

Annals of the 3rd 1869: Alcatraz Island

In January 1870 Fortress Alcatraz defended the United States with eight batteries of heavy artillery, mostly named after Union generals, and now hopelessly obsolete: see Figure 1. As of 1868 the Island also housed a military prison, and some fifty prisoners had been at work for several months excavating parts of the island to prepare for a weapons upgrade. The Commandant helped make room by sending all Alcatraz's useless 8 inch and smaller guns to Benicia Arsenal.¹

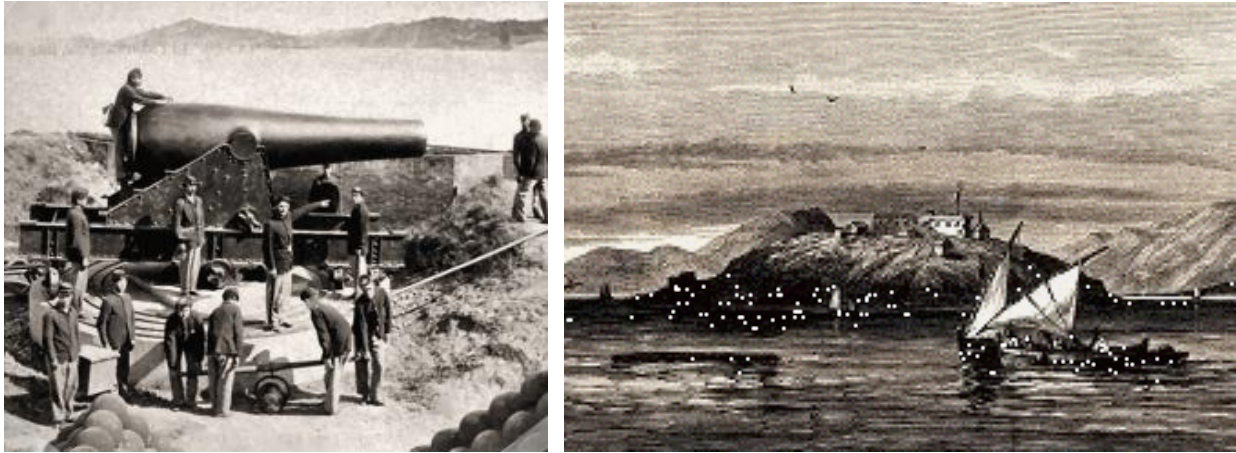


Figure 1: Left, Alcatraz, 1870, a 15inch Rodman muzzle-loaded smoothbore cannon that shot solid cannonballs. Right, a view of Alcatraz in 1876.

The guns were serviced by the 2d US Artillery, probably Battery B, as Battery A was out on patrol in the desert protecting against Indian raids. On January 13, 1870, Lt. D.A. Lyle of the 2d Arty received the letter shown in Figure 2 from an officer friend stationed in South San Diego:²



Figure 2: So. San Diego, CA / Alcatraz Island, Dec. 30, 1869

The sender describes ample opportunities down there for sex and bird hunting:

Dear Lyle:

...I am living high and prospering. Have all I want to eat and drink. My nearest neighbor is "on it" and sometimes I am "on her...."

Yesterday was out gunning all day. Killed 60 quail and was not a good day of quail either. Had a party Christmas Eve, and will have New Year. Have lots of fun, ... Wish you could come down and spend a week or so, D[amn]dest place in the world.

My "command" are getting along splendidly. Hunter sent the worst "beats" of his Company down, and Pennington sent his 1st Sgt, because he wasn't worth a d[am]n...

.... Let me hear from you

Lyle got a letter from another friend a few weeks later, shown in Figure 3. It no longer has its enclosure, but it alerts us to a few interesting things. First, our Lt. Lyle docketed his letters in



Figure 3: Astoria, OGN / Alcatraz Island, Jan. 6, 1870

French and by date of his response rather than date of receipt. Figure 1 was replied to, "*Rependu 13 Janvier 1870,*" and Figure 3 "*Rependu 3 Fevrier 1870.*" The letter from South San Diego, about 520 miles from Alcatraz, was "*Rependu*" 14 days later. The letter posted at Astoria, Oregon, 450 miles north of Alcatraz was "*Rependu*" 28 days later. Some delay was built into any delivery to Alcatraz as mail had to be offloaded onto a ship that would probably sail to the island no more than once a day, what with currents, fog, and the absence of paying passengers.

Next, the letter from Astoria shows one of the 3¢'s fatal flaws: iffy gum. Like the National Banknote Company's prior productions of 1861 and 1867, the Pictorials were coated with dextrin, a simple starch. For some reason, perhaps being too thinly spread, the 3¢'s gum was bad enough to draw public criticism, and the sender resorted to self-help to make his stamp adhere to the envelope.

Finally, the letter from “Astoria” was probably initiated at Fort Stevens at the mouth of the Columbia River, shown in Figure 4. Fort Stevens, like Fort Alcatraz, was armed with obsolete smooth bore muzzle loaders,³ and the letter’s author may have been working on updated coastal defense as was the Lieutenant in South San Diego and Lt. Lyle at Alcatraz. A few years later the Army established Fort Rosecranz (another Union general, of course) in South San Diego with big new guns, but the United States soon thereafter abandoned fortress defense in favor of active naval defense by ships and planes.



Figure 4: Fort Stevens, Oregon.

¹ The Civil War had shown that big guns could smash the masonry casemates of coastal fortresses, and rifled breech-loaders were a must for self-defense. Congress approved a coastal defense weapons upgrade by the end of 1870, but shortly thereafter the Army switched Alcatraz’ purpose from defense to detention and abandoned the weapons upgrade.

² “[T]he South San Diego cancellation is not exactly a common item... A three cent 1869 cover with this cancellation was sold [in April, 1978] for the tidy sum of \$125!” John Birkinbine, “Two Interesting Manuscript Cancellations,” *1869 Times*, May, 1979, at 12. The post office was established April 8, 1869, and its name changed to “San Diego” on April 14, 1871. *Id.*

³ “Rodman guns” were a subset of “Columbiads,” which used Rodman’s invention for creating a hollow casting, thus vastly reducing the labor of reaming out the barrel.