

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The two nominated buildings are all that survive from Camp Ruston, a large World War II prisoner of war internment facility. The simple frame buildings are now surrounded by the modern campus of the Ruston Developmental Center, formerly the Ruston State School, located in a rural setting about six miles west, of the city. They have received some alterations over the years, but still easily retain their basic historic appearance. Despite these integrity issues, the buildings are of "exceptional significance" as extremely rare examples of a type of resource that by its very nature did not have much of a chance to survive.

The 750 acre Camp Ruston had between 200 and 300 buildings and an internment capacity of 5,800. The facility was placed in service in December 1942, with additional construction occurring in 1943. There were three large compounds (about fifty buildings each) for enlisted prisoners of war and one for officers. In addition, there was a multi-building hospital area and a section containing housing for American personnel as well as administrative and other support buildings.

Despite the presence of a great deal of information about the camp, including a map, it is impossible to be absolutely certain about the use of the nominated buildings because of site redevelopment. Comparing their compass point orientation to buildings shown on the map reveals that they were not part of the enlisted prisoner of war compounds. Possibilities include prisoner of war officers quarters, buildings in the hospital section, or barracks for American personnel. In 1984, a former officer prisoner of war, upon returning to the site of his internment, identified one of the buildings as his barracks. While this may well be true, one wonders how identification could be certain given the redevelopment of the site and the fact that one World War II era military building looks much like the next. Regardless of whether the buildings housed American personnel or prisoners of war or were hospital facilities, they are still survivors from a prisoner of war camp.

The linear one story buildings are located about fifty feet apart. The most intact of the two on the exterior ("Building A") retains almost all of its windows running along each side, but the original door openings on each end have been enclosed. A new doorway has been cut between the windows on the eastern side elevation, and loading ramps have been installed at both openings on this side. "Building B" is similar except more of its windows have been enclosed, and additions (in the same building material) have been made at the southern end and along the eastern side. The original appearance of the interiors is not known, other than that they were always very basic. One former prisoner of war remembered that there were no finished ceilings. Today the ceilings are covered with plywood. A few makeshift plywood partitions have been installed, and some of the walls have been covered in plywood.

Assessment of Integrity

Despite the fenestration changes and additions noted above, the buildings retain sufficient integrity to be recognized immediately by someone from the historic period, as evidenced by the former prisoners of war that have visited the camp over the years. The most serious integrity issue is the loss of the rest of the camp and redevelopment. Suffice it to say, that given the very nature of the resource, it would be extremely unrealistic to expect the base to have survived intact or even partially intact. Buildings at temporary, limited objective World War II military facilities were not intended for long-term use, were hastily erected, and in most instances were sold at public auction for removal from the property when the facility was deactivated. In the conclusion to his book Nazi Prisoners of War in America, historian Arnold Kramer stressed that there is extremely little left in America as a whole to represent the country's unprecedented prisoner of war experience during World War II.

State significance of property, and justify, criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Ruston P. O. W. Camp buildings are of state significance in military history because they best represent Louisiana's role in housing prisoners of war during World War II. The period of significance spans from 1943, when the camp received its first prisoners, to 1946, when the last ones left. The justification for "exceptional significance" (i.e., an exception to the fifty year cutoff) is provided below.

During World War II, some 400,000 Nazi prisoners of war were interned in the United States as well as about 50,000 Italians and 5,000 Japanese. Facilities ran the gamut from specially built prisoner of war camps (like the one in Ruston), to military bases that had a POW section, to temporary satellite work camps. There were also innumerable instances of prisoners housed in hastily converted CCC camps, high school gyms, tent cities, auditoriums or whatever was handy. These makeshift arrangements were particularly true in the beginning, before America had geared up for this unprecedented need, and in the satellite work camps. Two-thirds of the base camps (i.e., major facilities), accommodating three-fourths of the prisoners, were located in the South and Southwest.

