

**Title of Lesson: *Camp Aliceville: The Story of WWII Prisoners of War Who Came to Alabama***  
(Suggested grade level: 11<sup>th</sup> grade American History)

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**Background Information:**

A surprising fact most people don't know about World War II is that there were over 500 POW (prisoners of war) camps in the United States. Four major POW camps were built in Alabama. (These American POW camps should not be confused with the internment camps that held American residents of Japanese ancestry.) In 1942, at the conclusion of the campaign in North Africa, the Allies had captured so many Axis soldiers that Britain (the only European country not under Axis control at the time), couldn't accommodate them all. The United States agreed to build camps and house a large percentage of all the prisoners that were taken during the war. The Army Corps of Engineers immediately started building the first and largest of the Alabama camps near Aliceville, a small town in Pickens County. Aliceville's initial influx of prisoners (members of Rommel's elite Afrika Korps who had been captured and held in detention camps in North Africa until the prison was ready) started arriving by train in May, 1943. Eventually, the camp held over 6,000 prisoners, almost all of them German soldiers. Life in the camp was governed by the third Geneva Convention. Early on, the United States and Britain had pledged that all their POW camps would strictly adhere to the Convention, initially adopted in 1929. This convention (treaty) defined humanitarian conditions for prisoners of war by providing a list of what was and wasn't acceptable treatment. Torture was forbidden. Prisoners had to be provided with housing, clothing, and food rations equal in quality to those of Allied troops. Although POWs worked (it was mostly agricultural work), they were paid a modest amount. The military supplied some recreational and educational resources, but the POWs organized all kinds of cultural activities for themselves. Violence turned out to be surprisingly minimal. In some cases, friendships developed between prisoners and guards. Former prisoners have even returned for reunions in Aliceville. Nothing physical is left of the prison; everything was torn down. But the remarkable story of Aliceville offers a glimpse into one of the more interesting and lesser known parts of the war. It is especially inspiring because of how humanely America chose to treat their captive enemies and how resilient those captives turned out to be.

**Overview of lesson:**

Students learn about the Aliceville POW camp by way of a [PowerPoint](#) presentation that's designed to generate as much student interest as possible. Questions are posed and images are displayed so that the story of the camp unfolds incrementally. The core activity comes in the middle of the PowerPoint, after students have discovered why the camp was built and how the community of Aliceville responded to its opening. Students are then presented with an essential question: "What was life in the camp like?" In order to respond, they have to look closely at seven different photographs that were taken in the camp (each is presented on a different slide and there are notes for the teacher to accompany each one). As students view each image, they have to jot down a few notes about what they see that can help them answer the essential question. Immediately following the seventh photograph, before any discussion begins, students are presented with a set of questions designed to help facilitate meaningful reflection. The final instruction on this slide requires students to write two complete sentences describing life in the prison, as seen in and through the photographs. After every student has read one

of their sentences, the teacher circles back over the seven photographs, and students discuss their responses to the essential question by pointing to details in the photos. The rest of the [PowerPoint](#) explains what the Geneva Convention was and why the United States decided to abide by it. As a wrap up, students are asked to discuss what their brief glimpse into the camp suggests about human nature, and why they think life at the Aliceville prison turned out the way it did.

### **Content Standards**

[Alabama Course of Study: Social Studies](#) (Bulletin 2004, No. 18)

Grade 11: Content Standard 7

- Describing consequences of World War II on the lives of American citizens

[National Standards for History, 1996](#)

#### **Standards in Historical Thinking**

Standard 3: The student engages in historical analysis and interpretation.

G. Consider multiple perspectives in the records of human experience by demonstrating how their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears influenced individual and group behaviors

#### **Standards in History for Grades 5-12**

Era 8, Standard 3C: The student understands the effects of World War II at home.

[National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies](#) (Bulletin 111, 2010)

*Standard 2: Time, Continuity, and Change*

*Standard 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions*

*Standard 6: Power, Authority, and Governance*

*Standard 9: Global Connections*

### **Primary Learning Objective(s):**

Students will

- Learn about POW camps in Alabama (and across the nation)
- Take notes from a *PowerPoint* presentation
- Analyze photographs
- Draw inferences
- Express opinions
- Support opinions with specific details and facts
- Discuss an essential question
- Practice writing skills
- Reflect on a philosophical question about human nature

**Time allotted:** 70 minutes

### **Materials and Equipment:**

- Digital projector to show *PowerPoint*
- *PowerPoint* presentation, [Camp Aliceville: The Story of WWII Prisoners of War Who Came to Alabama](#) (attached)
- Instructions for student writing assignment (a letter)
- Rubric for writing assignment
- Quiz on major facts in *PowerPoint* presentation

