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“Here is where Al Capone and a few others are spending their vacations?” : Tracing How Alcatraz was Portrayed in Postcards, 1924-1971

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**“Here is where Al Capone and a few others
are spending their vacations?”¹:
Tracing How Alcatraz was Portrayed in
Postcards, 1924-1971**

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Alcatraz, the infamous prison where it long boasted to be inescapable. Sitting in the San Francisco Bay, the Rock was a prison that housed some of the United States’ most heinous criminals— Al Capone, “the Birdman” Robert Stroud, and the original George “Machine Gun” Kelly, just to name a few. But what happens when Alcatraz closes and becomes a popular tourist attraction to oddity seekers from around the world? What else, then to be printed on a postcard and sent to friends, family, and



Image 1: ca. 1924

loved ones all over the United States. Between the 1920s and the 1970s and as Alcatraz was decommissioned as a federal prison and bloomed into a booming tourist industry, the Rock saw a change in the way that the postcard industry portrayed it via photos on the back of postcards. As time went on, Alcatraz was depicted more as a tourist hotspot than a warning place to stay out of. Photo postcards of Alcatraz shifted from black and white photos and printed photos

¹ Postcard of Alcatraz found in the “Prison” binder in the David P. Campbell postcard collection at the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at The University of Akron. These postcards were also dated by postmarks indicating when the cards were sent and through Google image searches revealing comparable images and their associated dates.

toward lively colored photos that had the message “Wish You Were Here!” printed on them, suggesting a cultural shift in attitude toward this notorious prison.²

So, what was Alcatraz? According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons

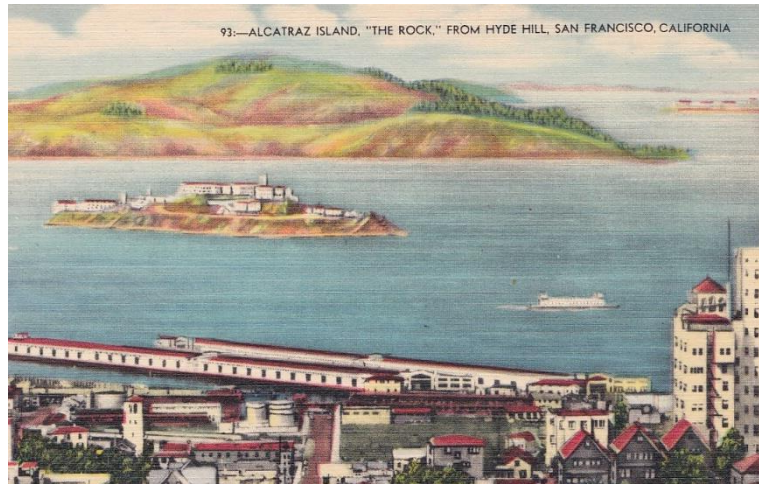


Image 2: ca. 1930

(FBP), Alcatraz was first written about in 1775 and its name is derived from the Spanish word “Alcatrazes”, and coming from a Spanish explorer in 1775, also known as Juan Manuel de Ayala. Ayala was reportedly the “first to sail into what is now known as San Francisco Bay,” and this name of *Alcatrazes* was later Anglicized to Alcatraz. In the year 1850, President Millard Fillmore issued an order that reserved Alcatraz island as a possible site for use as a reservation for the United States Military. This order was a result of the booming time of the California Gold Rush and the importance of protecting San Francisco and her Bay from the rapid boom of migrants to the area. Along with this order, the United States Army built a fort at the top of the island in the beginning of the 1850s, also planning to install “more than 100 cannons on the island, making Alcatraz the most heavily fortified military site on the West Coast.” Along with being a military fortification, Alcatraz was also home to the first operational lighthouse on the West Coast.³

Later in the 1850s, Alcatraz island saw some of its first prisoners, military prisoners at this point, being housed. These were the first signs of Alcatraz being a prison and would carry later into the twentieth century. However, in 1909 according to the FBP the U.S. Army tore down the fortress and the base of this

² Richard Cavendish. “Alcatraz Prison Closes.” *History Today* 63, no. 3 (March 2013): 11.

