"My Dear Warden"

A brief documentary history of the administration of James V. Bennett, 1937-1964

Compiled and edited by John W. Roberts

James V. Bennett was Director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons from February 1, 1937 to August 28, 1964. When Bennett assumed office, the Bureau was less than 7 years old, and it had scarcely begun to carry out its mandate of upgrading Federal penal administration. The next 27 years brought great change, as the Bureau, under Bennett, established itself firmly as an ongoing Federal agency, expanded from 19 institutions to 33, codified a Bureau-wide policy system, withstood political pressures, responded to social change, became involved in international corrections activities through the United Nations, and pioneered in the implementation of new corrections concepts, such as individualized treatment programs, special programs for youth, and community corrections.

RG 129-P, National Archives

About once a month throughout his tenure as Director, Bennett wrote a "Round-Robin letter" to all wardens and superintendents in the system. In those letters, he explained important new policies, commented on specific events that affected the Bureau, offered solutions to general problems, and, not infrequently, issued sharp rebukes for lax procedures or inadequate performance.

The letters cover many situations unique to their time—such as the Bureau's role in World War II, which Bennett discussed in a letter dictated in his office on a cold December morning in 1941, only a few blocks away from the Capitol, where at that very moment President Franklin D. Roosevelt was preparing to ask Congress for a Declaration of War. Yet the letters also illustrate how common themes have emerged to link various eras in the Bureau's history: Bennett's insistence that Wardens meet regularly with staff to determine their needs, problems, and ideas was an embryonic, non-scientific version of today's "climate surveys" and "institution character profiles," through which the Bureau attempts to gauge the attitudes of its personnel; the budget and personnel demands Bennett faced as byproduct of the Bureau's expansion certainly have a contemporary ring; and Bennett's recommendation in 1960 that institutions open their doors to make themselves and their operations better known to the press and public stemmed from the same concerns that led to the establishment of the *Federal Prisons Journal* nearly 30 years later.

Edited excerpts from some of Bennett's letters to his wardens are printed below. Never before published, they reflect Bennett's thinking and personality, furnish a glimpse of how the Bureau operated from the 1930's into the 1960's, and convey something of the flavor of the Bennett Administration.

On his very first day as Director, Bennett expressed his pride and confidence in the new Bureau, and urged wardens to stay in close personal touch with institution programs and with staff. Two years later, in the document of February 15, 1939, he stressed the importance of staff morale and promotion from within, and continued to insist that wardens be familiar with the needs and problems of their officers.

Bennett was immensely proud of the Bureau's staff, such as the staff members above at the U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth; he praised them, worked to improve their morale, and fostered the principle of promotion from within. But he could also come down hard when personnel and policies failed to measure up.

February 1, 1937

Warden T.B. White, U.S. Detention Farm, La Tuna

My Dear Warden White:

When the Attorney General, with the President's approval, selected me to head the work of the Bureau, it was, I believe, an expression of confidence in the work we are doing and a general approval of the broad policies now in effect. I shall, therefore, with your help do my utmost to carry on prevailing plans and methods. This does not mean, however, that we can be content with the extent to which present policies and standards have been developed.

It is a source of great satisfaction to know that the establishment of the entire prison system on a civil service basis is about completed. This places a new responsibility upon all of us to make sure that officers and employees of all grades advance solely in accordance with their merit, efficiency, and the degree to which they cooperate in carrying out your orders and the Bureau's policies.

I presume that most of our Wardens have by this time so organized their work that they are not so encumbered by administrative details that they cannot regularly get out into the institution and become acquainted with the problems, at first hand, of the inmates. We, of course, look to the head of each institution to lead and to take an active part in every part of our program and upon him rests, in the last analysis, responsibility for the safekeeping of the institution and the effectuation of our program. I presume too that there are regular periods when the head of the institution meets with all of his officers and employees and that from time to time also staff conferences are held when the problems of the institution can be frankly discussed.

February 15, 1939

My Dear Warden:

The maintenance of a high morale among your officers and employees is one of the most important tasks of any executive officer. I have lately gained the feeling that it is a subject worthy of more study and attention.

This general and somewhat vague feeling on my part is not to be construed as any lack of faith in the officer personnel, as the great bulk of our men have given unstintingly and cheerfully of their time and energy. But, on the other hand, I think you and all of our other Wardens will admit that there are a few officers in almost every institution whose spirit and morale could be raised.

I also have a notion that there is something about the prison atmosphere which breeds an attitude of what I shall call "lack of mutual confidence and respect" for want of a better phrase. An officer somehow involuntarily absorbs some of the inmate disrespect for "the law" as represented by Government officers, and he applies prisoners' standards all too frequently to his fellow officers.

My own feeling is that each Warden, busy though he is with his administrative tasks, ought to meet as frequently as possible with the officers and the employees of the institution, listen to their problems, and discuss ways and means of correcting situations which may make for friction, discord, suspicion, and jealousy. Taking the initiative in discussing the problems of individual officers ought to be of some help.

Bennett sought to loosen traditional restrictions on inmates wherever possible and to avoid unnecessary intrusions into their lives.

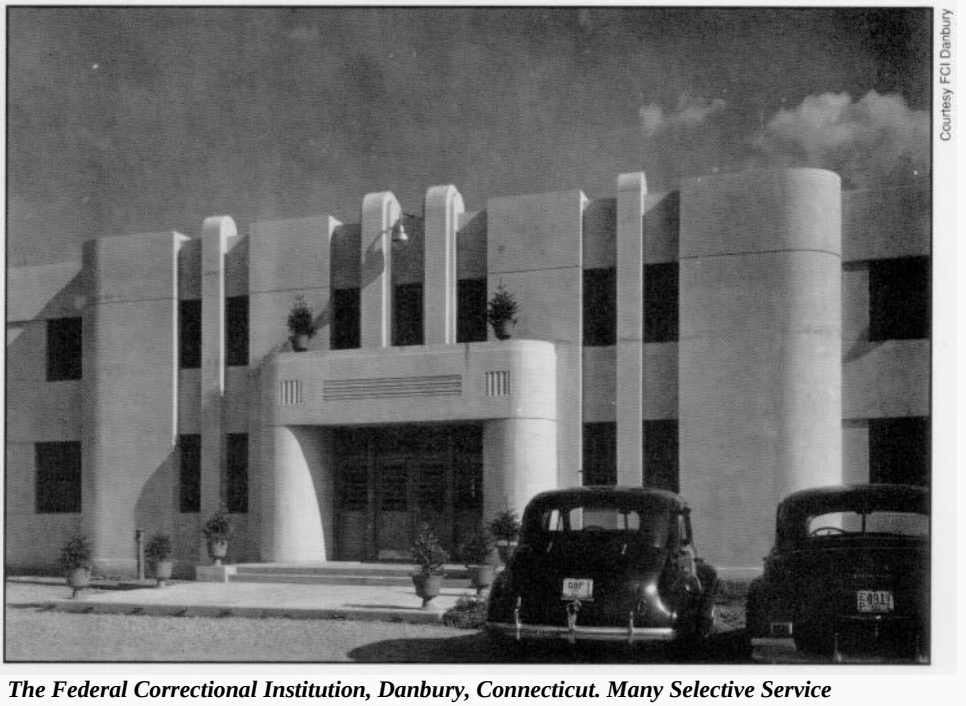
March 7, 1939

My Dear Warden:

