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## Alcatraz, A Pelican's Brief

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# Articles

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## **Alcatraz, A Pelican's Brief**

By Cecelia Smith

*Abstract: Jutting out into the middle of San Francisco Bay is a large rocky formation known as Alcatraz Island, its name loosely translated from the Spanish word for "pelican." Tourists leave from Pier thirty-three and travel to the island which has been designated as a National Park. It offers visitors the opportunity to experience history as the location was once a fortress and a prison. Many visitors, however, are unaware of the connection of Indigenous populations to the island thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans. With the advent of settler colonialism, the impact of European colonial settlers on Indigenous populations had negative consequences, compounding a system of genocide and repression. Alcatraz eventually became an asset for the United States government, incarcerating those who did not conform, including members of Indigenous populations. In 1969, a group calling itself Indians of All Tribes (IOAT) occupied the island, taking over what was now considered surplus federal property. Their effort at decolonization – the process of dismantling colonial occupation by returning land and recognizing Indigenous sovereignty – was based on broken and unratified treaties between Indigenous tribes and the United States. Currently, the National Park Service's conservation efforts help to vocalize the relevance of California's original occupants and add an important narrative to the state's history.*

*Alcatraz, A Pelican's Brief*



*Figure 1. Alcatraz Island, 2007. Photograph courtesy of the author, Cecelia Smith.<sup>1</sup>*

Pier thirty-three creaks with age as tourists load onto its wooden planks. Nearby, the island's permanent residents, boisterous sea lions, lounge beneath a muted sun and bark out their greetings; seagulls and the occasional pelican soar smoothly overhead drifting upon a streaming, cool breeze. The boat at the edge of the pier rocks gently as passengers begin to board, excited for their destination, a large rock in the middle of the San Francisco Bay called Alcatraz. Someone on the boat checks off the location on their bucket list of National Parks to visit; another tourist marks off her checklist of lighthouses photographed, the first one erected along the coast of California in 1854.

Off in the distance, Alcatraz Island is prominent though sometimes shrouded in fog. In November 1969, perhaps the air was colder and the bay waters a little choppier, but the scene was not so dissimilar. Except, the passengers on board the vessel headed for Alcatraz Island had grand emotions regarding their

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<sup>1</sup> Photograph courtesy of the author, Cecelia Smith.

destination. The group known as “Indians of All Tribes” (IOAT) headed out toward Alcatraz Island and started a movement.

Alcatraz Island, whose name translates loosely from Spanish as ‘pelicans,’ was added to the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1972 by the United States federal government.<sup>2</sup> It offers visitors the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of notorious gangsters such as Al Capone (1899–1947), Meyer “Mickey” Cohen (1913–1976), and Ellsworth Raymond “Bumpy” Johnson (1905–1968) while reimagining episodes of daring, cinematic-like escapes. Visitors can step inside decommissioned holding cells and photograph themselves trying to recreate the lives of the imprisoned. Nevertheless, very few, if any, visitors attempt to re-enact or truly consider the Indigenous experiences on the island.

The island’s fort and prison history, along with its crumbling façade, are not so subtle reminders of the imprisonment and decimation of Indigenous populations and the laws and broken treaties used by the United States government to forcefully quell a people. The federal government’s failures drove an attempt to decolonize Alcatraz, culminating in an “occupation” on the island for nineteen months to compel adherence to Treaty K. The struggle for decolonization on Alcatraz Island highlights the plight of Indigenous populations across the United States.

### **The Importance of Tradition – A History of Alcatraz Island**

Among the Indigenous peoples, the history of the lands before European and American intrusion is revealed in oral traditions, its stories handed down via practices such as song and dance. Songs, stories, dances ceremonies, and traditions performed and passed down through generations demonstrate an association and

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<sup>2</sup>. National Park Service, “Alcatraz Island, Golden Gate National Recreation Area,” National Park Service, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/places/alcatraz-island.htm>; National Register of Historic Places, Reference # 76000209, listed 6/23/1976, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/database-research.htm#table>.

reciprocity with the land. Native traditions look to the primacy of direct experience, interconnectedness, and relationships in the natural world.<sup>3</sup> Their traditions validate a connection to the land, a connection which the United States government has dismissed as irrelevant.

According to Troy Johnson (d. 2013), a historian of American Indian activism in the 1960s and 1970s, ten to twenty thousand years before the arrival of Europeans, the island was occupied by Indigenous groups native to the area. Johnson states that ten thousand Indigenous people, known as the Ohlone, lived between Point Sur and the San Francisco Bay. He notes that the history of Alcatraz is difficult to reconstruct, but it appears that Alcatraz was used as a place of isolation or ostracization, a camping spot, an area for gathering food and bird eggs, and a hiding place for those attempting to escape from the California Mission system.<sup>4</sup>

