



TOP: Interior of the New Industries Building

BOTTOM: Exterior of the New Industries Building overlooking San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge



New Industries Building

In the federal penitentiary on Alcatraz Island, work was considered a privilege. One of the rewards for good behavior was a job, and for many inmates during the last two decades of the prison's existence, that job was in the New Industries Building. Built between 1939 and 1941, this two-story laundry and manufacturing facility was designed to replace the Model Industries Building nearby, which had been the site of several escape attempts.

Working in “the Industries” offered its own kinds of escape: from boredom and physical inactivity, from social isolation, and even from a full prison term. In exchange for his labor, an inmate could earn a shortened sentence—an average of two days’ “good time” for a month’s work—as well as a little money to send to family or save for the future. (In the prison’s early days, the wage was five to twelve cents per hour.) Work could be a relief from the tedium of hours spent alone in a cell, and the daily walk down from the cellhouse to the New Industries Building offered panoramic views of San Francisco and the Golden Gate.

For some prisoners, though, the sight of the city was a tormenting reminder of how far they really were from freedom, and work, rather than a respite, was just another dreary routine. Former inmate Jim Quillen remembered his job in the New Industries brush shop as “the most frustrating and boring, not to mention aggravating, work I have ever done—before, during, or after my release from prison.” Although workers had slightly more freedom to move about and communicate at work than in the cellhouse, they were still under constant control: unarmed guards patrolled the floor, carrying whistles to signal to armed guards in the gun gallery overhead in case of trouble.

Former guard Jim Albright described the New Industries Building as “filled with the assorted sounds of clothes washers and dryers, band saws, grinders, hammers, and sewing machines. . . . The combined scents of laundry detergent, cleaning fluids, and other chemicals once filled the air.” Workers here did laundry for military bases all over the Bay Area—initially, the entire upper floor was a laundry facility, the largest in San Francisco at the time—and manufactured clothing, gloves, shoes, brushes, and furniture for government use. During World War II, prisoners were also called upon to help the war effort: workers made tens of thousands of cargo nets for the U.S. Navy and repaired the large buoys that secured the submarine net across the Golden Gate.

The official employer of workers on Alcatraz was not the penitentiary itself but rather Federal Prison Industries, a government corporation launched in 1934 to create “factories with fences” in federal prisons. This corporation still exists today; operating under the name UNICOR, it has expanded to provide not only manual labor for government industry but also business services, such as prisoner-staffed



call centers, for private companies. Currently, the United States is home to one of the world's largest prison labor forces, while forced labor remains a horrific reality for prisoners of conscience in many parts of the world.

The workshops in the New Industries Building started shutting down in October 1962, before the entire prison closed in 1963. Today, visitors to the national park can still see the views that were so tantalizing for the men who worked here, and observe the numerous birds that now use the cliffs outside New Industries as a nesting ground.

Construction of the New Industries Building, c. 1930s

OPPOSITE: New Industries tailor shop, c. 1950s