I have long been of the opinion that we are unnecessarily strict when we approve the list of correspondents for an inmate and that we go too far in our attempts to censor the mail.

A prisoner should not, of course, be permitted to correspond with ex-prisoners or with anyone who might be attempting to promote any unlawful activities. Nor should he be permitted to correspond with anyone where there is an illegitimate relationship involved. On the other hand, I think he ought to be permitted to correspond with any person who would have a really sincere and honest interest in him.

Another important consideration is the extent to which we ought to attempt to censor the correspondence of our inmates. It seems to me that we sometimes go too far in trying to impose upon the inmates our own views on current political and governmental problems. [S]o long as the inmate does not attempt to carry on any unlawful activity though his correspondence and does not use profane, abusive, or slanderous language, we ought not to restrict him in presenting his views on almost any matter.



Courtesy FCI Danbury

The Federal Correctional Institution, Danbury, Connecticut. Many Selective Service violators served their sentences here during World War II.

Recognizing that Selective Service violators were not "criminals in the generally accepted sense," Bennett recommended that special tact and sensitivity be exercised in incarcerating them.

April 4, 1941

My Dear Warden:

In [recent Congressional] hearings I discussed the policy with respect to the treatment of Selective Service violators. I believe we can give more than usual attention to the problems presented by this group of inmates. While no special or unusual privileges should be granted them by way of relieving them from any of the responsibility they must assume as prisoners and they can be given no special privileges in the way of work assignments or cell assignments, still the utmost tact and patience ought to be used when considering their political or religious views. A democratic country does not, in my judgment, need to be vindictive in its attitude towards these men or consider them as criminals in the generally accepted sense of that term. Our wardens will be expected to give personal attention to the problems presented by this group.

World War II presented the Bureau, its staff, and even the inmates with unusual challenges and opportunities, which are elaborated in the next two documents.

December 8, 1941

My Dear Warden:

I am writing to you a few minutes before the President appears in Congress to ask for a declaration of war against Japan. Undoubtedly we shall soon be at war with Germany and Italy also. Meanwhile

I have been trying to think of the ways in which this new emergency will affect our institutions. I think our plans are pretty well laid.

I know of no new instructions specifically to give. You have doubtless already canvassed the entire situation and are putting into operation such changes in your routine as you think necessary. Take no chances of sabotage in the institution or its industries. In case of doubt, the inmate ought to be segregated until the situation is well in hand.

I think it is wise also to check over the situation with respect to our personnel. We have already asked you for a statement on the number of employees at your institution who are likely to be called shortly into the military service. We will do everything we can, of course, to see that these vacancies are promptly filled.

Moreover, our officers, I think, will have to anticipate the possibility that they may have to work longer hours. I hope there are no officers in our service whose loyalty to the Government can be questioned and who cannot be called upon for emergency service.

It is of the utmost importance that all concerned keep calm and carry on the usual routine of the institution effectively and energetically. Gossip and speculation ought to be kept to a minimum. Perhaps it would be helpful if you spoke a word or two to your officers telling them of your confidence in them and reassuring them of my conviction that they will carry forward calmly and intelligently.

The Bureau was part of the war effort during World War II. Prison Industries produced war materials, and a new law permitted offenders to join the military upon release.

September 24,1942

My Dear Warden:

Since the attack on Pearl Harbor I have received thousands of letters from the men in our institutions, offering their services in the prosecution of the war. These expressions of patriotism have been most heartening and encouraging and have demonstrated that we have not been in error in our efforts to have every man considered on his merits, both with respect to induction into the military forces and employment in war industries.

Hundreds of men released from our institutions have already entered the armed forces and are justifying our faith and the faith of the nation in them. Hundreds more are employed in war industries and are also making an admirable contribution to the war effort. Those who are still in the institutions can make vital contributions by preparing themselves by education and occupational training for essential jobs after release, by increasing the output of the industries, the shops and the farms, by doing a full day's work on maintenance jobs so that others may be assigned to the industries and the farms, by the conservation of materials and food, and by the purchase of war bonds and stamps.

I wish you would assure the inmates of your institution that we shall keep them advised of our progress and of any changes in policies or procedures affecting induction or enlistment in the armed forces.

When Bennett criticized poor performance, he also offered specific and practical advice on how to make improvements—as the following letter on escapes illustrates.

February 7, 1947

My Dear Warden:

I have been reexamining some of the reports on the escapes we have been having from several of our institutions and want to call your attention to two or

three points which I think need strengthening and action on the part of all of our Wardens. There seems to be an apparent weakness in supervising the officers who are detailed to guard the inmates. In one case a notoriously weak officer had been left on duty in a tower for over a year, notwithstanding the fact that the reports we now receive indicate he was not really suited for that form of service. In another instance the officer on duty had apparently merely been patrolling the room in which the inmates were working without periodically counting the men or checking on the window, grilles or other possible escape avenues.

In all of these cases there was not only a lack of alertness on the part of the particular officer involved but also there was apparently a breakdown in seeing that each of them was performing fully his duties. Whenever an escape occurs it cannot usually be attributed to but one officer. Some of our Lieutenants and Captains, I am afraid, are not getting around to the different posts and "seeing and being seen." One of the ways also that we might keep officers who have monotonous assignments alert to their responsibilities is to shorten the time they are on duty to say a four-hour shift and assigning them to other duties.

Farms, which remain today at only a few Bureau facilities, were a major component in the 1940's and offered badly needed budget relief.