The Spanish established the California Mission system beginning in the late eighteenth century—the first one was founded by Father Junipero Serra (1713–1784) in 1769 as Mission San Diego de Alcalá— as an effort to convert Native Americans to Catholicism, but also as a method for expanding European territorial control. On a website documenting the history of the missions, the California Missions Foundation states that their foundation is committed to a full and accurate depiction of the institutions.<sup>5</sup> They assess that the mission system was highly coercive and that once California Indian people entered the community, they were expected to live in ways that the padres and

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Madrigal, *Sovereignty, Land & Water: Building Tribal Environmental and Cultural Programs on the Cahuilla & Twenty-Nine Palms Reservations* (California: Center for Native Nations, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Troy R. Johnson, “We Hold the Rock,” National Park Service, Alcatraz Island, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/alca/learn/historyculture/we-hold-the-rock.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> California Missions Foundation, “California Indians, Before, During, and After the Mission Era,” accessed March 19, 2022, <https://californiamissionsfoundation.org/california-indians>.

military officials deemed acceptable.<sup>6</sup> It is easy to surmise that the distance and isolation of Alcatraz would offer a safe haven for the Ohlone, and for others who did not wish to be forced into a system intent on eliminating Indigenous traditions and lifestyles.

According to author Jennifer Graber (n.d.) in her work on the struggle for the American West, “Reducing Indian landholdings had been an important feature of United States Indian policy since George Washington’s presidential tenure (1789–1797).

Washington’s vision for Indians’ future also assumed their ‘progress’ toward ‘civilization.’”<sup>7</sup> By 1882, for example, Kiowas faced the Americans’ unrelenting effort to sever their ties to their lands and to each other.<sup>8</sup>

In a work on the history of the Ohlone people, anthropologist Lowell John Bean writes:

The Ohlone peoples comprised a complex series of cultures that spoke related languages and occupied a large area bounded by the Carquinez Strait and the Golden Gate to the north, and Big Sur and Soledad to the south. Like many other California native peoples, the Ohlone-speakers were subjected to the disastrous experience of missionization under the Spanish Empire, and, following the admission of California to the United States, were dispossessed of their remaining lands and denied legal status by the state and federal governments.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> California Missions Foundation, “California Indians.”

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Graber, *The Gods of Indian Country: Religion and the Struggle for the American West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Graber, 153.

<sup>9</sup> Lowell John Bean, “The Ohlone Past and Present: Native Americans of the San Francisco Bay Region,” Bancroft Library, accessed October 25, 2021, [http://www.muwekma.org/images/The\\_Ohlone\\_Back\\_From\\_Extinction\\_Nov\\_1\\_994.pdf](http://www.muwekma.org/images/The_Ohlone_Back_From_Extinction_Nov_1_994.pdf).

It can be gleaned from Bean's research that a refusal to understand Indigenous oral traditions on the part of government officials ultimately marginalized the Indigenous populations. This demonstrates a dismissal of their histories, heritage, and connections to the land. The author's conclusions also function to highlight the main motives used by the Spanish and American empires to assert authority and domination in their efforts to usurp these lands, the belief that it was a God-given right. According to Mark David Spence in his book, *Dispossessing the Wilderness* (1999), the government tried to achieve what they called "expansion with honor" which was how they intended to incorporate tribal territories into the United States without belligerently undermining Native societies.<sup>10</sup> However, in these efforts toward expansion, there was an unwillingness to interact and learn from an already present populace, an unwillingness to consider another point of view, perhaps with the hopes that the Indigenous populations would simply disappear from the dialogue. The ideology of a God-given destiny and a belief in European superiority created an environment in which White, male, Christians could justify national aggrandizement and territorial acquisition.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, they could step onto land not their own, and develop a system of ownership, not stewardship, and craft the tools necessary to rule over, keep out, and imprison those who they deemed others. Some scholars argue that the belief in European superiority and the ideology of Manifest Destiny (the white European-American belief in a God-given destiny to expand from

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<sup>10</sup> "Expansion with honor" is noted as then-President George Washington's administration's unofficial Indian policy. Efforts would be made to negotiate the succession of Native land, government-to-government, but Washington was willing to go to war if diplomacy failed. Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1999); Ryan Winn, "George Washington and the Resiliency of Indian People," *Tribal College, Journal of American Indian Higher Education*, July 2, 2018, <https://tribalcollegejournal.org/george-washington-and-the-resiliency-of-indian-people/>.

<sup>11</sup> Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

coast to coast) were used to justify the taking of land; they were not the driving force. As historian Anders Stephanson has observed, “Americans wanted land to exploit, not Indigenous peoples to assimilate.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the first references to the concept of Manifest Destiny is found in journalist John O’Sullivan’s (1813–1895) article entitled, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” published in *The United States Democratic Review* in 1839. O’Sullivan was fixated on the glory and magnificence of America and wrote that “America has been chosen to be great by Providence, by God’s will.”<sup>13</sup> He espouses the considerable principle of human equality; however, he neglects to address the Native American populations that lost their lands based on this philosophy.

