



Alcatraz Island is located off the shore of San Francisco. Home to a federal prison, for many years, the place is also known as "The Rock."

Although escaping from Alcatraz was not foolproof, there was at least one compelling reason to build a prison on the island. The water, which is always cold (averaging 50-55 degrees F), has a notorious current, swirling around its shoreline, which is very difficult for even an expert swimmer to manage.

Initially used as a military prison, The Rock began housing civilian prisoners on August 11, 1934.

The federal Board of Prisons tell us [more about The Rock](#), beginning with its name.

Alcatraz - The Name

The name Alcatraz is derived from the Spanish "Alcatrazes." In 1775, the Spanish explorer Juan Manuel de Ayala was the first to sail into what is now known as San Francisco Bay - his expedition mapped the bay and named one of the three islands Alcatrazes.

Over time, the name was Anglicized to Alcatraz. While the exact meaning is still debated, Alcatraz is usually defined as meaning "pelican" or "strange bird."

First Prisoners - Military

By the late 1850s, the first military prisoners were being housed on the island. While the defensive necessity of Alcatraz diminished over time (the island never fired its guns in battle), its role as a prison would continue for more than 100 years.

In 1909, the Army tore down the Citadel, leaving its basement level to serve as the foundation for a new military prison. From 1909 through 1911, the military prisoners on Alcatraz built the new prison, which was designated the Pacific Branch, U.S. Disciplinary Barracks for the U.S. Army. It was this prison building that later became famous as "The Rock."

Famous Prisoners - Not Many

While several well-known criminals, such as Al Capone, George "Machine-Gun" Kelly, Alvin Karpis (the first "Public Enemy #1"), and Arthur "Doc" Barker did time on Alcatraz, most of the prisoners incarcerated there were not well-known gangsters, but prisoners who refused to conform to the rules and regulations at other Federal institutions, who were considered violent and dangerous, or who were considered escape risks.

The average population was only about 260-275 (the prison never once reached its capacity of 336 - at any given time, Alcatraz held less than 1 percent of the total Federal prison population). Many prisoners actually considered the living conditions (for instance, always one man to a cell) at Alcatraz to be better than other Federal prisons, and several inmates actually requested a transfer to Alcatraz.

...At Alcatraz, a prisoner had four rights: food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Everything else was a privilege that had to be earned. Some privileges a prisoner could earn included: working, corresponding with and having visits from family members, access to the prison library, and recreational activities such as painting and music. Once prison officials felt a man no longer posed a threat and could follow the rules (usually after an average of five years on Alcatraz), he could then be transferred back to another Federal prison to finish his sentence and be released.

Escape Attempts

Over the 29 years (1934-1963) that the Federal prison operated, 36 men (including two who tried to escape twice) were involved in 14 separate escape attempts. Of these, 23 were caught, 6 were shot and killed during their escape, and 2 drowned.

Two of the men who were caught were later executed in the gas chamber at the California State Prison at San Quentin for their role in the death of a correctional officer during the famous May 2-4, 1946, "Battle of Alcatraz" escape attempt.

Whether or not anyone succeeded in escaping from Alcatraz depends on the definition of "successful escape." Is it getting out of the cellhouse, reaching the water, making it to land, or reaching land and not getting caught? Officially, no one ever succeeded in escaping from Alcatraz, although to this day there are five prisoners listed as "missing and presumed drowned."

One of the many myths about Alcatraz is that it was impossible to survive a swim from the island to the mainland because of sharks. In fact, there are no "man-eating" sharks in San Francisco Bay, only small bottom-feeding sharks.

The main obstacles were the cold temperature (averaging 50-55 degrees Fahrenheit), the strong currents, and the distance to shore (at least 1-1/4 miles). Prior to the Federal institution opening in 1934, a teenage girl swam to the island to prove it was possible. Fitness guru Jack LaLanne once swam to the island pulling a rowboat, and several years ago, two 10-year-old children also made the swim.

If a person is well-trained and -conditioned, it is possible to survive the cold waters and fast currents. However, for prisoners - who had no control over their diet, no weightlifting or physical training (other than situps and pushups), and no knowledge of high and low tides - the odds for success were slim.

The prison at Alcatraz Island closed on March 21, 1963. It had become too expensive to maintain. This image provides a view of Alcatraz Island.

Credits:

Image online, courtesy ReserveAlcatraz.com website.

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The Rock: Alcatraz Island and Prison

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