March 13, 1947

Dear Warden:

Now that the spring planting season is at hand I wish to urge each of you having agricultural facilities to do everything possible to step up your production of farm products which you will need

RG 129-G, National Archives

Throughout Bennett's administration, nearly every Bureau institution, such as U. S. Penitentiary Leavenworth, had a farm. Back in the days when small-scale farming was cost-effective, they were an important resource.

during the next year. The rising price level is going to make it difficult for us to keep within our appropriation for food and everything that you can raise on your farm will make the task easier.

Any institution having climate, land or facilities peculiarly adapted to raising some product that would be useful to the other institutions should do so. We are all one service and if you can aid a neighboring institution with some farm product, it will help you and everybody else.

Bennett's first great achievement in the field of corrections was to study and report on the neglect and unsanitary conditions in Federal prisons in the 1920's, before the establishment of the Bureau. He was adamant that such conditions never be allowed to reappear.

July 29, 1948

My Dear Warden:

I have been surprised and at times chagrined at the appearance of some of our institutions. The maintenance of buildings, equipment, clothing and Government property has been sadly neglected in certain places. Housekeeping has been allowed to deteriorate in some places to the point where it is a disgrace.

I have, as many of you know, hammered away at this but apparently unless I personally call the matter to the attention of the Warden or other appropriate official things are neglected. I say to you quite frankly that I rather resent having to be an inspector to see that lockers are in order, that beds are clean and sanitary and in proper order, that a proper level of sanitation is maintained in mess halls and kitchens, and that clothing is reasonably clean and respectable. The officers on duty ought to be able to keep control of this situation and should be held responsible for results.

The Bureau was not exempt from the wave of riots that hit U.S. prisons in 1952. After disturbances at two Bureau institutions and a major escape from a third, Bennett was quick to pinpoint deficiencies and castigate "lid-sitters."

October 9, 1952

My Dear Warden:

I am writing to all of our Wardens at this time to advise them of some of the things that have come to our attention as a result of the preliminary investigations we have made into the riots at Chillicothe and El Reno and the escape from Lewisburg. Needless to say, these were a severe blow to all of us and, of course, cannot be glossed over or taken as something that was inevitable. Also, unfortunately, they showed some weaknesses which need correction.

We **thought the morale of the inmates** and personnel where the disturbances occurred was excellent and we had no reason to suspect that anything of the kind was brewing. That, of course, naturally leads to the question of whether we know how to appraise an explosive or dangerous institutional situation when it actually exists. Perhaps some of the ways we have used to measure the institutional climate have been erroneous and based on too small a sampling or perhaps we have been fooling ourselves with a feeling of complacency. It seems clear also that there has been a relaxation of some regulations and failures in inspection which should have been more rigorous. Obviously, if complaints about food or about clothing or about those items which are so important in determining the atmosphere of the institution are neglected or passed over without action they are bound to grow and be blown into major incidents.

There is no institution or department in the entire system that doesn't have problems springing from lack of funds. Our appropriations are very carefully guarded and there is no "fat" anywhere. But this doesn't mean that we can excuse every weakness or breakdown on the basis of shortage of appropriations and personnel.

The Federal Prison Service is judged on its entire record. There is no room in our service for "lid-sitters," or for indecision or carelessness.

Bennett cautioned against questionable behavior by staff even during their leisure hours.

November 18, 1952

Dear Warden:

I have been receiving recently some reports about the personal conduct of some of our officers that are somewhat disturbing. They indicate that in several of our institutions there is a group who tend to use alcohol to excess.


RG 129-P, National Archives

Bennett insisted that staff should be personally acquainted with the inmates and their problems. He is shown here meeting inmates at the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta with Attorney General Tom Clark.

We have no inclination to want to be "Pecksniffian" about such matters and no desire to criticize anyone who takes an occasional drink, but there are limits of good taste which we expect people assigned to our service to observe. Any officer who spends all of his evenings and off time hanging around some joint, who becomes loud and boisterous in public places, or who attends or gives brawls is not the fellow who is going to progress in our service. Moreover, no club or tavern ought to be frequented by groups of our officers so that it gets to be known as a hangout for members of our service or that people look upon it as a sort of prison officers' club.

During the Cold War, several Communists convicted of perjury or espionage were held by the Bureau. One of them, William Remington, was killed by inmates in 1954. In his memoirs, Bennett described the Remington murder as "one of the most tragic incidents of my administration." Maintaining safe custody for the Communists while at the same time resisting political pressure to treat them harshly was a difficult challenge for the Bureau, as can be seen in the next two documents. The second document also indicates the severe budget constraints under which the Bureau had to operate.

October 30, 1953

Memorandum to All Wardens and Superintendents:

The recent attack upon a Communist in New York Detention Headquarters prompts me to call your attention to the hazards that the presence of such prisoners create. To some of the [inmates] in our institutions, particularly former soldiers, they are probably hated men because they belong to a class or group who brought on, in part at least, the situation which caused their present predicament. It is not difficult therefore to understand how many of our prisoners would project responsibility for their own sufferings on them.

Being aware of this, we must take care to see that the responsibility we have to protect all prisoners from attack or assault is exercised fully in these cases. To make certain that they are not subjected to any unnecessary hazards or placed in a situation where they might be attacked because of their views or attitudes, you are requested to recheck their present work and cell assignments. For their own well-being and to avoid any charge that they are being discriminated against by being placed in isolation, it is suggested that they not be held in administrative segregation unless they so request.

It might be well to have some member of the staff call each of them in and consult them as to whether they have been threatened or have any fears requiring special protective measures.

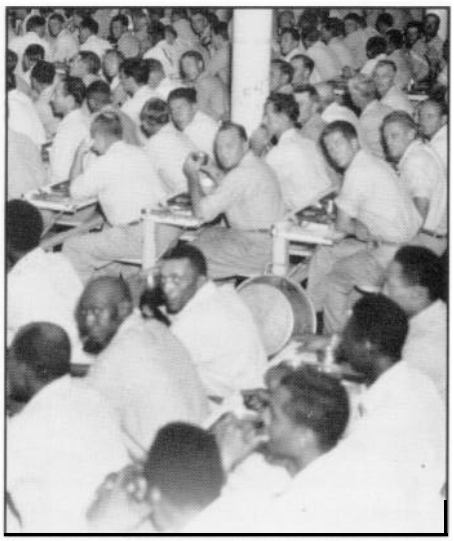
March 9, 1954

To All Wardens and Superintendents:

I would like to comment on...the speech of Congressman Pat Sutton of Tennessee and Congressman Broyhill of Virginia containing certain criticisms of this Bureau and urging an investigation. Many of you have seen the text of these remarks. They are pretty largely a rehash of charges that were given publicity by columnist Westbrook Pegler to the effect that we had granted certain favors to Communists John Gates and Carl Marzani. Those of you who know the facts realize that we moved Gates to Danbury at the urgent request of the Subversive Activities Control Board and made him available to the attorneys for the Communists because the Board felt this was vital to the successful prosecution of the case of McGrath versus the Communist party.

