



Alcatraz ca. 1905. Army citadel at top of island. Original lighthouse shown was first on West Coast (1854).

BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF ALCATRAZ ISLAND

1769

First sighting of San Francisco Bay by the Spanish Navy.

1775

First Spanish entrance into San Francisco Bay. Alcatraz Island sighted and named "Isla de los Alcatrazes" (Island of the Pelicans) by Don Juan Manuel de Ayala, Lieutenant of the Royal Spanish Navy. Apparently, the Spanish title claim stemmed from this exploration.

1775–1840

During this period there are no local records of any occupation or use by the Spanish.

1846

Julian Workman petitions to Pio Pico, last Mexican Governor of California, for a grant of title to Alcatraz Island (apparently to settle a debt).

Governor Pico grants Alcatraz to Workman upon the condition that Workman erect a lighthouse on the island.

Bear Flag Revolt ends Mexican rule of California. A series of conflicting claims and litigations over title to Alcatraz ensues.

1848

Alcatraz Island ceded to U.S. Government by Republic of Mexico.

1850

Alcatraz Island reserved for "public purpose" by executive order of President Millard Fillmore. While the specific public purpose is not declared in the reservation order, subsequent documents and events indicate the original purpose of reservation was military.

1853–1858

Military fort and lighthouse construction by Army engineers. The fortifications and lighthouse were the first to be constructed on the West Coast.

1854

Alcatraz lighthouse begins operation.

1858

Completion of initial fortifications.

1866

Additional fortifications built.

1868

War Department designates Alcatraz as a place of confinement for military prisoners with long sentences. Apparently the use of Alcatraz as a place of confinement dates unofficially to 1859. It was used to hold Civil War prisoners, and, between 1870 to 1890, to detain Indian prisoners. During and after World War I, prisoners of war were confined there.

1906

San Francisco Earthquake apparently produces a large fissure in the rock, but no structural damage to any buildings.

1906-1909

Construction of present main prison building and many of present supporting facilities.

1907

Alcatraz Island ceases to be known as Fort Alcatraz; is designated the Pacific Branch of the United States Military Prison.

1915

Facilities renamed: U.S. Disciplinary Barracks, Alcatraz Island.

1934

Alcatraz Island officially designated a Federal Civil Penitentiary following War Department's determination that it was no longer needed for defense purposes. While under military jurisdiction, no shots were fired in combat.

1938

Title to Alcatraz Island passes to Department of Justice.

1962

U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy announces Alcatraz to be phased out of Federal Penitentiary System.

1963

Last prisoners are removed from Alcatraz.

Alcatraz Island is reported to the General Services Administration as excess property.

1964

Formation of President's Commission on the Disposition of Alcatraz Island.

Commission recommends to Congress that Alcatraz Island be used to commemorate the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco. No action taken on this proposal.

1968

Federal and California State agencies indicate to GSA that they do not wish to acquire the island.

City of San Francisco expresses interest in acquiring Alcatraz and calls for development proposals. Some 500 proposals received.

1969

Interior Secretary Hickel asks GSA to delay decision on disposition of Alcatraz until Department can consider potential as "Parks to People" project. Mayor and Board of Supervisors support new Federal study, as does Coalition to Conserve Alcatraz.

1969-1971

Indian occupation of Alcatraz.

1972

Legislation to establish Golden Gate National Recreation Area as part of President's Environmental Program introduced in Congress.

Bill establishing Golden Gate NRA, including Alcatraz as a unit, is signed into law by President Nixon.

1973

October-Alcatraz open to the public.

THE RUGGED HISTORY

Twenty-seven pale, quiet men wearing fresh prison blues, pea-coats, handcuffs, leg-irons and waist chains--were released from their cells and herded into buses which slowly descended the narrow switchback road to the wooden wharf on the steep east side of the Island. The prisoners were transferred to the Warden Blackwell and the boat headed for the Alcatraz dock at Fort Mason a mile away on the San Francisco waterfront. The time --10:50 a.m. The date Thursday, March 21, 1963.

There were no ceremonies, there were no speeches, there were no tears. The comments of the hard-case inmates leaving for disbursement to other Federal prisons were something less than nostalgic. "The place is hell," said a bank robber as he boarded the prison boat. And the last of the prisoners to step off The Rock delivered the final, bitter epitaph, "Alcatraz was never no good to nobody."

Thus ended nearly 100 years of Alcatraz notoriety as a place of military and civil confinement--the grimmest symbol in North America of the hand of justice.

The fog shrouded institution, often pictured as the "Devil's Island" of the Western Hemisphere, had a capacity of 400 prisoners, normally two-thirds filled. It housed such incorrigibles as Al Capone, Machine Gun Kelly, mail robbers Albert Bates, Gene Colson and Limpy Clever, and the last of the great train robbers, Roy Gardner.

Alcatraz Island was first sighted and claimed by the Spanish nearly 200 years ago. Its Spanish name, "La Isla de los Alcatrazes" (the Island of the Pelicans), was originally intended for another island in San Francisco Bay, but by a later mapmaker's error, the name was shifted to this island.

Initially, it was used for the first lighthouse on the Pacific Coast and as a fortification. Subsequently, it became a military prison and was used to hold Civil War and Indian prisoners, pacifists and World War I prisoners.

In 1938, jurisdiction over the island was transferred to the Department of Justice which changed it to a maximum security civil penitentiary for the hardcore gangsters and other criminals of the time. In this use, its notoriety as "The Rock" outpaced its tenure, which lasted less than 30 years.



THE ISLAND TODAY AND TOMORROW

For the first time since the 13-plus acre island was ceded to the United States, daily public tours are available. The guided tour is approximately 2 1/2 hours from dock to dock. The tour includes early fortification and military history, a walk up the main switchback road into the main cell block and solitary cells, the recreation yard and then back to the boat along a verdant path with excellent views of the surrounding bay.

With just a minimum of cleanup and restoration over the route, tours will be conducted for approximately the next 5 years. By evaluating public reaction during this time, the National Park Service will be in a better position to create a long-range plan for this island, which offers one of the most magnificent views of the city, the Golden Gate and its headlands.

RESERVATIONS

There is a reasonable charge for transportation to the island. Boat reservations are recommended and may be obtained by calling (415) 398-1141 or writing Harbor Tours, Inc., Pier 41, San Francisco, California 94133.

SAFETY

To fully enjoy your visit to Alcatraz here are a few recommendations to insure your safety and comfort:

1. Half of the tour is outdoors so generally dress for cool and windy weather.
2. Comfortable walking shoes are needed for the mile-long tour. (Avoid high heels.)
3. The tour route involves some steep grades and stairs, so please consider your physical condition before visiting the island.
4. You must stay with your tour guide. The areas outside the tour route can be dangerous.

ADMINISTRATION

Alcatraz Island is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The Superintendent of Golden Gate National Recreation Area, whose address is Fort Mason, San Francisco, California 94123, is in immediate charge.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has basic responsibilities for water, fish, wildlife, mineral, land, park, and recreational resources. Indian and Territorial affairs are other major concerns of America's "Department of Natural Resources." The Department works to assure the wisest choice in managing all our resources so each will make its full contribution to a better United States - now and in the future.

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service

