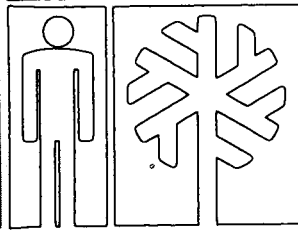


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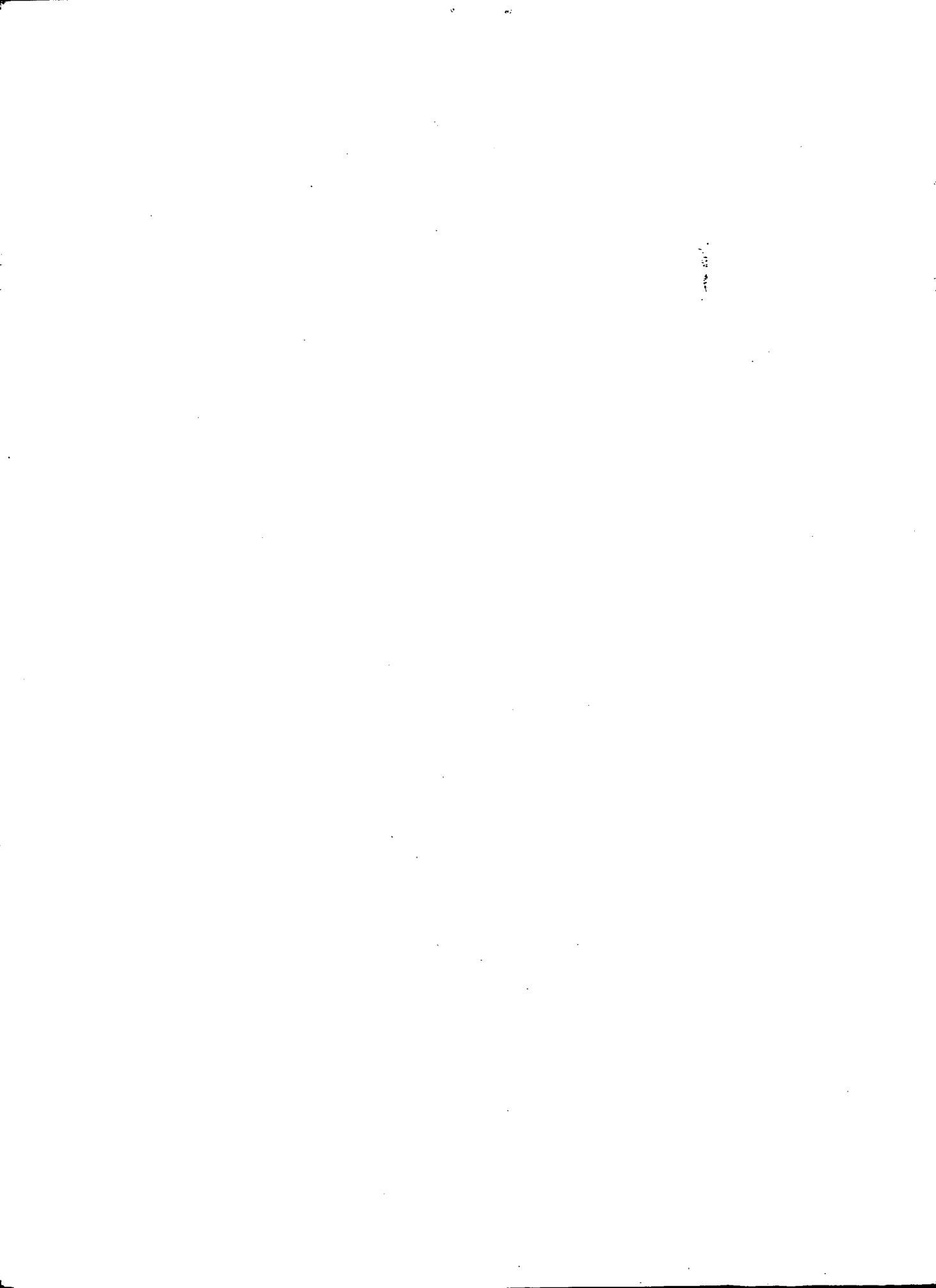
GOLDEN GATE