The idea of futurity and destiny facilitated the impediment that was settler colonialism. Settler colonialism is defined as a distinct type of colonialism that functions through the replacement of Indigenous populations with an invasive settler society.<sup>14</sup> In line with the mentality that this was their destiny and right, European colonial settlers intentionally moved to stay, not to coexist, thus removing and eliminating Indigenous people from their homelands. Historian Patrick Wolfe, in his examination of the impact of settler colonialism on Indigenous populations, argues that “settler colonialism destroys to replace. The logic of elimination not only refers to the summary liquidation of Indigenous peoples...it strives for the dissolution of native societies.”<sup>15</sup> Author Lisbeth Haas, in her discussion of the Mexican-American War (1846–1848), considers the plight of the

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<sup>12</sup> Stephanson, 26.

<sup>13</sup> John L. O’Sullivan, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” *The United States Democratic Review*, Vol. 6, Issue 23 (1839): 426.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Barker and Emma Battell Lowman, “Settler Colonialism,” *Global Social Theory*, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://globalsocialtheory.org/concepts/settler-colonialism/>.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 8, Issue 4 (2006): 388, <https://doi-org.libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/10.1080/14623520601056240>.



Indigenous population because of the efforts of colonial settlers. She concludes that their condition was perilous as more and more settlers and soldiers encroached upon their land. This encroachment would have a negative impact on their sovereignty and autonomy, as their interactions with the “settler society became ever more heavily policed.”<sup>16</sup> The impact of settler colonialism compounds a system that perpetuated genocide and repression and normalizes the continued occupation and exploitation of Indigenous lands. Following the Mexican-American War, the United States acquired what are the present-day states of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Nevada, Utah, and California. Not long after, the United States began settling and colonizing the rich state of California, including the little island off the coast: Alcatraz.

### **Alcatraz Becomes a Prison**

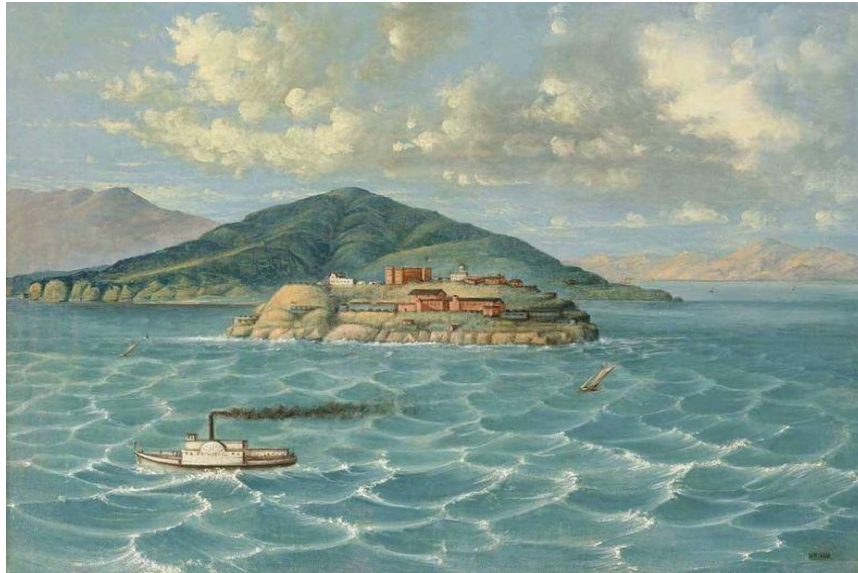
The building of a military fort and subsequent prison on Alcatraz served as a defensive move important to the United States for two reasons: first, the end of the Mexican-American War, which resulted in the creation of the state of California in 1850, and second, the frenzy of the Gold Rush era (1848–1855). Because of the possibility for fortune there was a large amount of maritime activity along this section of the coast, including vessels bringing people and supplies to the area, which required the placement of a lighthouse on the land in 1854. In addition, historically the area had been explored by Europeans, colonized by the Spanish and occupied by Mexico; Russia even maintained a fort north of San Francisco.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, thought to be necessary to deter possible invasions, Alcatraz became a crucial asset during that period, as

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<sup>16</sup> Lisbeth Haas, “War in California, 1846-1848,” *California History*, Vol. 76, no. 2-3 (Summer-Fall, 1997): 331–355, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25161671>.

<sup>17</sup> California State Parks, “Fort Ross SHP: A Russian Fort by the Sea,” California Department of Parks and Recreation, accessed June 8, 2022, [https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=449](https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=449).

well as during the Civil War (1861–1865). It eventually morphed into a prison facility, frequently incarcerating those who did not conform to the United States government’s rules and regulations (*Figure 2*).



