

Alcatraz: United States Penitentiary  
1934-1963

As a result of the Great Depression, a new breed of violent criminals swept the streets of America. In response to the cries of alarmed citizens, Congress enacted a number of statutes, which gave the federal government jurisdiction over certain criminal offenses previously held by the states. With the suggestion of former US Attorney General, Homes Cummings, Congress agreed that a special penal institution of maximum security and minimum privilege be established. In 1934, the legendary US Penitentiary of Alcatraz was born and became the home of Americas most wanted for the next thirty years.

Once authorized by Congress, the US Department of Justice acquired control of Alcatraz Island, previously a US Army compound. As the island was redeveloped into a maximum-security prison, seven of its twelve acres were enclosed in a prison compound. The remaining five were set aside for employee residences, apartments, and recreational space. Soon after the redesigning of the old Army fortress, the Alcatraz prison was ready for the grand opening (or better said lockout!). Equipped with four different cellblocks, A, B, C and D, the Rock began its operations on January 2, 1934. Although cellblock A was seldom used, B, C and D provided 378 "cages" to accommodate the most notorious felons that America could produce.

The first of four wardens to take charge of the penitentiary was a retired, professional administrator named James A. Johnston. The Department of Justice carefully selected Johnston because he was a well-organized, no-nonsense businessman with over twelve years of experience in the California Department of Corrections. Under Johnston, another ninety officers were required to cover the three eight-hour shifts (plus leave and vacation time).

During its thirty years of service, close to 1545 inmates resided at the Alcatraz penitentiary. Contrary to popular belief, Alcatraz was initially meant to confine only a few of the infamous headline-makers of the era. However, out of the total population ever to occupy this prison, the vast majority was not to be found on wanted posters adorning post office walls. The average number of prisoners maintained in the prison (at one time) was 260, with a high count of 302 and a low count of 222 men.

Although many stories exist of escapes from Alcatraz, only three men were successful in escaping the prison and the island, Morris and the Anglin brothers (June of 1962). Thirty-six prisoners were involved in attempts to escape: seven shot and killed, 2 drowned, 5 unaccounted for and the rest recaptured. Even though some men have made it off the island, survival still remains questionable.

Alcatraz was, of course, home to Al Capone for about four and a half years. He was first transferred from US Penitentiary Atlanta in August of 1934. Capone was also among the first "official" shipment of criminals to be received at the Rock. Capone's arrival actually generated bigger headlines than the opening of the institution, giving birth to the endless myth of Alcatraz. For this famous gangster, the influence and privileges he possessed in Atlanta were lost at Alcatraz where he was assigned menial jobs in accordance with other inmates. More importantly, Capone's transfer to Alcatraz solved the problem caused by his ability to run his criminal organization from jail. Once at the Rock, the channel of communication between Capone and his family members was simultaneously shut down.

Arriving on the second "official" shipment of prisoners was George "Machine Gun" Kelly. After an initial sentence at Leavenworth, Kelly emerged from prison to a lucrative career in bank robbery and kidnapping. Kelly's capture resulted in a courtroom sensation at the first Lindbergh Law Trial and a life-sentence that send

him back to Leavenworth. He was transferred to the Penitentiary of Alcatraz in September of 1934 for a period of seventeen years. After suffering a mild heart attack, he was returned to Leavenworth where he was paroled in 1954. Soon after his parole, a final heart attack ended his life at the age of 59.

In August of 1936, another well-known celebrity named Alvin Karpis joined Capone and Kelly at Alcatraz. After being a fugitive on the run for fifteen years, Karpis was apprehended and taken into custody in New Orleans. Karpis began his career as a petty thief who moved on to join Ma Barker in violent rampage of robbery and kidnapping. It was during this time that Karpis gained the title of Public Enemy No. 1, given to him by J. Edgar Hoover. After serving 26 years in Alcatraz, Karpis was transferred and released for deportation to Canada. After leaving Canada, Karpis assumed residency in Spain and committed suicide in 1979.

Finally, the United States Penitentiary of Alcatraz was closed on March 21, 1963 and has not since reopened. The island was turned over to the General Services Administration (GSA) in May of 1963 and later became a national park and monument. Today, Alcatraz has become one of the biggest attractions of the San Francisco Bay-area and has even inspired films such as *The Rock*, with Sean Connery and Nicholas Cage. Even though the Alcatraz prison is dead, its legacy continues at other penal institutions such as the federal prison in Marion, IL, which operates in the footsteps of Alcatraz.

#### References:

1. Coy, Bernard Paul. *Alcatraz'46: The Anatomy of a Classic Prison Tragedy*. Leswing Press, San Rafael, CA 1974.
2. Roberts, John W. *Escaping Prison Myths*. The American University Press, Washington , D.C. 1994.

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