³ <https://www.bop.gov/about/history/alcatraz.jsp>; Richard Cavendish. “Alcatraz Prison Closes.” *History Today* 63, no. 3 (March 2013): 11.; <https://www.alcatrazhistory.com/rock/rock-01.htm>

structure was later used as the foundation for a new prison. Then, “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.” This prison that was built by the hands of prisoners would later be known as the Alcatraz prison that is known today. From 1850 until 1933, the United States Army used Alcatraz island until it was subsequently transferred to the United States Department of Justice “for use by the Federal Bureau of Prisons.” It was then that the Federal Government decided to open a “maximum-security, minimum-privilege penitentiary to deal with the most incorrigible inmates in Federal prisons,” and to intimidate already law-abiding citizens that the United States government was going to be very stern in handling the crime of the 1920s and 1930s.⁴

Alcatraz prison was closed on March 21, 1963 after only twenty-nine years of use. For what reason? The same reason that many large institutions closed—lack of money and funds in order to keep it running and

functional. As the FBP noted, “An estimated \$3-5 million was needed just for restoration and maintenance work to keep the prison open.” The FBP reported that this estimated figure did not include many daily costs, because Alcatraz was one of the most expensive prisons that existed. Of course, one of the main expenses for the Rock was the sheer fact that it was an island and secluded from land more than the average prison was and because of this isolation, everything had to be ‘imported’ in a way from the mainland by boat to the island and distributed to the facility. For example, “the island had no source of fresh water, so nearly one million gallons of water had to be barged to the island each week.” Unfortunately, because of the high cost of keeping Alcatraz open, the Federal government decided

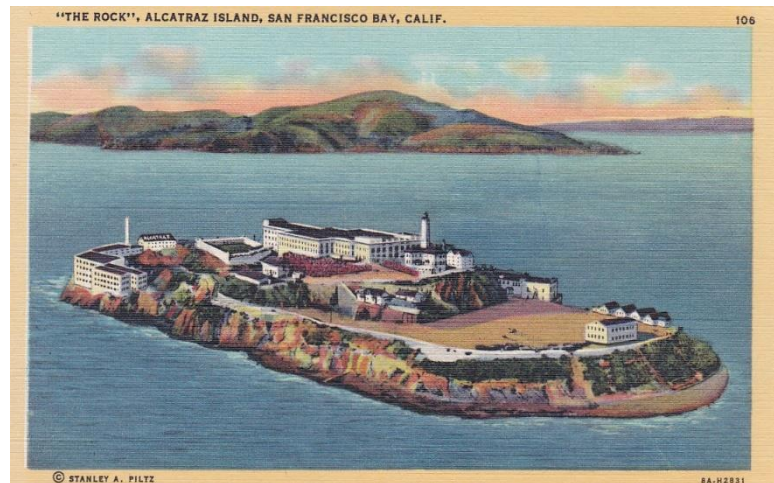


Image 3: ca. 1930s

⁴ Ibid.

instead to build a new, more cost-effective institution and abandoned Alcatraz and the island all together.⁵

In the latter half of the 1960s, Alcatraz Island was inhabited by a group of Native Americans that claimed the island as Native

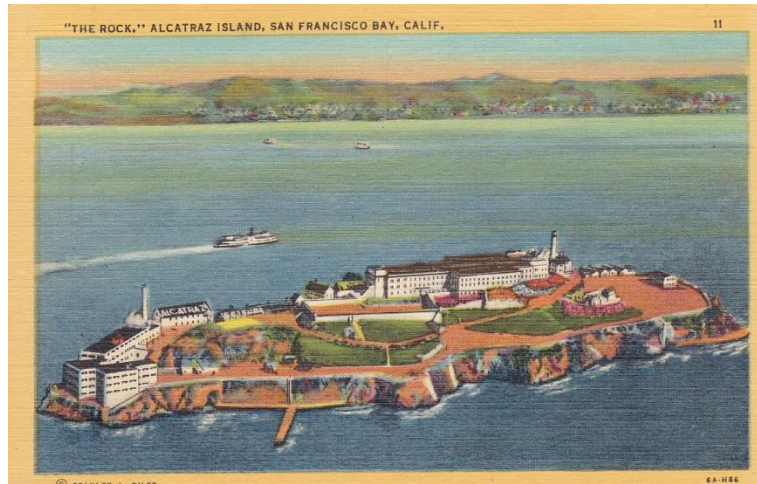


Image 4: ca. 1930s

American land “with the hope of creating a Native American cultural center and education complex on the island.” This group of Native American Indians used this coup to demonstrate and symbolize the struggles that Native Americans had been facing since contact with Europeans hundreds of years ago, and the disadvantages that they had since been facing. Of course during this time, around late 1969, there is also a growing anti-war sentiment with the United States becoming more and more involved in the Vietnam War, and this also fed into sentiments of Americans to join the Native Americans that were on Alcatraz Island, including the “general public, schoolchildren, celebrities, hippies, Vietnam war protestors, Hells Angels” over the course of eighteen months.⁶