*Figure 2. Joseph Whittle, Early Oil Painting of Alcatraz as a Military Prison, ca. 1860. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.<sup>18</sup>*

In an article published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, dated February 26, 1894, a journalist told the end of the story of Alcatraz as a military prison. The fort was described as follows:

Rising abruptly from the bosom of the bay, the precipitous cliffs that mark its outlines have a most forbidding aspect, and give to the incoming voyager whose steamer skirts its uninviting shores the impression that it is a veritable Gibraltar, whose

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<sup>18</sup> Joseph Whittle, “Early Oil Painting of Alcatraz as a Military Prison,” ca. 1860, Bancroft Library, accessed March 19, 2022, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf100006jh>.

guns, which may be seen peeping over the parapets upon the hilltops, would repulse the invading fleets of all the world. ...the fort is a point of the greatest strategic value for the defense of this city, but instead of being famous as one of the great fortifications of the country, it is notorious as a place of detention, a prison where military offenders, while expiating their crimes, may... look wistfully across the stretch of water.<sup>19</sup>

“The Rock,” as is its nickname, held military prisoners and Civil War southern sympathizers, but it was also a place of incarceration for Indigenous prisoners. Nineteen members of the Hopi Tribe from Arizona were imprisoned at Alcatraz in 1895 for nearly a year. The reason for their imprisonment was due to their resistance to the United States’ policies meant to “civilize the savages.” Deemed “Hostiles,” this group of Hopi Tribe members did not follow the agricultural guidelines for planting crops established by the government, instead seizing land and planting wheat. In addition, they refused to allow their children to be sent to government boarding schools, which were overcrowded and unhealthy (*Figure 3*).<sup>20</sup>

This use of Alcatraz to detain these Hopi men is a clear example of the method for the punishment of Indigenous tribes who refused to “behave” in accordance with United States’ assimilation policies. The significance of their imprisonment on this island is found in the reference made by Johnson regarding isolation or ostracization methods used by Indigenous tribes many centuries before. The methods were implemented by tribes in

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<sup>19</sup>. “Alcatraz Island: No Longer a Bugbear to Soldiers: The Fear of ‘the Rock’ has Vanished,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 26, 1894, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/27407613/?terms=alcatraz&match=1>.

<sup>20</sup>. Holliday is the historian of the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office. Wendy Holliday, “Hopi History: The Story of the Alcatraz Prisoners,” National Park Service, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/hopi-prisoners-on-the-rock.htm>.

conjunction with their *own* governance. The imprisonment of these Hopi men was a method of punishment by an authority attempting to force its governance on independent Indigenous communities; its rules and regulations were in direct conflict with how the Hopi desired to live.



Figure 3. *Hopi Prisoners at Alcatraz (1895)*. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.<sup>21</sup>

The nineteen Hopi men were released from Alcatraz on September 23, 1895.<sup>22</sup> Their imprisonment was indicative of how the United States government interacted with the Indigenous tribes of this land. Preconceived notions and prejudicial perceptions ensured that the Indigenous tribes would be contended with in a manner that would diminish their standard of living and demolish

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<sup>21</sup>. TradingCardsNPS, "Hopi Prisoners at Alcatraz," Wikimedia Commons, accessed May 14, 2022, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hopi\\_Prisoners\\_at\\_Alcatraz\\_\(7222901166\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hopi_Prisoners_at_Alcatraz_(7222901166).jpg)

<sup>22</sup>. Laurie Ann Doyle, "The Hopis of Alcatraz," Alta Online, April 15, 2020, <https://www.altaonline.com/dispatches/a7179/the-hopis-of-alcatraz/>

their political, economic, and military power or independence, sovereignty, or autonomy.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Secret California Treaties**

The United States government's National Archives indicates that:

From 1774 until about 1832, treaties between individual sovereign American Indian nations and the United States were negotiated to establish borders and prescribe conditions of behavior between the parties. In 1871, the House of Representatives ceased recognition of individual tribes within the United States as independent nations with whom the United States could contract by treaty, ending the nearly one-hundred old practice of treaty-making between the United States and American Indian tribes.<sup>24</sup>

According to an article by the United States Office of the Historian, the government used treaties as one means to displace Indians from their tribal lands, a mechanism that was strengthened with the Removal Act of 1830.<sup>25</sup> They violated the treaties and, in addition, used the rulings of the Supreme Court to facilitate the

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<sup>23</sup> Doyle, "The Hopis of Alcatraz."

<sup>24</sup> "American Indian Treaties," National Archives, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/treaties>.

<sup>25</sup> The Indian Removal Act was signed into law by then-President Andrew Jackson (1829–1837) on May 28, 1830, which authorized the granting of lands west of the Mississippi in exchange for Indian lands within existing state borders. It resulted in the forcible removal of the Cherokees from their lands into a march that became known as the "Trail of Tears." Office of the Historian, "Indian Treaties and the Removal Act of 1830," accessed March 19, 2022, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/indian-treaties>; "Indian Removal Act: Primary Documents in American History," Library of Congress, accessed on March 19, 2022, <https://guides.loc.gov/indian-removal-act>.

spread of European Americans westward across the continent. Over the following decades, Indigenous peoples were murdered, killed by disease, or driven from their lands and livelihoods by miners and colonial settlers.

