

Topic Page: [Alcatraz Island \(Calif.\)](#)

Definition: **Alcatraz** from *Merriam-Webster's Geographical Dictionary*

Rocky island, San Francisco Bay, California, ab. 4 mi. (6.4 km.) NW of San Francisco, opp. the Golden Gate; U.S. fortification and penitentiary, estab. 1868 for military prisoners and 1934 for federal prisoners, closed 1963.



Image from: [Partial text of letter smuggled by an unknown... in Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment](#)

Summary Article: **Alcatraz Island Prison**

from *The Social History of Crime and Punishment in America*

The U.S. penitentiary on Alcatraz Island is perhaps the most famous of all American prisons. Located on the 12-acre island in San Francisco Bay, California, it stands as a reminder of the public's desire to shield itself from dangerous offenders. Originally a military fort that protected the San Francisco seaport, it eventually evolved into a disciplinary barracks for military prisoners. In 1907, Alcatraz ceased operations as a fort and was designated a U.S. military prison. It operated as a military prison until 1933. The soaring costs associated with its upkeep eventually convinced military officials to close the facility and withdraw from the island.

Shortly after the military abandoned the island, the Department of Justice acquired it and turned it into a federal prison. Alcatraz operated under the auspices of the Federal Bureau of Prisons from August 1934 until 1963 and was one of only 11 federal prisons in existence during the early 20th century. The bureau intended for Alcatraz to serve as a high-profile prison that would deter rising crime rates. Prohibition, the Great Depression, and the advent of organized crime led citizens and politicians alike to demand a prison that could securely house dangerous and notorious crime figures.

Upon arriving at Alcatraz, inmates were housed in single-occupancy cells. It was initially operated as a silent institution, but this approach proved unpopular and was eventually abandoned. All movement within the facility was strictly controlled to ensure that horseplay, violent confrontation, and escape attempts were minimized. In addition to its housing units, Alcatraz also had a hospital, sanitation department, auditorium, kitchen, and library for recreational reading and legal research. The development and progressive use of inmate grievance procedures helped ensure that its prisoner population had an avenue available to resolve complaints without resorting to violence. Institutional and industrial work assignments were available to those inmates who wanted to earn a wage. Many of these industrial assignments were initially geared toward the war effort. At its highest capacity, Alcatraz housed more than 300 inmates, with its average population being closer to 200.

Over the course of its history, Alcatraz served as the prison of choice for those inmates who were particularly dangerous, disruptive, or skilled at escape. Most inmates were sent to Alcatraz directly from lower-security facilities. Alcatraz housed such infamous criminals as gangster Al "Scarface" Capone and George "Machine Gun Kelly" Barnes. Known as "The Rock" or "Devil's Island," Alcatraz became the prototype for maximum-security prisons in the decades following its closing.



A former Alcatraz prison guard stands by an empty cellblock. The last inmates were transferred in 1963, and 10 years later the island became a

Escape Attempts

Because Alcatraz was remote and physically isolated, it was billed as an inescapable institution. Therefore, all escape attempts were viewed with great public interest. Over the course of its history, there were 15 documented escape attempts involving a total of 30 inmates. Every inmate who attempted an escape is thought to have drowned in the frigid and turbulent waters of the San Francisco Bay, was shot by guards, or was recaptured. In one of these escape attempts that occurred in May 1946, a small number of inmates took six guards hostage and were able to gain control of their cellblock. When their escape attempt failed, they refused to surrender and unsuccessfully sought to enlist the support of other inmates in the ensuing insurrection. After nearly two days, officials entered the cell-block and confronted the six inmates—three of whom were immediately killed. Two guards also lost their lives. The remaining three inmates were captured, and two of them were later executed for their participation.

Perhaps the most celebrated escape attempt involved just three inmates, two of whom were brothers. Frank Morris and John and Frank Anglin were able to gain access to the rooftop of their cellblock in June 1962. Once outside, they attempted to float their way to the mainland onboard makeshift rafts. The papier-mâché heads used to dupe guards into believing that they were asleep in their bunks can be viewed today during the daily tours given at the prison. Evidence suggests that all three men drowned.

Conclusion

Alcatraz was plagued with ongoing deterioration caused by the harsh sea environment, and with the high costs associated with its upkeep, officials increasingly began to seek an alternative to the continued use of Alcatraz Island. A new prison was sought to serve as the nation's highest-security institution. Envisioned as the new Alcatraz, United States Penitentiary Marion, in Illinois, was specifically designed and built to house the most dangerous offenders in America. While Marion was still under construction, Alcatraz began to transfer inmates to facilities throughout the United States—eventually transferring the last of its inmates in March 1963. In 1973, the National Park Service acquired Alcatraz Island and turned it into a museum and wildlife sanctuary. Tourists to Alcatraz occasionally encounter former inmates and guards eager to speak about their unique experiences with this prison.

See Also: Capone, Al; Federal Prisons; Film, Crime in; Film, Punishment in; Native Americans; Penitentiaries; Prison Riots; San Francisco, California.

Further Readings

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