However, for the Native Americans and their supporters, their fight to establish the Native American cultural and education institution was not

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <https://www.alcatrazhistory.com/factsnfig.htm>; Brenda Norrell, *Indian Country Today*, Rapid City, S.D. “Seizure of Alcatraz 30 Years Ago Renewed Native American Rights Movement.” *Indian Country Today* (Rapid City, SD).; Simon J. Ortiz, “American Indian Studies Association Conference Keynote Address: Indigenous Activism: Our Resistance, Our Revitalization, Our Indigenous Native Studies: And Our Healing within Our Indigenous Context (or From Alcatraz 1969 to Standing Rock 2017. Or Perhaps--Truth Be Bold--Liars, Killers, Thieves Invade Sacred Stone Camp).” *Wicazo Sa Review* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 106–14. doi:10.5749/wicazosareview.32.2.0106.; Carolyn Strange and Tina Loo. “Holding the Rock: The ‘Indianization’ of Alcatraz Island, 1969-1999.” *Public Historian* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 55. doi:10.1525/tph.2001.23.1.55.



Image 5: ca. 1930s

successful due to the onset of vandalism, fires, and graffiti that engulfed the island. With many emotions on high, differing opinions, different peoples, and the War, the lighthouse keeper's home, the Warden's quarters, and the Officers' Club were all

destroyed. In June of 1971, according to the FBP, "Federal Marshals removed the remaining Native Americans from the island." One year after the Native Americans were forcibly removed from Alcatraz Island, Congress created the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which included Alcatraz Island protected under the National Park Service. In 1973, the Island was opened to the public and see more than a million worldwide visitors each year.⁷

An article that was found in the *Journal of Travel Research* analyzes the relationship between travel destination and tourist photography, which definitely comes into play when analyzing the tourist culture and postcards that emerge as a result of the rise of interest in Alcatraz and the island. The author of "Understanding the Relationship between Tourism Destination Imagery and Tourist Photography," Brian Garrod, argued that photography and tourism "are widely considered to be intrinsically linked." This is because tourism is majorly influenced through photography that appears in modes of media like television, brochures, postcards, among many other means. Of course, another interesting link between tourism and photography is that in order to have "proof" of being a tourist, one of the most popular things to do is snap a photo of where you went, what you saw, what you ate, things of that nature. Tourist attractions are presented to people through these means of photographs and in turn cause a want or desire

⁷ <https://www.alcatrazhistory.com/factsnfig.htm>; Brenda Norrell, *Indian Country Today*; Simon J. Ortiz, "American Indian Studies Association Conference Keynote Address..."; Carolyn Strange and Tina Loo. "Holding the Rock..."

to go see an attraction, creating more and more photos of the tourist site and creating more of a hype throughout the modes of media.⁸

Postcards specifically transport photos via the mail and are in the hands of many people when in transit from one place to another, and once they are in the hands of the recipient, intrigue and interest are piqued at the subject matter on the cards. Garrod also argues that postcards “represent a ‘trophy’ of the tourist gaze:

tangible evidence that the trophy bearer has visited the destination and in some sense consumed it.”

Garrod also argues that the act of sending postcards exists because this is evidence of the sender’s “act of conspicuous

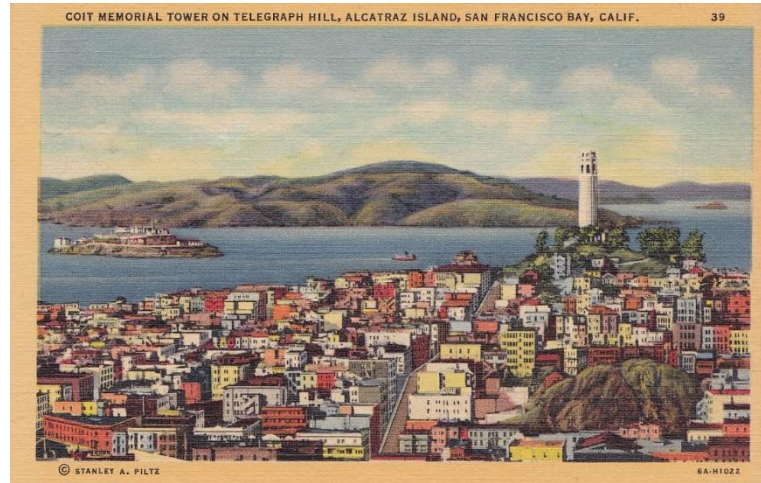


Image 6: ca. 1930s

consumption. In the case of Alcatraz photographed postcards, perhaps the beginning of the prison’s journey as a Federal Institution that housed criminals struck an interest with the American people because being a prison on an island was not something that Americans were used too—there was nothing else like it in the United States.⁹