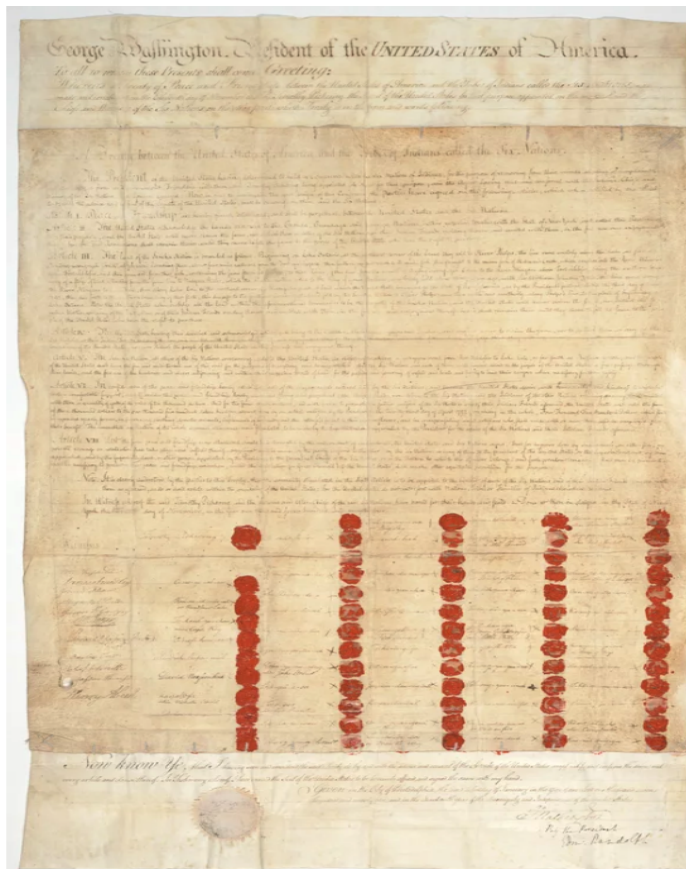
In 2016, the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, located in Washington, D.C., presented an exhibit of compacts (treaties) between the United States and Native American nations. The rarely seen Treaty of Canandaigua (1794) was one of the first enacted (*Figure 4*). According to author Hansai Lo Wang, in his article on the broken treaties displayed in the exhibit, this specific agreement was also known as the Pickering Treaty. It returned more than a million acres to the Haudenosaunee, an Iroquoian-speaking confederacy of First Nations peoples in the Northeast, but their territory has been cut down over the centuries.<sup>26</sup> One portion of the treaty that remains intact is the provision of \$4,500 in goods, provided to tribal members annually, which is dispensed in bolts of cloth. Haudenosaunee leaders have said that cloth is more important than money because it is a way to remind the United States of the treaty terms, large and small.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Hansai Lo Wang, “Broken Promises on Display At Native American Treaties Exhibit,” NPR, January 18, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/01/18/368559990/broken-promises-on-display-at-native-american-treaties-exhibit>.

<sup>27</sup> Wang, “Broken Promises.”





*Figure 4. The Treaty of Canandaigua, 1794. Courtesy of the United States National Archives and Records Administration.<sup>28</sup>*

One particular treaty of importance in the exhibit references Native American tribes in California during the Gold Rush era. The United States and persons associated with the San Luis Rey (Luiseno), Cahuilla, and Serrano Indians signed a compact known as Treaty K in 1852; however, it was not ratified by the United States Senate, under pressure from California lawmakers. According to one of the exhibit's curators, Suzan Shown Harjo of

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<sup>28</sup> Wang, "Broken Promises." Courtesy of the United States National Archives and Records Administration.

the Cheyenne and Hodulgee Muscogee Indian nations, money was the reason behind the unratified treaty. She reasoned, “the answer is always gold. And if it’s not gold, it’s silver. And if it’s not silver, it’s copper. And if it’s not, go right through the metal chart.”<sup>29</sup> She said that many American Indians in California suffered without treaty protection.<sup>30</sup>

This statement is augmented by the government’s confirmation that “no compensation has ever been made to the California Indians for their lands, as the Government seems to have followed the policy of Mexico, from whom it got its title to California, in not recognizing the Indians’ right of occupancy.”<sup>31</sup> Even more disturbing is the fact that the existence of the treaties themselves had been buried. Not until 1904, in an unearthed letter from R. Woodland Gates (n.d.), private secretary of Senator Thomas Bard (1841–1915) of California, to Charles Edwin Kelsey (1861–1936), a lawyer and field worker for the Northern California Indian Association, were the concerned treaties even located (*Figure 5*).

From the Smithsonian website, the California treaty described above is listed as “Unratified California Treaty K, 1852.” A photograph of the document is not included; however, the transcript provided indicates the orders restrict Indigenous movement and migration, deny Indigenous peoples the right to vote, and ban them from testifying in court against any white person. This “Treaty of Peace and Friendship” indicates in Article 3 that the efforts are “to promote the settlement and improvement of said nations.”<sup>32</sup> The treaty acknowledges the United States as,

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<sup>29</sup> Wang, “Broken Promises.”

<sup>30</sup> Wang, “Broken Promises.”