THE ROCK: A HISTORY OF ALCATRAZ ISLAND, 1847-1972



NATIONAL RECREATION AREA / CALIFORNIA

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THE ROCK: A HISTORY OF ALCATRAZ ISLAND, 1847-1972
HISTORIC RESOURCE STUDY
GOLDEN GATE NATIONAL RECREATION AREA
CALIFORNIA

By

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DENVER, COLORADO

WITHDRAWN

E R R A T A S H E E T

Page 6, paragraph 2, the second sentence should read,

But, on July 20, 1838, the Mexican government, fearful that foreigners might occupy some of these islands, passed a law that authorized the governor of California to grant them to Mexican citizens.¹⁰ On April 30, 1846, less than two months before the Bear Flag Revolt, Julian Workman, a naturalized Mexican, petitioned Governor Pio Pico for a grant to Alcatraz, "which has never been inhabited by any person, nor used for any purpose." The governor forwarded the petition to the second prefect to be certified.

Page 207, paragraph 2, second sentence, should read,

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P R E F A C E

This historic resource study of Alcatraz Island does not have an approved task directive. However, it has been prepared in accordance with the standards and regulations concerning historic preservation. The objective has been to complete a document that will prove useful to planning, management, preservation, and interpretation.

Direct quotations herein have on rare occasion been carefully modified by minor punctuation changes. Care has been taken not to change the original meaning. The actual rank of army officers is used throughout the report, their brevet grades being ignored. Also, in describing the post-Civil War years, officers are referred to by their regular army grades, not by their wartime positions.

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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L I S T O F A B B R E V I A T I O N S

AAG	Assistant Adjutant General
AG	Adjutant General
AGO	Adjutant General's Office
CCF	Consolidated Correspondence Files (Quartermaster)
CG	Commanding General
Ch.	Chief
CO	Commanding Officer
IG	Inspector General
JAG	Judge Advocate General
NA	National Archives
NPS	National Park Service
OCE	Office of the Chief of Engineers (also Office of the Chief Engineer)
OQMG	Office of the Quartermaster General
PB, USDB	Pacific Branch, United States Disciplinary Barracks
PB, USMP	Pacific Branch, United States Military Prison
QM	Quartermaster
RG	Record Group
USA	United States Army

I. An Introduction To Alcatraz Island

A. Historical Significance

"The Rock" became a synonym for Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay long before its penitentiary housed the most desperate federal prisoners in the United States for almost 30 years, from 1934 to 1963. Alcatraz's historical significance reaches much further back in time and possesses more facets than the story of bank robbers and kidnappers. On the island stood the first lighthouse on America's Pacific shores, a light that has guided ships in and out of the magnificent bay for almost 125 years. For nearly 75 years, the island served as a military prison for army convicts from both the western states and overseas possessions. And for 50 years, Alcatraz played a key role in the defenses of San Francisco Harbor.

B. The Rock Is a Rock: A Description

Despite later tales that the island was honeycombed with Spanish tunnels and dungeons, it attracted very little attention from explorers and settlers before the Mexican War. Nor was there much about it that was attractive. Alcatraz jutted out of the bay, a barren irregularly shaped rock that was devoid of flowing water as well as vegetation. An American army officer described it as being "entirely without resources within itself and the soil is scarcely perceptible being rocky and precipitous on all sides."¹ Its first surveyor wrote: "This Island is chiefly composed of irregularly stratified sandstone covered with a thin coating of guano. The stone is full of seams in all directions which render it unfit for any building purposes & probably difficult to quarry." He added: "The island has no beach & but two or three points where small

1. [U.S. Army], Outline Descriptions [of] Military Posts in the Military Division of the Pacific, 1879 (n.p. [1879]), p. 69.

boats can land." His survey showed that the island was 1,705 feet long and that its maximum width came to 580 feet. Its long axis lay in a northwest-southeast direction. When viewed in profile it had two "peaks" that reached elevations above sea level of 134.9 and 138.4 feet. The guano probably gave cause for the name White Island that was occasionally applied to it. The Rock measured about 22 acres.²

C. Alcatraz Gets a Name: Explorers

Because of its location in the midst of the swift currents of the bay, Alcatraz (where one could get close to the water) provided an excellent platform from which to harvest the great schools of fish that passed beneath its slopes. But if Indians made use of the island as a fishing station, they left no evidence of their visits. Not until the third quarter of the 18th century did Alcatraz enter into history.³

Sgt. José Francisco Ortega, chief scout for Gaspar de Portola's expedition, may have seen Alcatraz Island when he stumbled upon the Golden Gate in 1769. Three years later, two Spanish gentlemen most certainly did. Capt. Pedro Fages and Father Juan Crespi, exploring the area where Berkeley now stands,

2. Washington, D.C., National Archives, Cartographic Archives Division, Record Group 77, Office of the Chief of Engineers (hereinafter cited as OCE), Fortifications File, Drawer 95-107, Lt. W. H. Warner, "Field Map of 'Isla de los Alcatrazes' San Francisco Harbor . . . May 1847." (Hereinafter, National Archives is NA; Record Group is RG. Historic maps used in this study are not shown individually in the Bibliography; rather they are listed in an appendix.)