If you look closely at how Alcatraz was portrayed through the David P. Campbell collection of postcards, housed in the Psychology Archives at the University of Akron, it is very noticeable to trace how the images of Alcatraz go along with what happened to the tourism industry between the 1920s and the 1970s, or the extent of the collection of Alcatraz prison postcards. The first cards of Alcatraz feature a small island in the San Francisco Bay without much of any context, aside from some of the messages that could be found on the back of the cards that discuss Al Capone being housed in there. These images started off being

⁸ Brian Garrod. “Understanding the Relationship between Tourism Destination Imagery and Tourist Photography.” *Journal of Travel Research*, Vol. 47, No. 3. 346-358.

⁹ Ibid.

black-and-white aerial photos of the prison with captions “Alcatraz” or “the Rock”. The early postcards illustrate the curiosity with Alcatraz and how a small island could house such big-named criminals, being careful not to get too close to



Image 7: ca. 1940s

the prison and keeping a safe distance away from it, almost mirroring the curiosity and intrigue that perhaps some of the general public had about the prison and how it was operated.

As the collection goes on

over the years, the way in which Alcatraz was pictured experienced a shift from black and white aerial photographs toward printed and drawn photos that feature oranges, yellows, and blues to highlight the architecture of the prison to also include what all was happening on the Rock. This means that people started becoming more inquisitive as to what else was happening on the island, because there were not just prisoners that were housed on this island. Alcatraz was almost like a tiny city on a rock that housed the families of guards, the guards themselves, adding up to about three hundred men, women, and children being housed on the island. As the official Alcatraz website states, “The primary living areas for families were Building #64, three apartment buildings, one large duplex, and four large wooden houses for senior officers.” On the island, families also enjoyed spending time together and days out at a bowling alley and even a soda fountain. The families on Alcatraz did most of their shopping in a small convenience store on the island, since “the prison boat made twelve scheduled runs to the Van Ness Street Pier each day.” The Warden also lived on the island in a large house “adjacent to the cell house and actually used inmates with good conduct records for cleaning and cooking.”¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://www.alcatrazhistory.com/factsnfig.htm>

As the postcards evolve with the time they were printed in, there is a noticeable change in the way that Alcatraz was being portrayed. The black-and-white aerial photographs and drawn images with pinks, oranges, yellows, and blues to enhance the sunlight and sunsets that Alcatraz and the families on the island would have seen turned into a more romanticized view of the prison. The island is more highlighted through aerial photography again, but this time it shifts to view the Golden