<sup>31</sup> Larisa K. Miller, “The Secret Treaties With California’s Indians,” *Prologue*, Vol. 45, no. 3-4 (2013): 38-45, <https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/prologue/2013/fall-winter/treaties.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> “Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations,” *Smithsonian, National Museum of the American Indian*, accessed May 31, 2022, <https://americanindian.si.edu/nationtonation/unratified-california-treaty-k.html>.



The sole and absolute sovereign of all the soil and territory ceded to them and stipulates that the said nations and their tribes...will never claim any other lands within the boundaries of the United States, nor ever disturb the people of the United States in the free use and enjoyment thereof.<sup>33</sup>

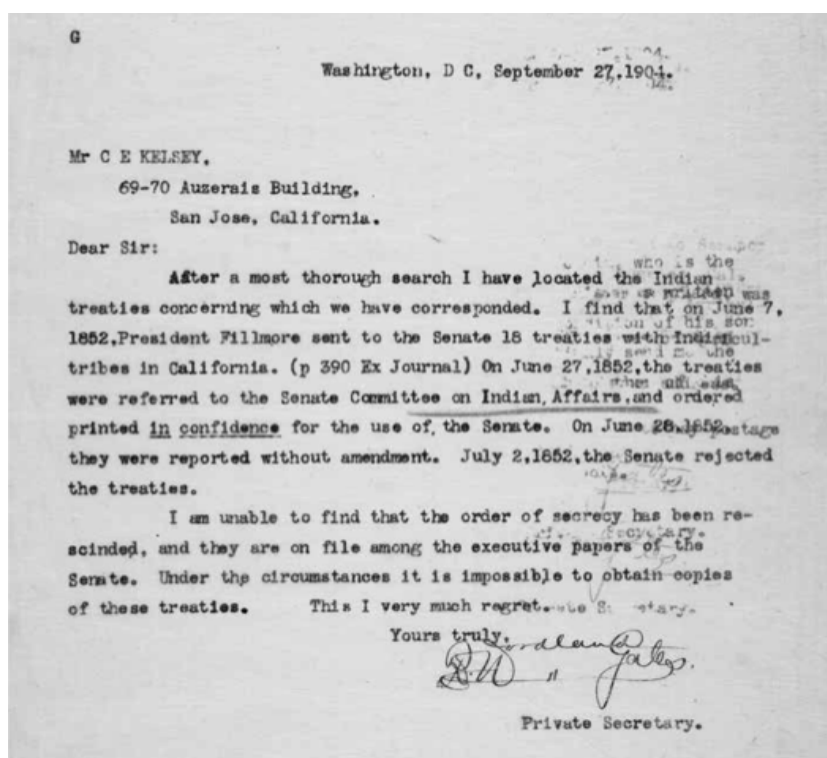


Figure 5. Letter to lawyer Charles Edwin Kelsey. Courtesy of Larisa K. Miller.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Charles J. Kappler, "Indian Affairs, Laws and Treaties," Vol. IV (Laws) Compiled March 4, 1927, <https://americanindian.si.edu/static/nationtonation/pdf/Unratified-California-Treaty-K-1852.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Miller, "The Secret Treaties."

It is inconceivable to believe that all of the various Indigenous tribes merely accepted the outcome of treaties compiled by the United States government or the acquiescence of their lands to the disservice of settler colonialism. There was a series of conflicts known as the Indian Wars (1609–1924), with major incidents occurring from the 1860s to 1890s. And as far back as the sixteenth century, historians have documented struggles between the Indigenous population and White colonial settlers. Valiant efforts of resistance were witnessed at tragic confrontations in such places as Wounded Knee Creek in the Dakota Territory in 1890.<sup>35</sup> However, different methods of resistance and achieving Indigenous sovereignty awakened on Alcatraz Island. The idea of decolonization, as demonstrated on the island, forced a nation to reexamine itself and its relationship to its Indigenous populace.

### **Decolonization: The Efforts of Indians of All Tribes (IOAT)**

It was a calculated response to the breach of various treaties when a group that called itself “Indians of All Tribes” (IOAT) climbed aboard a vessel named *Monte Cristo* and set out across the waters of the San Francisco Bay to seize Alcatraz in 1969.<sup>36</sup> No longer in use as a prison after closing in 1963, the group saw the land as unoccupied and determined that it was now considered to be surplus federal land. Citing the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, the claim was made that the abandoned surplus federal land would be returned to Native Americans.<sup>37</sup> Close to the shores of the island, Richard Oakes (1942–1972), the leader and spokesman for the

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<sup>35</sup> Robert M. Utley and Wilcomb E. Washburn, *Indian Wars* (New York: American Heritage Press, Inc., 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Kent Blansett, *A Journey to Freedom: Richard Oakes, Alcatraz and the Red Power Movement* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>37</sup> University of Massachusetts Lowell Library, “The Occupation of Alcatraz, 1969,” accessed March 19, 2022, <https://libguides.uml.edu/c.php?g=945022&p=6820208>.

