

Text by Juliet Clark
From *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz*,
Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, 2014



TOP: One of the Hospital's ward cells. Though designed to house multiple patients, for safety reasons a ward cell was usually occupied by a single inmate.

BOTTOM: Doors to treatment, examination, and other special-use rooms open off the Hospital corridor



The Hospital Wing and Psychiatric Observation Rooms

Medical care was one of only four basic rights granted to prisoners in the Alcatraz penitentiary, along with food, clothing, and shelter. Inmates exercised their right at sick call: every day after lunch, prisoners could line up to ask to be taken to the Hospital, upstairs from the Dining Hall. One former officer claimed that as many as 10 percent of inmates would appear in the sick line on a given day, either suffering from genuine illness or hoping for an escape from regular life in the cellblock.

A fully functioning hospital was maintained on Alcatraz throughout the military and federal prison years. Instead of sending sick or injured inmates to San Francisco, where they might have a chance to escape, Alcatraz administrators brought the doctors to the prisoners. A Bureau of Prisons bulletin boasted:

The Alcatraz Hospital, adjacent to the main cell house, is equipped with modern X-ray and physical therapy apparatus, operating theater, laboratories, and dental unit, and contains wards and individual rooms for the treatment and convalescence of inmate patients. It has been certified by the American College of Surgeons and compares favorably with the up-to-date hospitals and clinics in the free community.

The Hospital was staffed by a general practitioner who lived on the island, while specialists, surgeons, and psychiatrists from the San Francisco Public Health Service and the Presidio military base visited when needed. Female nurses or assistants sometimes accompanied the surgeons—the only time women were ever allowed inside the cellhouse.

Each cell in the Hospital could hold as many as six men, but inmates were usually kept separate for safety reasons. Among the prisoners who spent time in these cells were Al Capone, confined to the Hospital in 1938 after being diagnosed with syphilis, and Robert "The Birdman" Stroud, who lived in the infirmary for eleven years. A hypochondriac as well as an extremely disruptive inmate who had incited a riot in D Block, Stroud was permanently moved to the Hospital in 1948 to keep him out of the general population.

Set apart from the regular cells were two psychiatric observation cells, called "bug rooms" or "bug cages" by inmates. The number of prisoners who became mentally ill during their time on Alcatraz is hard to pin down: the official estimate of Warden James A. Johnston was 2 percent, but former inmate Jim Quillen said it happened "a lot more than that—all the time." Many aspects of life on Alcatraz could drive inmates over the edge: the monotony, the lack of privacy, the threat of violence, even the knowledge that San Francisco and freedom were so close but impossible to reach. However, some prisoners tried to fake insanity, hoping for a chance to be transferred to another institution—anywhere other than Alcatraz.