3. The writer is aware that some students believe that Francis Drake discovered San Francisco Bay in 1579. A summation of the various Drake theories will be presented in a later study of Golden Gate National Recreation Area (hereinafter cited as GGNRA).

looked westward toward the Golden Gate and noted the principal islands within their view. Fages wrote in his journal: "Within the estuary we saw five islands, three of them making a triangle opposite the mouth, with a large distance between them; and the nearest of them to the channel at the mouth [Alcatraz] must have been over a league from it. The largest of the three [Angel], which must have been some three leagues in circuit, was very grassy and with considerable trees on it; the other two [Alcatraz and Yerba Buena] were smaller and also displayed considerable greenery."⁴

The first European to visit the island may or may not have been Frigate-Lt. don Juan Manuel de Ayala, who sailed the first ship into San Francisco Bay in August 1775. On August 12 he set out in a small boat from his temporary anchorage at Tiburon for nearby Angel Island, which he named Isla de los Angeles. Although he found good moorings there, he decided to inspect further before deciding on a harbor: "I rather preferred to pass onward in search of another island, which when I reached it proved so arid and steep there was not even a boat-harbor there; I named the island de los Alcatrazes [Island of the Pelicans] because of their being so plentiful there."⁵

4. Frank M. Stanger and Alan K. Brown, Who Discovered the Golden Gate? The Explorers' Own Accounts, How they discovered a hidden harbor and at last found its entrance (San Mateo Historical Association, 1969), p. 122. Crespi's description was briefer; he too identified the location of Alcatraz. There is no accounting for Fages' observing greenery on Alcatraz. Perhaps the distance made the guano appear to be what it was not.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 151. Ayala's chart spelled the name "Alcatrazes." The officers of the U.S. Army had a difficult time with this Spanish name. From their reports the following variations have been culled: Alcatrazes, Alcatras, Alcatrazas, Alcatrace, Alcatrose, Alcatrazas, Alcatrazos, and Alcatrases. The last of these was the most common spelling in the 1850s. By 1866 the army had settled on today's spelling, but the Coast Survey had settled on today's version as early as 1851.

One could readily assume that Ayala had reached today's Alcatraz. However, the chart resulting from this first survey of the bay clearly labeled today's Yerba Buena Island as de los Alcatraces. Some scholars, such as Stanger and Brown, believe that the chart was inaccurate and that the name was applied to the wrong island by an unskilled hand, and that Ayala's "arid and steep" island was indeed today's Alcatraz. Others assume that the chart is correct, that Ayala did visit Yerba Buena, and that the name was later accidentally changed.⁶

Stanger and Brown believe that Ayala's phrase could only have applied to today's Alcatraz and not to the more bountiful Yerba Buena. Supporting this conclusion, on the one hand, is the army's experiences on Yerba Buena around 1870, when it had a full-fledged post on the island capable of supporting 150 men. A spring and a well supplied a limited but adequate amount of water. And the post boasted a 5-acre garden. Photographs taken at the time show a heavy natural growth of grasses, bushes, and large shrubs. On the other hand, Ayala's own pilot, Jose de Canezares, described today's Yerba Buena as "rough, steep and with no shelter."⁷

A Mexican map of the Bay Area dated 1825 continued to identify Yerba Buena as Alcatraz, with no identification of the

6. Ibid., pp. 56 and 57; also see Erwin G. Gudde, California Place Names, The Origin and Etymology of Current Geographical Names (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), pp. 5 and 351.