IOAT group, jumped into the frigid water with his boots still on and swam to land.<sup>38</sup>

On November 9, 1969, IOAT landed on Alcatraz and posted their demands in a lengthy proclamation. Their proclamation addressed the United States government directly, delivering the following message “To the Great White Father and All His People” (*Figure 6*):

We, the native Americans, re-claim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery. We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land and hereby offer the following treaty. We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for twenty-four dollars in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of a similar island about three hundred years ago... We offer this treaty in good faith and wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with all white men.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Blansett, *A Journey to Freedom*.

<sup>39</sup> The group consisted of Indian students and a group of urban Indians from the Bay Area. Many different tribes were represented which is why the all-encompassing name was selected. Ilka Hartmann, “Alcatraz Proclamation,” Shaping San Francisco's Digital Archive @Foundsf, accessed October 25, 2021, [https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=File:Nativam\\$alcatraz-proclamation-photo.jpg](https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=File:Nativam$alcatraz-proclamation-photo.jpg); Johnson, “We Hold the Rock,” accessed October 25, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/alca/learn/historyculture/we-hold-the-rock-htm>.



Figure 6. Proclamation of the Indians of All Tribes posted on Alcatraz. Courtesy of Shaping San Francisco's Digital Archive.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ilka Hartmann, "Alcatraz Proclamation."

Oakes explained in a press conference the significance of Alcatraz to Indigenous tribes, stating, "Alcatraz offers the insulation necessary for us to develop intellectually."<sup>41</sup> A second (unnamed) spokesman offered a more in-depth explanation and reasoning for the group's seizure of the island. He stated:

Several Indians throughout the United States have the right to appropriate a certain amount of the so-called public domain or public property of the United States. ...Alcatraz Island is the original property of California Indian people collectively in California. The federal government has never acquired title to California Indian property. And that property that the federal government still holds within the state, which would include Alcatraz, would, it seems to me, still have an unextinguished Indian title. The federal government has never paid for the land, has no deeds to the land.<sup>42</sup>

The Regional Director of the United States government's General Services Administration, Thomas E. Hannon (n.d.), responded to Oakes statements saying there were no immediate plans to remove the group from the island. When asked about a deadline, Hannon did not have one and acquiesced to the reporter that the group's stay on the island was indefinite.

Richard Oakes' biographer, Kent Blansett (n.d.), explains Oakes' participation and the occupation of Alcatraz as one that reinforces Native Nationalism. Oakes was perhaps the most recognizable face on the island. His participation in the occupation inspired the Red Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which

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<sup>41</sup> "Occupation and Ownership of Alcatraz," Christopher Newport University, Primary Sources: Native Americans-American Indians: Alcatraz Occupation, accessed on October 25, 2021.

<https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/187793>.

<sup>42</sup> "Occupation and Ownership of Alcatraz."

ultimately had a tremendous impact on Americans' view of Native American history.<sup>43</sup>

The efforts of IOAT sparked a revolution for Indigenous activism. The group would have to remain on "The Rock," however, for nearly two years to enact significant change (*Figure 7*). According to Blansett, most historians focus on Oakes' role, but in reality, Alcatraz was a spark. The Red Power Movement gained greater notoriety after the occupation of Alcatraz. The Red Power Movement fought for protection and autonomy in the face of an encroaching White culture that sought the termination of tribal statuses and culture. The movement is credited with changing the federal government's policies, which sought to strip tribal members of their rights, their identities, and recognition of tribal citizenship.<sup>44</sup>

Richard Oakes resided with his family on Alcatraz during the occupation, and there are many videos of his interactions with the media. He left the island in 1970 after the death of his daughter from an accident in one of the abandoned buildings but remained involved in the Red Power Movement. He was shot and killed in Sonoma, California, in 1972 by Michael Morgan (n.d.), a man whose claims of self-defense against Oakes eventually led to an acquittal of all charges. Oakes' supporters allege his death was in cold blood and racially motivated.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Blansett, *A Journey to Freedom*.

<sup>44</sup> University of Massachusetts Lowell Library, "The Red Power Movement," accessed March 19, 2022, <https://libguides.uml.edu/c.php?g=945022&p=6820187>.

<sup>45</sup> University of Massachusetts Lowell Library, "Richard Oakes," accessed March 19, 2022, <https://libguides.uml.edu/c.php?g=945022&p=6820208>.



*Figure 7. Landing site on Alcatraz Island, including the graffitied phrase, “Indians Welcome.” Courtesy of the author, Cecelia Smith.<sup>46</sup>*

As tourists exit the boat at Pier thirty-three on their return from Alcatraz, they might take one last look back at the island and try for that perfect picture. But they often move on, without thought or conversation about the history, or the possibilities for Indigenous people. The possibilities were demonstrated by IOAT in their occupation of Alcatraz, and it is these possibilities that we should always consider. While IOAT was not successful in retaking the island, the group did bring focus to the plight of Native Americans as well as center the debate on decolonization.