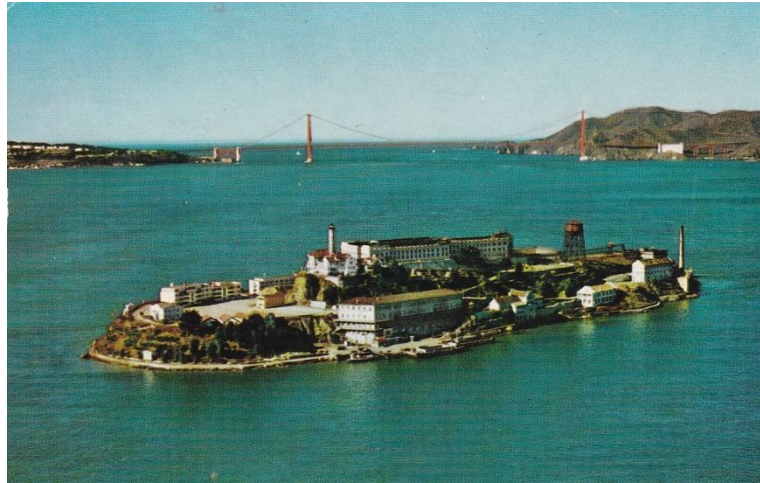


Image 8: ca. late 1950s

Gate Bridge in the background and gets seemingly closer to the island and the prison itself, suggesting a shift from the safe-distance view that was practiced during the earlier postcards. This trick perhaps plays down the fact that Alcatraz was (and at the time is) a functioning prison that housed criminals guilty of heinous crimes, seemingly romanticizing the prison as a beautiful oddity that sits in the San Francisco Bay with a gorgeous view of the Golden Gate Bridge. These later postcards also depict Alcatraz as a beautiful destination because of the greenery that can be seen in the photographs of the big, lush green trees and the nature that was on the island—which kind of masked the fact that the island really was not able to self-sustain without importing basic food, water, supplies from the mainland. The tourist industry held this façade over Alcatraz and depicted it in such a beautiful tourist light that was very different from the curious, not getting too close approach that the postcards of the earlier twentieth century saw.

Opening in 1934 as a Federal United States Prison, Alcatraz only saw prisoners enter and leave, and on some rare cases escape, until 1963. The history of Alcatraz and the way that it was portrayed through postcards throughout the 1920s to the 1970s illustrates a cultural shift from curious sentiments to wishing “you were here!” more and more as time went on, and the Rock became more of a popular tourist spot that drew people from all over the world to the San

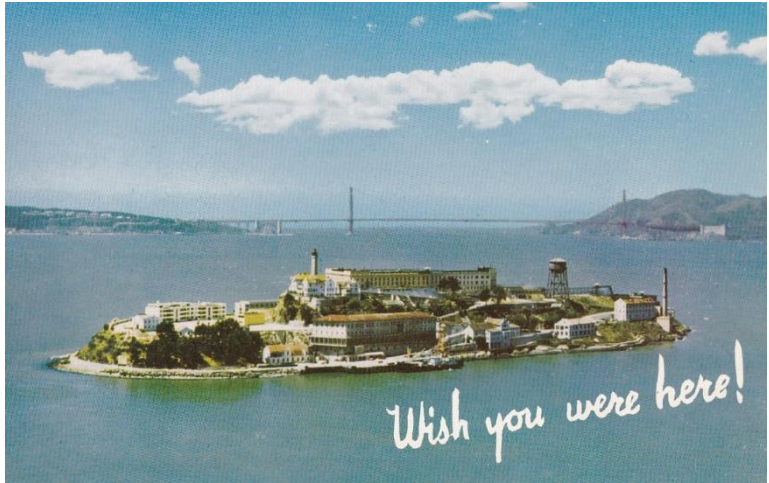


Image 10: ca. 1960

Francisco Bay. These postcards portrayed Alcatraz through means of communication and tourism that captured the curiosity and minds of the recipients of the cards. Alcatraz postcards started with black and white postcards to in-depth drawings of the Rock and the various buildings that were fully functional on the island and where families stayed, where the prison was, where the Warden slept,

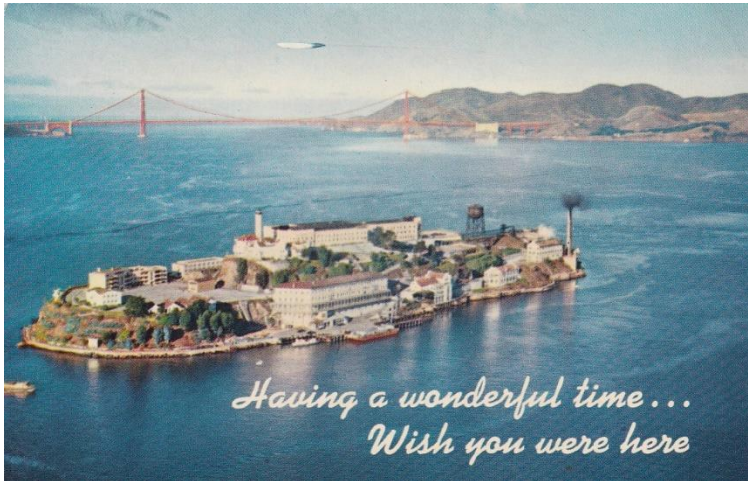


Image 9: ca. 1971

and where the officers stayed, to fully colored aerial photo cards of the prison in the beautiful blue water in the San Francisco Bay with beautiful green trees and a great view of the Golden Gate Bridge and “Wish You Were Here!”

captions. The Rock was a United States Federal Prison that only functioned for just twenty-nine years, yet still today causes such a fluster of curiosity and intrigue. Throughout its history, Alcatraz and the prison that housed some of the United

States' most notorious prisoners have caught the attention of not only tourists worldwide, but especially in the United States itself.

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