
“Birdman of Alcatraz” Robert Stroud

Robert Stroud, the infamously named “Birdman of Alcatraz” was probably the island’s most famous prisoner. Despite the nickname, Stroud had never owned any birds whilst serving time in Alcatraz. In 1909, Stroud was convicted of manslaughter after he had brutally murdered a man who refused to pay for the prostitute for whom Stroud was pimping at the time.

After he had gunned the man down, Stroud took the man’s wallet in order to compensate the prostitute for her services. Stroud was initially imprisoned at McNeil Island, a U.S. Federal Penitentiary in the state of Washington. However, his violent and disruptive behavior did not stop there, as he had viciously attacked another inmate whilst serving time at McNeil. After being transferred to Leavenworth, Stroud brutally stabbed a guard to death in front of 1100 inmates who were present after being refused a visit from his brother. He was convicted of first-degree murder and was to be hanged. His mother pleaded desperately for his life and finally in 1920, President Woodrow commuted his death sentence to life imprisonment with parole. It was Stroud's violent behavior that earned him time in segregation. Stroud developed his interest in birds when he found an injured bird in the recreation yard. He was then allowed to breed birds as prison officials thought that it was a good idea for him to use his time constructively. In the 30 years he spent at Leavenworth Stroud wrote two books about canaries and the diseases that they contract. It didn’t take long for prison officials to discover that Stroud had used the bird cages to hide contraband items and that the equipment that he requested for his so-called scientific studies were used to build a still for alcoholic beverages.

Stroud was eventually transferred to Alcatraz in 1942, where he was held for the next 17 years of his life. Stroud had spent a total of 54 years of his life behind bars before he was transferred over to the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, Missouri, where he died on November 21, 1963.