In an article on the website “Interdependence: Global Solidarity and Local Actions,” the definition of decolonization is presented as being about “‘cultural, psychological, and economic freedom’ for indigenous people with the goal of achieving Indigenous sovereignty—the right and ability of Indigenous people to practice self-determination over their land, cultures, and political

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<sup>46</sup> Photograph courtesy of the author, Cecelia Smith.



and economic systems.”<sup>47</sup> The site also includes a TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Talk about decolonization, presented by Nikki Sanchez, an Indigenous media maker, environmental educator, and academic. In her TED Talk, Sanchez’s references are to the Canadian territories, but she does say that colonization is global, and there is not a single corner in the world that colonization has not been enacted upon. She remarked, “In order for us to know where we want to go together, we need to know where we are, and for us to know that we need to know where we’ve been.”<sup>48</sup> Her words prompt us to think about who we are, but most importantly, we are prompted to think about the land and its people, the Indigenous communities whose entire existences were nearly vanquished. Decolonization is more than just handing back territory; it requires an understanding of how we arrived at where we are today. It begins with understanding the past.

The National Park Service is doing its part to ensure the history of Alcatraz Island is not forgotten. Its website maintains crucial information about the site, including illuminating articles written by historians. In 2012, the federal government unveiled a rebuilt tower with the freshly painted words in bold red letters, “Peace and Freedom. Welcome. Home of the Free Indian Land.” It is a replica of the graffiti rendered when IOAT activists occupied the island. A spokeswoman for the National Park Service, Alexandra Picavet, commented that “normally, the federal government is not in the business of preserving graffiti. The water

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<sup>47</sup>. E. Hartman & S. Brandauer, eds., “What is Decolonization, Why is it Important, and How can we Practice It?,” *Interdependence: Global Solidarity and Local Actions*, 2021, <https://globalsolidaritylocalaction.sites.haverford.edu/what-is-decolonization-why-is-it-important/>.

<sup>48</sup>. Tedx Talks, “Decolonization is for Everyone/Nikki Sanchez/TedxSFU,” YouTube Video, 13:19, March 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP9x1NnCWNY>.



tower was the occupation's most outwardly focused message to the world, and it is an important part of the island's history."<sup>49</sup>

Spence writes that the American adventurer, painter, and traveler, George Catlin's (1796–1872), view of wilderness,

Reflected the romantic ideals that had defined Western intellectual thought since the eighteenth century. Consequently, wilderness not only offered an escape from society but also provided the ideal setting for romantic individuals 'to exercise the cult they made of their own souls.'<sup>50</sup>

Alcatraz is a rock out in the bay. It has no accessible freshwater and resources must be shipped in. It does not fit into the ideal of romanticism and were it not a tourist attraction today, it is doubtful people would want to visit a seemingly barren rock. But as Oakes explained, it is a place for intellectual growth for the Native population.

Thorough knowledge of Alcatraz should be an important component of this state's history; vocalizing the relevance of California's original occupants, in addition to the island's military and prison history, and its interrelatedness to the Gold Rush makes for a rich, all-inclusive story. Its history is ultimately immortalized by an occupation boosted by decades of the fight for civil rights by marginalized groups, as well as the National Park Service's recent attempts to restore and maintain graffiti-riddled monuments.

It is easy to dismiss the beauty of Alcatraz as it doesn't fit neatly into "American" perceptions of romance. It does not have the attractiveness and wildlife of Yosemite or Yellowstone; the breadth and height of trees in the Redwood Forest; nor the multi-layered, colorful geological wonder of the Grand Canyon.

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<sup>49</sup> Malia Wollen, "Antigovernment Graffiti Restored, Courtesy of Government," *The New York Times*, December 24, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/25/us/alcatraz-american-indian-occupation-graffiti-preserved.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*.

However, Alcatraz was a place for retreat, a place for isolation, and a place for food for the Indigenous population that resided on this land. A place does not have to exhibit the niceties that we might require for a romantic getaway for it to be functional. In the perception of the Native population, Alcatraz is not merely a rock; rather, it is a wondrous and functional territory of sovereignty.

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### **Author Bio**

Cecelia M. Smith was born and raised in Los Angeles County and attended Howard University after high school. She transplanted to San Bernardino County as an adult and resumed her pursuit for higher education at Chaffey College and California State University, San Bernardino. She graduated from California State University, San Bernardino with a bachelor of arts in history in 2013. She retired from her position as a 911 police operator and dispatcher for the city of Los Angeles in 2017 with over thirty-five years of service. In 2020, she began studies in the inaugural class of the master of arts in history program at California State University, San Bernardino, with a focus on African American history. Her thesis explores factors involved in the lynching of women. She graduated with her master's degree in May 2022. Cecelia is currently an adjunct professor at La Sierra University in Riverside. She enjoys writing and art and wishes to focus on completing a fictional novel or screenplay based on her current research. She would eventually like to return to school to further her education, perhaps pursuing a second master's degree. She currently resides in Fontana with her family.