7. Stanger and Brown, p. 159; [U.S. Army], Quartermaster General, Outline Descriptions of Forts and Stations, 1871 (Washington, 1872), p. 31; NA, Audiovisual Archives Division, 2 photos, Engineer Company on Yerba Buena Island, n.d. (but between 1868 and 1874, No. 77F-98-16, A and B.

latter island at all. But in the next year, Capt. Frederick Beechey, British Navy, secured permission from Mexican authorities to survey the bay. For whatever reasons, he gave each island its present name and thus they have been known ever since.⁸

D. Frémont's Claim

During the last years of the Mexican regime, a number of citizens, native and naturalized, of the Republic applied for grants of land around San Francisco Bay at locations that within a short time would be demanded by the United States for use as military reservations for the defense of the harbor. While some of the original grantees had intentions of developing these lands, others were purely speculators and, after the conquest of California, undoubtedly had high hopes that the United States would be forced to pay well to obtain possession of them. Ownership disputes would soon plague all the early military reservations: Presidio, Point San Jose (Fort Mason), Lime Point, Angel Island, and Alcatraz.

Early in 1849 the U.S. Congress appropriated funds for a joint commission of army and navy officers to examine the Pacific Coast with reference to its defense. Maj. John Lind Smith, senior officer of the commission, wrote from San Francisco concerning Mexican titles. He understood that the only titles that existed in California were those derived from Mexican grants and from uninterrupted occupancy for the length of time prescribed by the laws of Mexico. He had also learned that "all valid Mexican grants contain a reservation that they may be resumed by the Govt.--when

8. NA, Cartographic Div., RG 77, Fortifications File, Dr. 124-1, "Plano del Puerto de San Francisco . . . 1825"; Stanger and Brown, pp. 62-63.

needed for public purposes; and that any grant without the reservation is not valid because there is a law of Mexico expressly requiring it to be inserted." Smith confidently concluded that the United States could take possession of any land in California that might be required for public use. Alcatraz Island would not test Smith's thesis as much as Lime Point or Point San Jose would in the years ahead; nonetheless the story of its claimants is a curious one.⁹

The Spanish colonial government had, in fact, retained control of all coastal islands. But on July 20, 1838, the Mexican government, fearful that foreigners might occupy some of these islands, passed a law that authorized the governor of California to certify. The prefect, J. de Jesus Noe, at Monterey, did his duty but was puzzled as to why Workman wanted the "completely bare" island. Another Monterey official pointed out that the only possible use Alcatraz could have would be the location of "some kind of lamp which may provide some light in the dark and stormy nights for the protection of ships that pass by." On June 8, 1846, as the sun was setting on Mexico's ownership of Alta California, Governor Pico granted Workman the small island, with the one condition that he establish a navigation light "as soon as possible." Workman did not erect a light on Alcatraz; almost immediately he conveyed the title

9. NA, RG 77, Office of Chief of Engineers, OCE, Letters Received 1838-1866, Maj. J. L. Smith, Mar. 31, 1850, to Secretaries of War and Navy.

10. Denver, National Park Service, Denver Service Center (hereinafter cited as NPS, DSC), John A. Hussey, "Fort McDowell, Angel Island, Marin and San Francisco Counties, California . . ." Manuscript prepared for War Assets Administration, 1949, p. 16.

to his son-in-law, Francis P. Temple, another naturalized Mexican.¹¹

In 1847, John Charles Frémont, appointed governor of California by Commodore Stockton, "purchased" Alcatraz Island from Francis Temple, "giving a bond for the purchase money in my official capacity as governor of California." Frémont said he regarded the island "as the best position for Lighthouse and Fortifications in the bay of San Francisco." Later in Washington, D.C., Frémont was court-martialed on a number of charges and specifications, among them being this purchase in the name of the United States. The United States rejected the "purchase" on the grounds that Frémont had not possessed the authority to make it. Furthermore, President Fillmore's 1850 order reserving Alcatraz and other parcels of land from sale was a clear indication that the federal government considered itself the rightful owner and purchase from anyone unnecessary. The army's Board of Engineers for the Pacific Coast confirmed that belief in 1851 when it wrote that while it had no specific information concerning Temple and Fremont, it was under the impression "that our Government had succeeded to the right of property in that and other Islands . . . which had been vested in the Mexican Government."¹²

11. San Francisco Examiner, Jan. 5, 1896; NA, RG 77, OCE, Land Papers, John C. Fremont, Washington, D.C., May 10, 1855, to General [Caleb] Cushing. Governor Micheltorena had apparently granted Alcatraz to Jose Yves Limantour in 1843, but a court had proclaimed this illegal.