More than 20,000 prisoners were interned in Louisiana in five base camps (Camps Ruston, Claiborne, Livingston, Polk and Plauche) and 35 satellite work camps. Camp Ruston was the only base camp that was specifically and solely a prisoner of war camp. The others were military facilities with a POW section. When the Camp Ruston site was selected in June 1942, the facility was to be for the internment of resident aliens, a need that the Army seriously overestimated. In August of the same year, with construction underway, the facility was designated a prisoner of war camp, and building activity was increased to accommodate 4,800 rather than the original 3,000. (A compound for 1,000 officers was added in 1943, bringing the total capacity to 5,800.) The camp was activated on December 25, 1942. The anticipated massive influx of prisoners to America in late '42 and early '43 failed to materialize, and Camp Ruston stood vacant and useless. It served as a WAC facility from March 1943 to June of that year, when the Army needed the facility for prisoners.

The first POWs, from Rommel's famed Afrika Korps, arrived at Camp Ruston on August 14, 1943. Because of the thousands of prisoners of war transferred from North Africa in the summer and early fall of 1943, Camp Ruston's POW population grew rapidly, reaching its overall peak on October 10 at 4,315. Although the camp is most associated with German POWs, as are the other facilities in America, there were also large numbers of Italians there. The last POWs left Camp Ruston in February 1946.

The exact fate of Camp Ruston is not entirely clear at this point. In the late 1940s it became a tuberculosis sanitarium. Whether any of the buildings were dismantled or sold at public auction (the standard route) is not known. Clearly a sanitarium did not need a complex the size of Camp Ruston. The site was taken over by an orphanage in 1959 and since the 1960s has been the home of the Ruston State School (redesignated the Ruston Developmental Center in 1991). A current employee remembers that upon his arrival some fifteen years ago, there were still various buildings from the original camp there. The only ones to survive are the two nominated buildings. Because their importance is not fully appreciated by the appropriate authorities, their future is uncertain. Although they are presently used by the school for storage, demolition has been discussed. It is hoped that National Register recognition will bring an increased awareness of the value of these survivors.

Other Properties Associated with POW Campus in Louisiana

Considering that World War II is a relatively recent epoch in American history, it is amazing how little remains to represent our nation's experience in prisoner of war internment. Because an exhaustive survey state-by-state was impractical, combined with a possible lack of survey data about the survival of POW-related buildings, Louisiana was chosen as the context for significance, in consultation with the National Park Service. This seemed entirely appropriate and justifiable since the state's role in POW internment was not inconsiderable. Of the five base camps, three no longer exist at all (Camps Livingston, Claiborne, and Plaquemine). Camp Livingston in Rapides Parish, for example, was a large World War II training facility with a POW population of about 4,000. The hundreds of buildings that were once there are completely gone. Communication with the base historian at Fort Polk revealed that the POW compound (some 40 buildings) is completely gone. The only other possibilities are the thirty-five makeshift satellite work camps located across the state. However, these tended to be either tent cities put up for the cotton, rice or sugarcane harvest, or pre-existing buildings that happened to house prisoners of war while they worked at a given task. While some of the latter still undoubtedly exist in Louisiana, they do not have as strong and as exclusive an association as do the two buildings remaining at Camp Ruston, which obviously would have never existed otherwise.

Justification for Exceptional Significance

The surviving buildings at the Ruston P.O.W. Camp fall under the "Fragile or Short-Lived Resources" section of National Register Bulletin 22, "Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties That Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years." In fact, World War II era frame buildings that were viewed as temporary and expendable are mentioned as an example.

P.O.W. camps by their very nature did not have much of a chance to survive. They were considered by the Army to be temporary facilities with a limited objective. The basic policy was for the buildings and other equipment to be sold at public auction after the facilities were de-activated. The land (if it had not been government property from the beginning) was either auctioned off or sold back to the original owners. Given these circumstances, it is little wonder that the two buildings at the Ruston camp are all that are left to directly and specifically represent Louisiana's experience with interning 20,000 POWs.

In reference to the guidelines in Bulletin 22, it should be noted that sufficient scholarly research has been done on the subject to permit proper evaluation. (Please refer to bibliography.) There is a scholarly account of America's experience with German POWs during World War II, a thesis on Camp Ruston, and two scholarly articles on Louisiana's experience. In addition, the staff consulted Dr. Matthew Schott of the University of Southwestern Louisiana, who has spent the past few years researching the state's POW camps. Dave Bingman, the base historian at Fort Polk, provided information about that facility.

Major Bibliographical References

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Personal communication with Dr. Matthew Schott, University of Southwestern Louisiana. Professor Schott has spent the last several years researching POW camps in Louisiana.

Personal communication with Dave Bingman, base historian, Fort Polk.