[Bennett goes on to answer the charge with respect to Marzani.] It seems to be the fashion now to charge people who have any responsibilities with respect to Communists of being soft on them if they are treated precisely like others similarly situated. It's our duty however to treat all those committed to us alike and on the basis of their individual merits. We cannot operate a penal or correctional institution on any other basis or we will lose not only the respect of those with whom we deal but of ourselves as well.

The increasing number of prisoners and the curtailed appropriations have thrown considerable burdens on our personnel.



In the 1940's, racial segregation was still widespread in Bureau institutions, as shown in the dining hall at the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta. By the 1950's, a policy of desegregating the prisons was already underway, although it would not be complete until the 1960's.

We have recommended the construction of several new penal institutions and the upgrading of all of our custodial officers. Several heads and associate heads of our institutions will be retiring [and] there is little chance that we will bring anyone in from outside the service to fill these positions. Attorney General Brownell [is] fully in accord with a program of making promotions on the basis of merit and experience in our service.

After the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision that "separate but equal" public schools were unconstitutional, the Bureau moved to eliminate the racial segregation that still existed in many of its institutions.

June 10, 1954

Memorandum to All Wardens and Superintendents:

I presume that you like myself have been giving a good deal of thought to the effect of the recent decision of the Supreme Court with respect to racial segregation in the schools.

We have made considerable progress in the last few years in breaking down the distinctions that formerly existed in our institutions between the various races, but we cannot be content until integration has been completed. In giving me your views and an appraisal of the existing situation, I wish you would comment specifically along the following lines:

(1) To what extent are all work assignments, recreational activities, sports programs, visiting room seating, educational activities and hospital care being integrated?

...(5) When do you think it will be possible to serve meals in the dining room without regard to race or color?

...(6) How do you go about winning the full and whole-hearted cooperation of all of the personnel, seeing that they do not in little ways thwart and frustrate the program?

...(8) Will you try also to give me generally the attitude of your personnel with respect to these matters? Naturally some will be opposed to racial integration and others will half-heartedly comply. What do you think can be done with officers who prove to be uncooperative?

One important area of tension would be removed if we could eliminate any distinction solely on account of race or color. I realize on the other hand that there are some deep-seated prejudices which are going to be difficult to overcome, but if the Army and Navy can break down these time-honored distinctions so can we.

Bennett believed strongly in the concept of "individualized treatment" to rehabilitate offenders, and he argued that for the concept to work, top staff needed to know the inmates firsthand.

May 15, 1959

Dear Warden:

In this letter I want to express some concern about a tendency I have noticed to relieve the top institutional staff of administrative and management details to the point where they are losing personal and firsthand contact with the inmates and I suspect also the personnel.

I don't need to tell you that if we are to have a program of "individualized treatment" it means, among other things, the top staff of the institution have to be personally acquainted to the maximum extent possible with the inmates and their problems. This means that they should participate whenever possible in the orientation and admission program.

The time of these officials, of course, is valuable and there are many important things to do, but it seems to me that each one of them could take a few minutes at least to make himself known to the inmates so that they will recognize him and be able to catch some idea of what sort of person he is like.

I hope, too, that the wardens and associate wardens will participate personally and actively in the classification procedures. Moreover, I think they should make note at that time of cases which they believe require personal attention.

Bennett encouraged institutions to open their doors to civic organizations, educational groups, and the press, so the public could be better informed about BOP operations.

What I am saying in all the foregoing is that there is no substitute for seeing and being seen and at the same time letting those who see you know who you are and what kinds of things you believe in and what sort of policies you will follow.

The key to public support was public knowledge of the prison system, and Bennett favored opening Bureau facilities for inspection by reporters.

April 28, 1960

Memorandum to All Wardens and Superintendents:

I recently participated in the Northwestern University short course in Crime News Analysis and Reporting, and I have written the many reporters around the country who were in attendance inviting them to visit our institutions whenever they find it convenient.

As a general practice, I think we should be as permissive as possible in allowing reporters, magazine writers, and representatives of responsible civic and educational groups to visit our institutions, as long as the anonymity of the individual inmate is preserved. If we are to continue to make progress in our field of work, we must have an informed public, and we should not overlook any opportunities to get our story told objectively.

Bennett took a keen interest in training and rehabilitation programs, which he believed were responsible for a decline in recidivism during his tenure as Director, and he insisted that those programs adapt to changing times.

January 5, 1961

To All Wardens and Superintendents:

A matter which has been given considerable emphasis here in the Bureau recently is our educational-vocational training program. Approximately $1,750,000 of Bureau and Industries funds go into this program and we must assure ourselves that the best use is being made of this expenditure and that training is making the strongest possible contribution to our program.

As I have said previously, one of the findings of the Ford Foundation project has been that most of the inmates committed to our institutions who expect to get anything constructive out of imprisonment name training as the constructive element. We must be sure that we get the right man in the right training program, provide motivation if possible when it is lacking and provide a vital realistic program.

I have asked our education staff to give special attention to two questions during the coming year. The first concerns the criteria for the selection of inmates to take part in school programs and in

training activities. I have the feeling that we can do a better job, on the whole, of pointing up the specific training needs of the individual offender.

A second question which needs study is how we can assure maximum use of all available personnel in teaching skills which have a practical market value. If we are not alert to the need for such changes and fail to modify programs accordingly, we will find ourselves in the position of some state institutions which not too long ago were still turning out blacksmiths.

Just as Bennett advocated constructive rehabilitation programs for inmates, he opposed what he considered to be frivolous ones.