12. NA, RG 77, OCE, Letters Received 1838-1866, Col. J. S. Smith, Nov. 3, 1851, to Col. Joseph Totten, Chief Engr.; NA, RG 77, OCE, Fremont, May 10, 1855, to Cushing; Theodore Grivas, Military Governments in California, 1846-1850 (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1963), p. 98.

The army proceeded to develop plans for the defense of Alcatraz. But Frémont was not at all convinced that his claim was dead. He decided that if he had not purchased Alcatraz for the government, then he had bought it for himself: "The island consequently reverted to me, and has ever since been held by me to be my property." Eventually, through Simon Stevens of New York, Fremont paid \$5,000 to the holder of the bond. From the 1850s on, Temple's name dropped from the records. Not so, Frémont's. By early 1855 the San Francisco law firm of Palmer, Cook, and Company, which seemed to specialize in land litigations that involved the federal government, entered the case either on behalf of Frémont, or in partnership with him. They brought an action of ejectment in the District Court, Fourth Judicial District, San Francisco. The engineer in charge of the works on Alcatraz, Maj. Zealous Bates Tower, notified Chief Engineer Joseph Totten that "Messers Palmer Cook & Co. have commenced suit against me personally for trespass in occupying Alcatraz." The secretary of war quickly authorized Tower to call upon the U.S. district attorney for any assistance he needed.¹³

At the same time Palmer went into court, Frémont wrote U.S. Attorney General Caleb Cushing outlining the case as he saw it, concluding: "I thought it not improbable that the government upon a full examination might be disposed to make some arrangement which would spare us the great expense and delay of litigation."

13. NA, RG 77, OCE, Land Claims, Maj. Z. B. Tower, Jan. 31, 1855, to Totten; NA, RG 77, OCE, Letters to Officers of Engineers, vol. 23, 1st Lt. J. D. Kurtz, May 18, 1855, to Tower. At that time the firm Palmer, Cook and Company was composed of Joseph C. Palmer, Charles W. Cook, George W. Wright, and Edward Jones. See NA, RG 77, OCE, Land Papers; Mary Lee Spence and Donald Jackson, editors, The Expeditions of John Charles Fremont, vol. 2: The Bear Flag Revolt and the Court Martial (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973). p. 317 and footnote 317n.

But the government was not so disposed. The construction of fortifications on Alcatraz went on. Fremont's claim came up again in 1859 when D. W. Perley, said to have been the "Pathfinder's" attorney at that time, threatened to institute a suit for the possession of the island. Sec. Lt. James B. McPherson, then in charge of Alcatraz, informed Washington that according to his intelligence Perley was threatening this action because he had lost \$30,000 when the federal government declined to pay \$200,000 for the purchase of Lime Point on the north side of the Golden Gate. As before, the subject quickly dropped from army correspondence, indicating that nothing much came from the affair.¹⁴

As late as the 1890s attorneys for the heirs of General Fremont, probably in association with another land dispute at Point San José (Fort Mason), placed on record a deed dated August 3, 1883, from Frémont to Charles A. Lamont of New York, stating that for the sum of one dollar and other valuable considerations Frémont sold one-half of all his rights to Alcatraz Island. The newspapers guessed that the old claim was to be renewed before Congress or the Court of Claims. But the Frémont heirs seem to have dropped their interest in Alcatraz about this time. They would, however, continue the battle over Point San José.

Alcatraz has remained firmly in the hands of the federal government from its first occupation by the army engineers until today.¹⁵

14. NA, RG 77, OCE, Land Papers, Frémont, May 10, 1855, to Cushing, and 2Lt. J. B. McPherson, July 14, 1859, to Capt. G. A. De Russy; NA, RG 77, OCE, Letters to Officers of Engineers, vol. 30, De Russy, Aug. 12, 1859, to McPherson.

15. Evening Bulletin, San Francisco, May 28, 1892; San Francisco Call, May 29, 1892.

II. The First Fortifications, 1853-1863

A. A Natural Redoubt: Planning the Works

1. First Survey

First Lt. William Horace Warner, Corps of Topographical Engineers, surveyed Alcatraz Island in May 1847. Not only was this the first detailed examination of the island, it was one of the very first land surveys carried out on the Pacific Coast by the newly established Tenth Military Department, headquartered at Monterey and still under the command of Brig. Gen. Stephen Watts Kearny. While the army had not yet developed plans for the permanent defenses of San Francisco Bay, Warner's map, with minor corrections, became the basis for future planning over the next 20-odd years. The department's desire to have the island surveyed at this early date indicated the realization that Alcatraz would play an important role in an, as yet, undeveloped scheme of defense.¹

