

PHOTOGRAPHS AS SOURCES: DOCUMENTING A WORLD WAR II POW CAMP

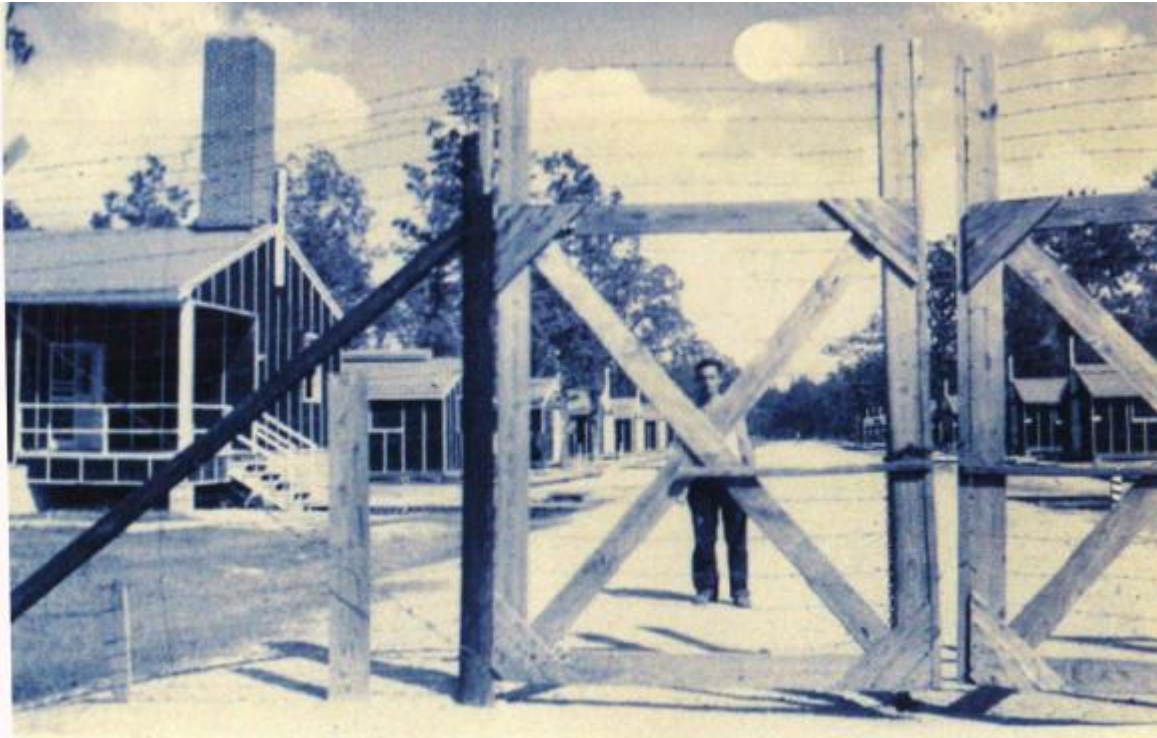
[July 26, 2013](#) [jbarnes9](#) [Day of Archaeology 2013](#), [Historical Archaeology Arkansas](#), [historical archaeology](#), [photographs](#), [primary sources](#), [Prisoner of war](#)

A picture is worth a thousand words the old adage goes. For historical archaeologists, photographs can provide important information about the location of buildings and activity areas. They can also provide insight into the everyday lives of past inhabitants. One of my current projects is the mapping and documentation of a World War II Italian Prisoner of War (PoW) camp in Monticello, Arkansas. Camp Monticello opened as a training facility for the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in 1943 and served as a Prisoner of War (PoW) camp for Italians from 1943 to 1946. Photographs of the camp provide important context for archaeological research, but as with any primary source they have to be examined carefully.



Section of a map of the PoW Camp showing Compound 1.

Camp Monticello consisted of three compounds that housed enlisted men, two compounds that held officers, a hospital and other facilities. The buildings of the camp have mostly disappeared from view. But the archaeological evidence of the PoW camp is relatively widespread and exhibits good preservation as concrete foundations mark the landscape. Archaeologists are increasingly interested in research on prisoner of war camps. Research in Europe, Canada, and the United States has fostered new understandings of PoW camps and their inmates. See for example, Michael Waters, [Lone Star Stalag about a German PoW camp in Texas](#) or Harold Mytum and Gilly Carr's [edited volume on prisoners of war](#). Archaeology at Camp Monticello has the potential to yield new information about the Arkansas' role in World War II, the lives of women at the camp, and the ways in which the Italian PoWs adapted to confinement and expressed ethnic and cultural identity through daily practice.



Gate to a compound at Camp Monticello. Photograph courtesy of the Drew County Historical Museum

I use historic photographs and documents to provide context. Photographs help me understand what the camp looked like, as well as how people may have used the space. But as with any source of information, I have to examine the photographs carefully. Photographs may appear to give an unmediated view of the past, a promise of truth and neutrality that is free of the partiality of written documents ([Edwards and Hart 2004](#)). However, this sensation is deceptive, because for each photograph the subject has been selected, framed, and thus partially constructed by the photographer. Plus, the photographs preserved in archival collections tend to have been taken for specific reasons. As [Barbara Little points out](#), documentary history — photographs, deeds, wills, maps — offers us one set of evidence about the past. Archaeology offers us a different kind of evidence. Historical archaeology is a kind of scholarship that challenges our certainties in useful ways.



A makeshift clothesline at Camp Monticello. Photo courtesy of the Drew County Historical Museum.

Photographs are great sources for archaeological research, since archaeology provides a way to test and corroborate the information contained within the photographs. As we head into the field to map and test the site, we hope to find activity areas like the makeshift clothesline that show what everyday life was like for the PoWs at Camp Monticello. Like the [Arkansas Archeological Survey – UAM Station](#) Facebook page for updates on this project and other happenings in southeast Arkansas.