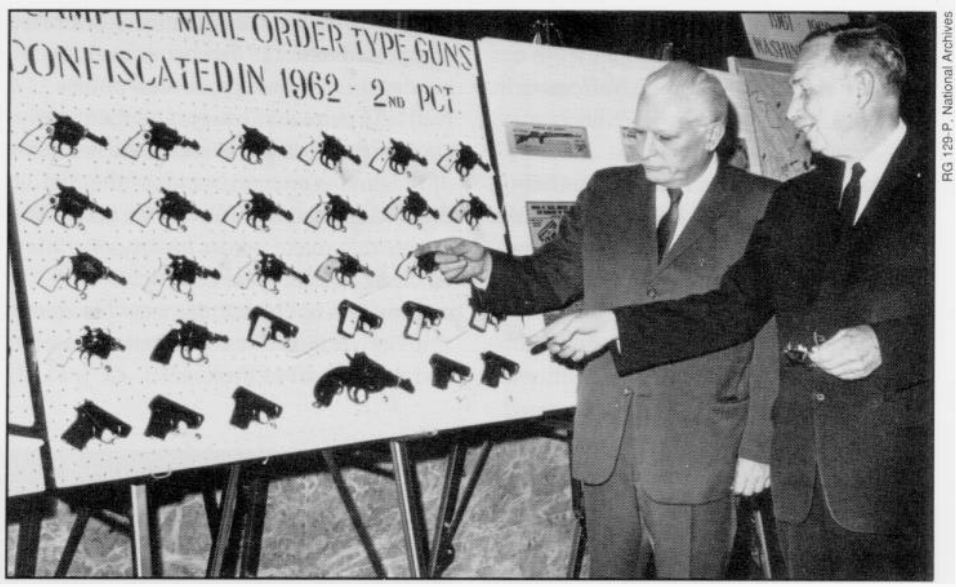
August 1, 1961

Warden Preston G. Smith,
FCI Terminal Island

My Dear Warden Smith:

I am ambivalent about your request to increase the number of television sets at your institution. My doubts spring from the fact that television is really not serving the purposes in some of our institutions which we envisioned when they were authorized.

Instead of being used as an incentive for good sanitation, high morale, and so on, it is I am afraid being used as a soporific, time waster and an escape hatch from worthwhile activities. Most of the junk on television is trash and the time of the inmates could better be used reading or participating in worthwhile sports, and for accomplishing assigned tasks. It is difficult I know to control what should be viewed but some effort to select constructive programs should be made.



Towards the end of his administration, Bennett became an influential advocate of stricter gun controls. He is shown here with Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut.

Moreover I am afraid the personnel are permitting television to become a kind of "babysitter" and thus relieve them of their responsibilities for pushing the educational, hobby shop, group counseling and other desirable leisure time activities.

The final letter demonstrates Bennett's keen interest in gun control, as well as the sometimes ad hoc nature of BOP research during his tenure.

June 15, 1964

Memorandum to all Institutions:

I am much interested in legislation looking to stricter control of the sale and possession of firearms, particularly handguns. It would help my argument very much indeed if I can show how easily criminals obtain firearms and where and how they secure them.

I may send you a questionnaire for each prisoner to fill out who has been convicted of bank robbery or some other crime [to determine] information about the acquisition of the gun and ammunition which would be useful in sustaining this argument as to the need for some sort of control.

When James V. Bennett retired in 1964, the Bureau of Prisons was on the threshold of several major advances the opening of pathbreaking new facilities at Morgantown, West Virginia, and Butner, North Carolina, the expansion of prerelease and community services through the Rehabilitation Act of 1965, and the implementation of unit management. But most of the innovations of the late 1960's and early 1970's were built on foundations that were laid during the Bennett years. His administration, then, bridged the gap between the small, fledgling Bureau of the 1930's and the far-flung, complex Bureau of today. In the day-to-day operational matters handled in Bennett's letters to his wardens is evidence of how Bennett guided the agency during a lengthy and critical era of growth and development. ■

Alcatraz

Where the past meets the future

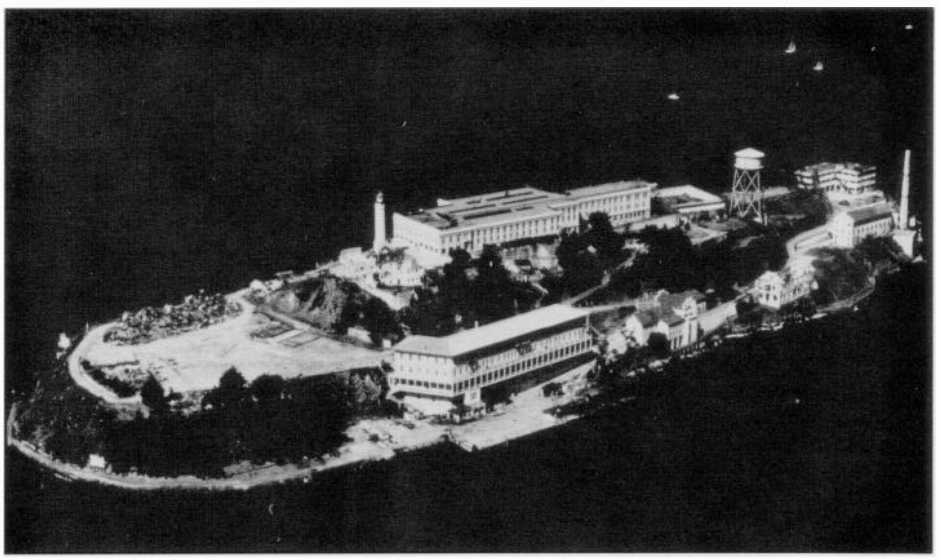
Brian O'Neill

"America's Devil's Island! Hellcatraz! The Rock!"

Popular images of the Federal Penitentiary years on Alcatraz Island burned fear of maximum security imprisonment and the island's infamous inhabitants into the imagination of the American public. People were fascinated by the myth of the "escape-proof" prison on Alcatraz. During the 1950's and 60's, they peered at Alcatraz through telescopes and circled the island in tour boats hoping to catch a glimpse of the desperate men and horrendous conditions they had heard about. They never imagined a time would come when Alcatraz hosted nearly one million visitors a year as a national park.

Today, the public, still as curious as ever about Alcatraz prison, can visit the cellhouse and learn about its history during visits to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Although the Federal prison years were only a brief part of the human history of Alcatraz, the significance and impact of those years reach across time and have brought together two unlikely partners working on public education projects—the National Park Service (NPS) and the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). The unique and exciting interagency projects now underway will enhance Alcatraz as a place where national and international visitors can learn about the island and U.S. prison history.

