

Statement Of Significance

Alcatraz Island was listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1976 and was designated a National Historic Landmark (NHL) in 1986. The National Register nomination describes the significance of Alcatraz Island:

“Alcatraz is an island in San Francisco Bay which is of national historical significance in the categories of military history and social history (penology). During the mid-19th Century it was an impressive fortress guarding, along with Fort Point and, later, Angel Island, the entrance to San Francisco Bay. As a fortress, it was as nearly impregnable as technology of the time could make it – an “American Gibraltar” – and it was crowned with a brick/masonry “Citadel” which may have been unique in the annals of American military architecture. In later years it served as a military prison, and in more recent times became a Federal penitentiary and one of America’s most famous penal institutions, with a reputation rivaling France’s Devil’s Island. As a Federal prison, it housed some of America’s most dangerous criminals, those whom it was believed were too unmanageable for incarceration in other Federal prisons. Its location in the Bay rendered Alcatraz nearly escape-proof” (Chappell 1976).

The statement of significance included with the NHL nomination states:

“Alcatraz Island has been the site of events that have had an important impact on the nation as a whole from before the Civil War through an Indian Occupation of the 1970s. Its significance in the area of military history, social history (penology), and maritime commerce is enhanced by the integrity of the resource which follows from the fact that access to the island has been strictly limited by the U.S. Government throughout its history. Maritime commerce was aided by the first U.S. lighthouse on the Pacific Coast built here in 1854; its successor still serves. By the start of the Civil War, Alcatraz was the key fort in the center of the most important Pacific port in nineteenth century America, mounted the first permanent cannons on the West Coast of the United States, and featured a brick and masonry defensive barracks that may have been unique in the annals of American military architecture. In the areas of both military and social history, Alcatraz is noteworthy because it was the first army prison in the nation. When it became a civilian penitentiary in 1934, it quickly gained nationwide attention due to its association with many of the most infamous criminals of the gangster era and the bloody escape attempts made from there. It is representative of the far end of the penological spectrum, since it was a prison designed for punishment and incarceration only, rather than rehabilitation. It is of national importance in this regard because of its use as the repository of incorrigibles throughout the Federal prison system . . . In terms of the national Historic Landmarks program, the history of Alcatraz Island is nationally significant under Theme 5 (Political and Military Affairs), subthemes 5b (1830-1860) and 5c (1865-1941); Theme 7 (America at Work), subtheme 7j (Engineering), facet 5 (Military Fortifications); Theme 9 (Society and Social Conscience) Subtheme 9b (Social and Humanitarian Movements), facet 2 (Humanitarian Movements), subfacet c (Prison Reform)” (Haller 1986: 8-1).

At the time the property was listed on the NRHP, no National Register criteria were explicitly cited to justify the significance. However, from the narrative statements of significance quoted above, it can be surmised that Alcatraz Island is significant under National Register criterion A (association with historic events). Under criterion A, Alcatraz Island is significant for its association with maritime commerce, as the site of the first U.S. lighthouse on the Pacific coast; for its association with coastal defense, as the site of one of the first permanent U.S. defensive facility in San Francisco Bay; for its association with military penology, as the first military prison in the country; and for its association with federal penology, as the site of the Federal Bureau of Prisons maximum security detention facility.

The statement of significance narrative also implies that Alcatraz Island may be eligible for the Register under criterion B (association with a person or persons) for its association with infamous criminals Robert Stroud (“Birdman of Alcatraz”), Alphonse Capone, and George Kelly Barnes (“Machine Gun Kelly”), who were each incarcerated at Alcatraz during the federal penitentiary period, and under criterion C (characterized by distinctive construction or design) for the Citadel that housed soldiers during the military fortifications period. More research is required to ascertain the property’s significance under these criteria.

The period of significance stretches from 1847, when the island was first surveyed for the military fortifications, to 1971, when the National Park Service acquired the island. This period of significance covers the military fortifications period (1847-1907), the military prison period (1907-1933), the federal prison period (1933-1963), and the public lands period (1963-1971). The current landscape of Alcatraz Island is a collection of landscape characteristics and features that date from each of the historic periods. The significance is conveyed through the nine remaining landscape characteristics: buildings and structures, spatial organization, circulation, small-scale features, topography, vegetation, natural systems and features, archeological sites, and land use. These landscape characteristics and their associated features contribute to the overall integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, setting, association, and feeling.