2. Joint Board of Engineers and Naval Officers

Two years passed before the U.S. Congress appropriated funds for an examination of the Pacific Coast "in reference to the defence of the Same." The resultant Joint Board of Engineers and Naval Officers (Pacific Coast) consisted of three army

1. [U.S. Army], Military Posts 1879, p. 1. The Tenth Military Department was created per General Order No. 49, War Department, Adjutant General's Office, Nov. 3, 1846. It was actually established in Monterey in February 1847. William Horace Warner entered West Point in 1831. He graduated tenth in his class. After two years as an artillery officer, he joined the Topographical Engineers in 1838. Promoted to first lieutenant in 1841, he received a brevet captaincy for gallant and meritorious service in California on Dec. 6, 1846. His military career suddenly ended Sept. 26, 1849, when he was killed by Indians in the Sierra Nevada. See Francis B. Heitman, Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, from 1789 to . . . 1903, 2 vols. (1903; reprint ed., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 1:1003.

engineers: Maj. John L. Smith, Maj. Cornelius A. Ogden, and 1st Lt. Danville Leadbetter; and three naval officers: Comdr. Lewis M. Goldsborough, Comdr. G. J. Van Brunt, and Lt. Simon F. Blunt.² These officers assembled at San Francisco in early April 1849. Their surveys of the Bay Area, the Columbia River, and San Diego over the next several months were greatly hindered by wholesale desertions of naval seamen who were intent on reaching the gold mines. In desperation, the commission sailed to Hawaii in November to hire an adequate ship's crew from the king. At least, this was a good excuse to visit Honolulu in the winter. They returned to San Francisco in March 1850.

At the end of March, the commission prepared its major recommendations concerning lands to be reserved for public use. On the south side of the Golden Gate they proposed one reservation that included all of today's Fort Winfield Scott, the Presidio of San Francisco, and Fort Mason (and the area between the latter two). The recommendation for the north side of the Golden Gate approximated what would later become the Lime Point Military Reservation (Forts Baker and Barry). The commission further proposed a reservation on the eastern side of Mare Island Straits. Finally, they included the three major islands in San Francisco Bay: Yerba Buena, Angel, and Alcatraz. Almost as an afterthought, they provided for a temporary battery at "Racoon"

2. NA, RG 77, OCE, Letters Received 1838-1866, Instructions of Secretaries of War and Navy to Joint Board of Engineers & Naval Officers (Pacific Coast). Blunt had been in San Francisco Bay before as a member of the Wilkes Expedition. Point Blunt on Angel Island was named in his honor. See William Stanton, The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

Point, opposite Angel Island, today's Peninsula Point. In its final report, dated November 1, 1850, the commission reiterated the above recommendations, saying:

The first consideration in connection with defense would be to prevent the passage of hostile vessels through the channel of entrance [Golden Gate]. This would be difficult as the narrowest part of the entrance is about a mile wide and vessels might pass through with the speed of 10 or 12 knots if favored by a strong fair wind, not unusual there, and the flood tide, estimated at 3 knots. The difficulty might be obviated by having, in addition to a strong battery on each shore, at the narrowest part . . . a third battery on Alcatrazos Island which lies within the Bay . . . and which, although about two miles from the other batteries would in cooperation with them and with a temporary battery on Point José at the South and another on Angel Island at the North, concentrate the fire of so many guns upon any vessels that might get past the front line of batteries, that they would be destroyed or so disabled as to become harmless.

The officers urged the building without delay of the fortifications at Fort Point, Lime Point, and Alcatraz. They estimated that the cost of a battery on the island would be \$600,000 at Pacific Coast prices. Five days later, before seeing this final report, President Fillmore declared Alcatraz Island reserved for public use, that is, as a military reservation.³

3. NA, RG 77, OCE, Letters Received 1838-1866, Col. J. L. Smith, Sausalito Bay, Apr. 9, 1849, and Smith, Honolulu Bay, Dec. 5, 1849, to Totten, Smith, Sausalito Bay, Aug. 1 and 29, 1849, and Mar. 31, 1850, to Secretaries of War and Navy, and "Report relative to an examination of the Coast of the U.S. on the Pacific . . .," Nov. 1, 1850, to Secretaries of War and Navy. Fillmore's order was modified on Dec. 31, 1851, but this had no effect on Alcatraz.

