capture resulted in the first Lindbergh Law trial and it was a courtroom sensation. Kelly was given a life sentence and returned to USP Leavenworth, within months being transferred to Alcatraz. He was considered a model prisoner by the officers with whom he came in contact, causing some question regarding his transfer to the more secure institution.

Headlines and Hoover must here be considered. After seventeen years on Alcatraz, Kelly suffered a mild heart attack and was returned again to Leavenworth in 1951. Within months of being paroled in 1954, a final attack ended his life at the age of 59. From early days as a petty thief, Alvin Karpis moved on in his career to join Ma Barker and form the Barker-Karpis partnership literally laying waste to the Midwest between 1931 and 1936. His flamboyant style of robbery and kidnaping earned him the absolute wrath of J. Edgar Hoover. Karpis soon found himself with a new title, that of Public Enemy No. 1, and his name was recognized throughout the country. Avoiding capture for some fifteen months after the Barkers were apprehended, Karpis was finally taken into custody in New Orleans on May first, 1936. By August of that year, Karpis was residing on Alcatraz where he would spend the next 26 years, transferred to USP-McNeil Island in April of 1962, and released from the federal prison system via deportation to Canada in 1969. Leaving that country to assume residency in Spain, Karpis committed suicide in 1979. The most complete media coverage to be accorded an Alcatraz inmate was given

to Robert Franklin Stroud. He was to gain world wide attention and notoriety as the Birdman of Alcatraz, regardless of the fact he was not permitted to continue his avian studies during his 17 years on the island. Following incarceration in USP McNeil Island, where he was sentenced to 12 years for manslaughter in 1909, Stroud was transferred to Leavenworth after serving only three years.

A history of violence dictated the move, and Stroud had been in Leavenworth less than four years when he attacked and killed a custodial officer in front of better than 2,000 other inmates. His trial resulted in the death sentence, but was commuted to life after his mother requested the intervention of President Wilson. Stroud's hostile and sometimes violent nature left prison administrators no choice but to keep him away from other inmates and officers, and prison officials interpreted this to mean he should spend the remainder of his life in segregation of some sort. The keeping of birds and the studying of avian diseases gained international attention for Stroud, but it was also to figure prominently in his ultimate transfer to Alcatraz. He began to openly violate prison rules and regulations in favor of continuing his experiments and communications with bird breeders and fanciers around the world. Stroud was literally packed up and moved out in the middle of the night, with his destination being San Francisco. Arriving on Alcatraz in 1942, he was to enjoy the company of fellow inmates within the confines of D Block until there occurred a change in administration with the retirement of Warden James Johnston and the arrival of Warden Ed Swope.

The enigmatic Swope was not to be challenged in any way by Robert Stroud and immediately moved him into a private room in the prison's hospital. Using ill health to justify the move, Swope was able to segregate Stroud in such fashion that few, if any, were ever able to again see him. Genuine ill health forced Stroud's transfer to the Federal Medical Facility in Springfield, Missouri in 1959. Four years after being received at the FMC, Stroud died of natural causes. The man about whom the world knew, the man about whom books were written and films were made was to be ignored in death as the date of his passing followed by one day the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. On the morning of his death, Stroud was found by a fellow inmate who is probably more widely recognized on an international scale than any other confined on Alcatraz - recognized not so much by his own name than by the defendants with whom he was tried in 1951. Charged with conspiracy to commit treason, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed at Sing Sing Prison in 1953, and Morton Sobell was to arrive on Alcatraz the year before, 1952, and would spend the next five years as the federal system's most famous political prisoner. Sobell's case could easily be an example of J. Edgar Hoover's influence. He simply did not fit the type generally selected for incarceration on Alcatraz, but he most assuredly did meet the criteria for the type particularly targeted by the FBI director. At this point, it is again emphasized that the historic era must be given clear and serious focus, as the red witch hunt for Communist subversives spread across the country, led by Joseph McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover. Sobell alleged that Hoover dictated his placement in this maximum security institution, and there really exists no denial regarding this allegation.

Following the five years inside Alcatraz, Sobell finished out the remainder of his sentence in USP Atlanta for a total of eighteen and a half years out of the original thirty set forth by Judge Irving R. Kaufman, Taken by the beauty of the Pacific and the Golden Gate, Sobell expressed a desire to return to San Francisco when freedom was again his to enjoy. Morton Sobell resides today in the city, and is part of the living history of Alcatraz. By 1962 the era on which the Federal Prison history of Alcatraz is predicated was coming to an end. Times were changing and the Bureau of Prisons knew that they would have to respond to that change. Alcatraz offered no concept of rehabilitation, and the bureau was reconsidering its philosophy as it examines the pros and cons of warehousing as opposed to rehabilitation. The physical structures on Alcatraz were indicating wear and tear that would cost the government millions of dollars to upgrade to required security. Always an expensive institution to operate, 1961 found the daily cost of inmate upkeep approaching one-hundred dollars, and an overall cost for continuing operation at better than six-million dollars. A new prison could and would be constructed at Marion, Illinois for ten-million, so to continue incarceration of inmates on Alcatraz was economically unsound. It is said that J. Edgar Hoover expressed displeasure at the closure of the prison, but his decades-long power base could not stand up to the new attorney general who made it quite clear to Hoover that a contrary decision had been made - a decision that would be backed by the attorney general's brother in the White House.

On Thursday, 21 March 1963, the end of an era arrived with the official closure of Alcatraz. The population had been gradually reduced commencing

in February, with the final twenty-seven inmates taken off on the aforementioned date. For the first time in its long and controversial history reporters were permitted on the island to cover the news story that would make headlines across the country. “ALCATRAZ CLOSES!” In looking for lessons to be learned from the operation of Alcatraz, lessons that can be applied to our present society, one can only wonder as we examine overcrowded prisons and the continuing attendant problems. Perhaps consideration should be given to the prophetic words of a long ago Alcatraz prisoner, reflecting upon his plight: “Can anything be worth THIS?” We can either learn from what valuable lessons that were taught at alcatraz, or we can be ignorant and let it happen again.

Alcatraz was considered hostile, cruel, and unjust, and it was. But there was a lesson to be taught, now if we don't learn that human life is the most precious gift that we take for granted, then Alcatraz was a good idea and it needs to be reinstated. But when you allow a man to lose his freedoms that our forefather fought for, with impunity, it is simply the worst thing to happen. Alcatraz was built for a good reason, it served for a good reason. Then it was transformed into “The Rock.” Al! I the good that went into was lost. We as a country lost sight of what was important to us, and now if we don't learn from it, we are only asking ourselves for it again.