The importance of the events that have taken place there have made Alcatraz a powerful symbol for an island that is only 12 acres in size. Alcatraz stories encompass themes as diverse as military history, prison history, contemporary Native American history, and the rapidly evolving role of the island as an indicator of the environmental health of the San Francisco Bay Area. Given the scope of events that make up the history of Alcatraz Island, what combination of circumstances created this new partnership between the National Park Service and the Bureau of Prisons?



Alcatraz Island sits 3 miles east of the Golden Gate, the entrance to San Francisco Bay. For centuries, the island served as a roosting and nesting site for numerous birds, including gulls, cormorants, and pelicans. A nearly barren sandstone rock, the island was uninviting to the original inhabitants of the Bay Area, the Ohlone Indians, who probably only paid short visits for fishing or to collect eggs. For hundreds of years, European explorers apparently missed the narrow passage leading into the bay. In 1775 Spanish explorer Juan Manuel De Ayala became the first European to sail through the Golden Gate. He named many obvious landmarks, including the small, barren island in the middle of the bay. This island became known as La Isla De Los Alcatraces, or "The Island of the Pelicans." The name was eventually Anglicized to "Alcatraz."

Its location in the center of the bay made Alcatraz Island well suited for several uses. The first west coast lighthouse to be built by the U.S. started operation on the island in 1854. A fort or citadel was completed in 1859 to act as part of a defensive triangle to protect the entrance to San Francisco Bay and the gold of central California. Almost immediately after the fortress was completed, Alcatraz began to function as a temporary military prison. Its first prisoners included insubordinate soldiers, army deserters, and Confederate sympathizers. Thus began Alcatraz's 100-year history as a place of incarceration.

Photos courtesy National Park Service-GGNRA, except where noted

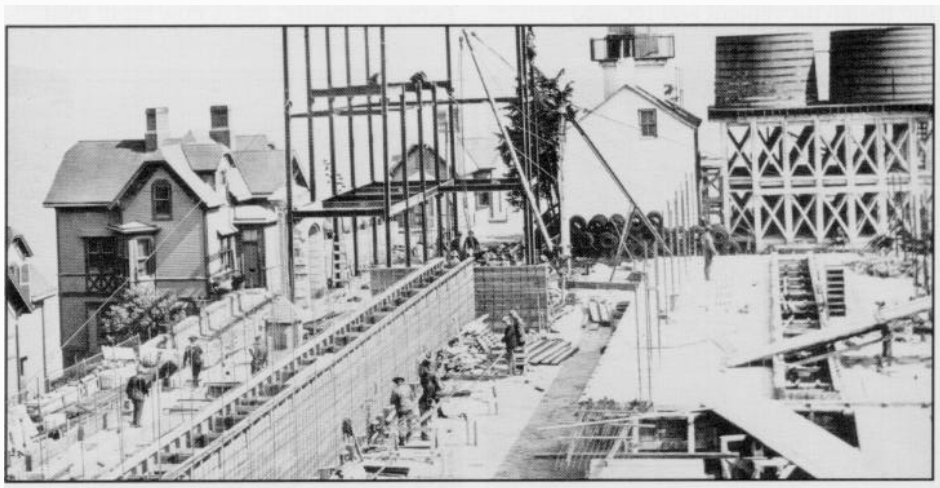
By 1868, Alcatraz had become the first long-term military prison in the United States. This experiment in rehabilitation of military inmates became the foundation for Fort Leavenworth Military Prison 6 years later. Improvements in the facilities were gradually made to allow for the detention of increasing numbers of military prisoners, and civilian prisoners as well. Though an unofficial prison at the time, the convict population peaked at 441 in 1900 during the Spanish-American War. Finally, in 1907, Alcatraz received the title, Pacific Branch, United States Military Prison.

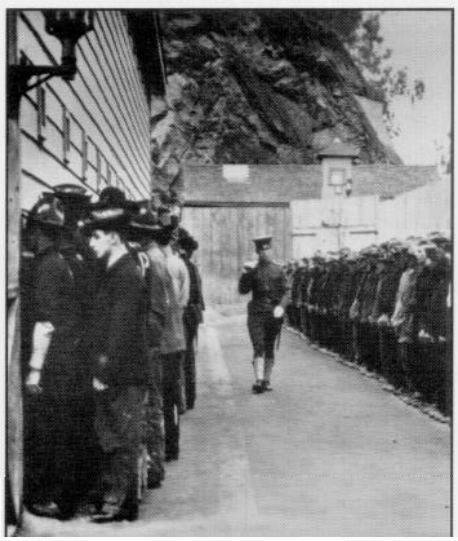
Through this period, the importance of Alcatraz as a defensive post was diminishing. The troops were removed, and in 1909 the citadel was demolished to make room for a modem cellhouse, which still stands. The incarcerated soldiers did hard labor. They built walls, constructed roadways, brought soil to Alcatraz, and planted vegetation. They also helped construct the new permanent military prison, completed in 1912. At that time it was said to have been one of the largest concrete structures in the world. This structure later became the main prison building for the civilian penitentiary. It still stands as one of the most identifiable features on Alcatraz.

The War Department decided to abandon Alcatraz because it was costly to operate. On June 25, 1934, Army officials turned Alcatraz over to the recently created Federal Bureau of Prisons, as a maximum security Federal penitentiary for civilian inmates. The facilities were remodeled using the newest technology available. Tool-resistant steel bars, metal detectors, and bulletproof glass were installed.

The men sent to Alcatraz were considered the most troublesome inmates from other Federal institutions. Escape artists, gang leaders, and agitators were sent to Alcatraz to learn how to follow prison rules. Alcatraz operated as a maximum security/minimum privilege Federal penitentiary, the first of its kind. Inmates had only the rights to food, shelter, clothing, and medical care; family visits, correspondence, reading materials, recreation, and work were privileges earned only by carefully following the rules. Nevertheless, inmates were safe from each other, the penitentiary was kept clean, and the food was good.

Although training, education, work, and other rehabilitative programs were not the primary emphasis at Alcatraz, the penitentiary did play a three-tiered role in the overall process of inmate rehabilitation. First, although Alcatraz was by far the most regimented institution in the Federal Prison System, paid employment and certain education courses—especially correspondence courses—were available to inmates who demonstrated good behavior. Second, as the prison within the prison system, Alcatraz





Top: The modern cellhouse at Alcatraz under construction before World War I. Right: Military prisoners "on parade." Left: Alcatraz today. Housing for Bureau of Prisons staff and their families formerly stood on the cleared area to the left of the picture.

enhanced rehabilitation programs elsewhere by housing those inmates who were so unruly that they would have disrupted the rehabilitation programs at other prison that were less restrictive than Alcatraz. Finally, the stern regimentation at Alcatraz encouraged greater self-discipline in the inmates, so that they eventually could take part in rehabilitation programs at the less restrictive prisons; in fact, nearly all the inmates who were sent to Alcatraz ultimately transferred back to less restrictive institutions that had full rehabilitation programs.

