

# California Tour: 3

## Alcatraz

Born of necessity, perhaps even political expediency, Alcatraz represents the federal government's response to post-Prohibition, post-Depression America. 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. Although land in Alaska was being considered, the availability of Alcatraz Island, in San Francisco Bay, conveniently coincided with the perceived need for a super-prison.

The Bureau of Prisons, having taken possession of the former Army prison and having circumvented the concerns of the local citizenry about having vicious criminals housed in their backyard, selected James A. Johnston, a no-nonsense businessman and prison administrator of 12 years, as Alcatraz's first warden. Alcatraz opened for business in 1934.

Classified as a concentration model, where difficult-to-manage prisoners from other institutions would be housed under one roof, Alcatraz served as an experiment. Warden Johnston and the second Director of the Bureau of Prisons, James Bennett, were both visionaries whose knowledge enabled Alcatraz to function as it had been intended and to later serve as a model for the federal prison located in Marion, IL.

Contrary to popular myth, Alcatraz was to confine only a few of the infamous criminals of the period. Of the 1,545 men to do time within its walls, the vast majority were 'unknowns.' Alcatraz was, of course, home to Al Capone for almost four and a half years. Transferred there in August, 1934, Capone was among the first "official" shipment of prisoners to be received.

Arriving in the second shipment, in September, 1934, was George "Machine Gun" Kelly. Serving a life sentence for kidnapping, he would be at Alcatraz for 17 years before returning to Leavenworth. Alvin Karpis (Ma Barker's partner) arrived in 1936 and would spend the next 26 years there. But it was Robert Stroud, the Birdman of Alcatraz, who received the most media coverage. He was transferred to Alcatraz in 1942 and remained there until 1959.

By 1962, Alcatraz was showing wear and tear that would cost millions to upgrade. Also, the 60s was ushering in an era of liberalism, an era in which a prison offering no hope of rehabilitation no longer had a place. It had always been an expensive institution to operate. A new prison could and would be constructed at Marion, IL. On March 21, 1963, Alcatraz officially closed. Today, the once-toughest prison in the United States is a San Francisco tourist attraction.