During 39 years as a Federal penitentiary, Alcatraz held more than 1,500 inmates and averaged about 265 prisoners at a given time. Well-known inmates include Al Capone, Roy Gardner, "Machine Gun" Kelly, "Doc" Barker, Robert Stroud ("the birdman of Alcatraz,") Alvin "Creepy" Karpis, and Frank Lee Morris. Most inmates were transferred back to other prisons. Some finished their sentences at Alcatraz. Thirty-six inmates were desperate enough to try the impossible—escape. Ten paid with their lives, while most were recaptured. Five of these men are still listed as unaccounted for and "missing."

Alcatraz's use of the 19th-century concept of "doing penance" or self-rehabilitation appears to have been remarkably successful: Only 23 of the more than 1,500 inmates ever returned for a second time. In spite of this, a growing emphasis on the active rehabilitation of criminals, combined with the deterioration of the aging prison, led to its closure in 1963.

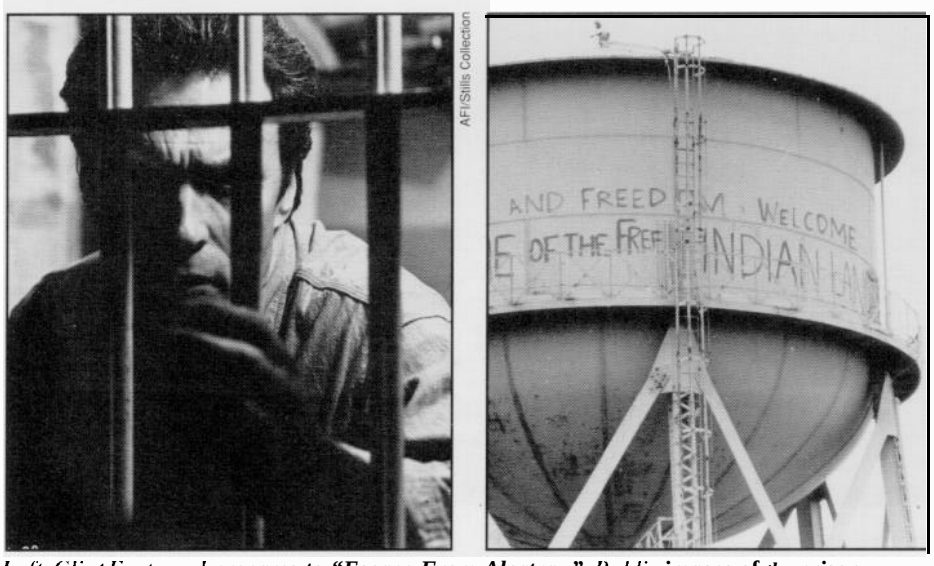
The island remained unused for the next 6 years. In November 1969, 85 Native Americans claimed Alcatraz in the hope of establishing a cultural center for the heritage of all Indians. They occupied the island until June 1971. Although their goal of a cultural center was not achieved on Alcatraz, the occupation became a symbol of resistance, unity, and hope to the Indian movement and focused national attention on the concerns of the American Indian.

When the Native American occupation ended, many uses for the island were proposed—privately operated casinos, resort, condos, a peace memorial, a "statue of liberty," and a park. In 1972, Alcatraz was included in the newly established Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), the largest urban park in the world (74,000 acres and 20 million visitors annually).

In 1973, Alcatraz island was opened to the public. In the first several years of operation, the National Park Service provided closely supervised tours of the cellhouse and solicited public input about the future of the island as a part of the planning process for GGNRA. The overwhelming consensus was to retain the cellhouse and interpret its history.

Alcatraz quickly became one of the top tourist attractions in San Francisco. Initial visitation was limited to 500,000 people annually, but is now more than 850,000 people each year—and the demand is still growing.

To accommodate public interest, from 1973 until 1984 the NPS managed Alcatraz as a "closed" island. Due primarily to safety considerations, visitor experience was limited to ranger-guided tours of the prisons and a small museum.

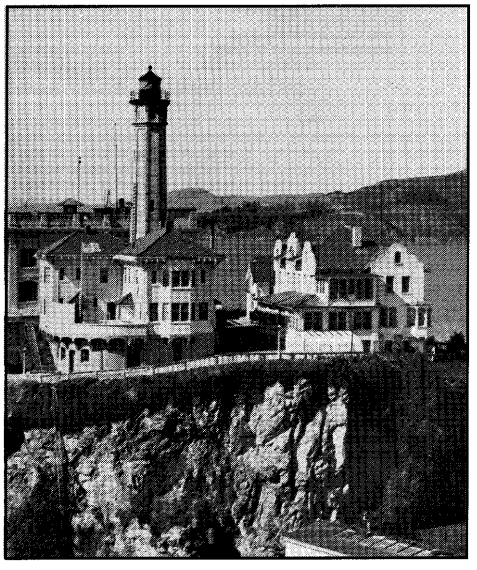


Left: Clint Eastwood ***prepares to "Escape From Alcatraz." Public images of the prison were shaped by movies such as this. Right: Graffiti left behind by the Native American occupation, 1969-1971.***

This interpretive approach is analogous to the "maximum security/minimum privilege" days of the penitentiary. However, as the other historical themes of the island became increasingly interesting to visitors, the NPS developed the concept of an "open island" visit for the public.

The turning point in this new approach to managing the island came with the development of a self-guiding audio tour for the cellhouse. The audio tour premiered in 1987 and was a phenomenal success from the first day. Developed by the Golden Gate National Park Association, a nonprofit organization established to support park education programs, and technically produced by a local contractor, the audio tour incorporates the voices of former correctional officers and inmates talking about their experiences on "the Rock." Normally, these types of self-guiding programs enjoy about a 35 percent use rate. The average daily rental rate for the tour of the cellhouse runs close to 80 percent! In 1989, the audio tour was translated into French, Spanish, German, Italian, and Japanese. This resulted in Alcatraz becoming the top international tourist spot in San Francisco, as nearly 10 percent of the audio tour rentals were by non-English-speaking visitors.

The advantage of the audio tour from the NPS point of view was that it freed the ranger staff to develop programs and exhibits about the rest of the island and for other themes in the island's history. Museum exhibits, interpretive panels, slide shows, publications, and new programs were created. Visitors could now learn about all aspects of Alcatraz history, but the central interest remains the cellhouse and the penitentiary years.



Left: The warden's house and lighthouse, which guides ships through San Francisco Bay. Alcatraz is now the second-most-visited National Park in the U.S.

As the educational and interpretive programs about the island increased, community interest in Alcatraz also increased. This resulted in two unusual programs.

The first was an offer by an internationally famous landscape architect, Lawrence Halprin, to facilitate a series of workshops for a wide cross-section of community opinion leaders and develop a design plan that could guide the NPS as it developed the island "from prison to park."

The public workshops resulted in a beautiful series of drawings and plans that defined all aspects of future facility and landscape design. Included in the design plan were a perimeter trail around the entire island, new uses for the existing buildings, and plans for improving the access to the natural beauty of the island as well. The plans are ambitious, but the NPS is confident that community support for the new concept plan will lead to private-sector funding.

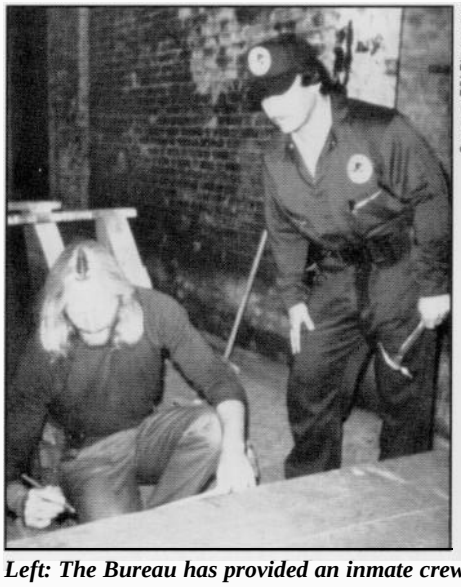
A second unusual program was developed in 1988. Called "Artists on the Rock," it brought together 14 coming artists who contributed their time to create an exhibition of original sculptures interpreting their impressions of Alcatraz Island. Evocative, moving, and (as art can be) at times controversial, this exhibition spoke of the beauty, the sadness, the harshness, and the controversial qualities of Alcatraz and its history. Public interest in and media coverage heightened public awareness of Alcatraz yet another notch.

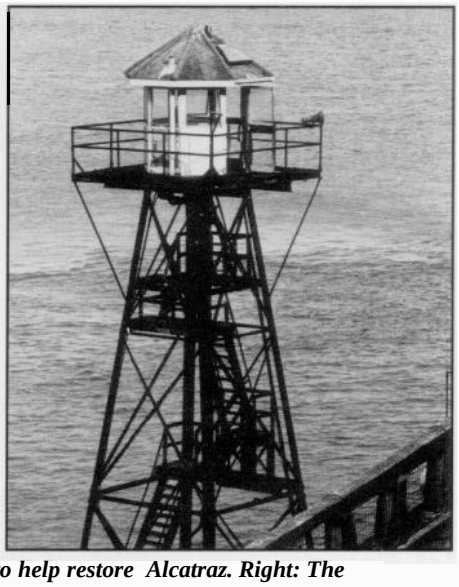
At this point, the Bureau of Prisons became interested in the potential of Alcatraz for public education programs about the history of prisons. The BOP proposed to the NPS that the agencies develop an Interagency Agreement to carry out cooperative projects. The resulting agreement signalled a new chapter in the history of Alcatraz.

The first cooperative activity was initiating an interagency cross-training and research program. BOP staff are available to participate in NPS staff training to provide current information regarding the BOP and its programs. NPS staff have visited the U.S. Penitentiaries at Marion and Lompoc and the Federal Correctional Institution at Pleasanton, and conducted research in the BOP archives in Washington, D.C. NPS provides BOP with statistical information about visitors and feedback from NPS interpretive programs, including the most common questions asked by visitors about the BOP and suggestions for further improvements in displays, interpretive materials, and other areas of mutual concern and interest.

The first public education project now underway is a cooperatively produced exhibit that will interpret the penal history of Alcatraz and its role in the broader sweep of U.S. prison history. The exhibit will be installed in two historic Civil War-era casemates in the area called "China Alley," and will be dedicated in January 1991, the centennial of the Three Prisons Act that led to the founding of the first Federal prisons. The exhibit themes include: the historical development of prisons in the United States, from colonial times to the present; myths and realities about Alcatraz; the evolution of the Federal Prison System, 1891-1991; and trends and issues in Federal corrections in the 21st century.

Another program that has resulted from the Interagency Agreement may signal the return of the BOP to a former tradition of inmate involvement in public works projects. At the end of March of this year, a select crew of six BOP inmates began a work program on Alcatraz. Since its opening in 1973. the NPS has been unable to provide full-time maintenance support for the island. In several months, the work of the inmate crew has already matched, and will soon surpass, the total maintenance efforts put into the island for the past 17 years! The difference this crew is making in day-to-day operations, improved preservation of historic buildings, and generally improved facilities for park visitors has been hailed as "phenomenal" by park staff.





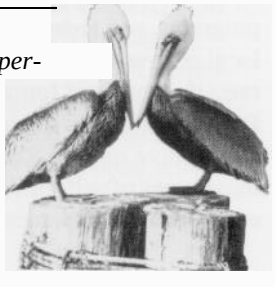
Courtesy FCI Pleasanton

Left: The Bureau has provided an inmate crew to help restore Alcatraz. Right: The dilapidated observation tower will be airlifted to the Federal Correctional Institution at Pleasanton to be restored. Below: The island's original inhabitants.

For their first project, the inmate crew completed the renovation of a curatorial storage area for historic artifacts. The next project will be the renovation of the area that will house the interagency exhibit. Perhaps most exciting of all are the plans now under discussion for the BOP to completely restore the original guard tower that stood sentinel over the island during the prison years.

The guard tower project may be a symbol of the best of the partnership between the NPS and the BOP. This restoration project, and the others as well, could signal a significant achievement in the NPS mission of historic preservation. The restoration will also help the BOP to continue its agency heritage on Alcatraz. Most importantly, this project allows the American public to better experience the history of the penitentiary and the island. Through our combined efforts to learn from and preserve the past we are all moving into the next century with an enhanced vision of improved public service. #

Brian O'Neill is Superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, San Francisco, California.



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