### Technological Resources:

- [Encyclopedia of Alabama article](#) about the camp at Aliceville. It provides an excellent overview.
- [Camp Aliceville Museum webpage](#). This is an article originally published in *Southern Living* on the POW Museum at Aliceville.
- [“Guests Behind the Barbed Wire: German POWs in America: A True Story of Hope and Friendship.”](#) This is the title of a book written by Ruth Cook. Much of the book relates to camps in Alabama. The link doesn’t take you to a publishing site, however; it takes you to a brief 4-minute audio review of the book by Don Noble, which was originally broadcast on Alabama Public Radio. It highlights some of the more interesting facts from the book.
- [“Inside the Wire: Aliceville and the Afrika Korps.”](#) This engaging and thorough article originally appeared in *Alabama Heritage* in 1988. It is fascinating reading and the pictures that accompany the text help round out the story of the camp.

### Background/Preparation:

- Students should have already begun their study of World War II. This lesson would fit into a “Life on the Home Front” section or, if students are studying specific campaigns during the war, it could be introduced right after they’ve read about the collapse of the Axis army in North Africa in 1942.

### Procedures/Activities:

#### Engagement/Motivation Activity:

- Show the first slide in the [PowerPoint presentation, Camp Aliceville: The Story of WWII Prisoners of War Who Came to Alabama](#). (It’s a photograph of a guard tower at the Aliceville POW Camp and asks this question “What do you think this structure was?”) Help students process the image by asking guiding questions: Why do you think the building in the photograph is elevated above the ground? What purpose might that serve? Why was it given a more rounded shape? What advantages would that offer? Why do you think it has so many windows? Why was it placed so close to a fence?
- If students don’t identify the structure in the photo as a guard tower of some sort (which they may or may not), tell them what it is and proceed to the next slide.

<b>Step 1</b>	Show the entire <a href="#">PowerPoint, Camp Aliceville: The Story of WWII Prisoners of War Who Came to Alabama</a> .
<b>Step 2</b>	As a general wrap-up, ask students to respond informally to these questions: “What do you think the POW camp at Aliceville demonstrates about human nature? Why do you think prison life turned out the way it did?”
<b>Step 3</b>	Give each student a copy of the instructions for the writing assignment, along with the rubric. Answer any questions.
<b>Step 4</b>	If you choose to, you could give students the attached quiz.

### Assessment Strategies:

- Student composed letter
- Quiz on major facts covered in *PowerPoint*

### Extension:

- Students could read all or part of Ruth Cook's book, Behind Barbed Wire: German POWs in America.

## PRISONER OF WAR WRITING ASSIGNMENT

You will assume the role of a German POW living at the Aliceville camp and write a letter to someone back home (could be a friend, wife, child, sister, mother, etc.). The letter must:

- Show the specific date you wrote the letter (nothing prior to when the first POWs arrived at Aliceville, which was May, 1943)
- Indicate the specific city in Germany where your correspondent lives
- Have both the date and location at the top of the letter
- Include some reference to what's currently happening on the front lines in Europe (you would have been able to follow events in prison) and link those developments to the person you're writing. Are the Nazis doing well? Has Germany had any major setbacks or challenges? What impact might recent developments have had on the person you're writing? (Show some awareness and concern.) Use your textbook to locate those facts.
- Discuss what life is like for you in the camp. BE SPECIFIC about how long you've been there and what you're doing every day.
- Include some statements that show how you feel about life in the camp. Use strong words which clearly indicated your frame of mind and emotional state.
- Contain complete sentences (unless it serves a clear purpose to be a fragment rather than a complete sentence)
- Be free of major spelling errors
- Be between 300-350 words. You can include a drawing if you like.

You can learn more about daily life at the Aliceville prison by reading one of two articles:

- An [Encyclopedia of Alabama article](#) about the camp
- "[Inside the Wire: Aliceville and the Afrika Korps,](#)" an online article that was first published in *Alabama Heritage* in 1988. It includes a number of photographs.

## RUBRIC FOR PRISONER OF WAR LETTER

Criteria	1 point	2 points	3 points	4 points
Basic Requirements	Was more than 10% under the word requirement. Didn't include date and/or name of the city letter was being mailed to.	Was slightly under the word requirement (1 to 9 %). Forgot either day or city (not both).	Met the word requirement. Forgot either day and city (not both).	Met the word requirement. Included date and city.
Factual Information	Stayed very vague, included almost no specifics about camp life and/or current war developments. Some facts may have been totally inappropriate.	Some specifics (not many) are included. Some references may have not have been clear.	Writer included a reasonable number of specifics which gave some sense of life in the camp as well as what was happening on the war front.	Without listing facts, writer included enough information to provide a clear sense of camp life and current developments on the war front.
Emotional Tone	Non-existent (the write seems totally neutral).	Reader has to read between the lines a good bit to determine what the tone is. Not many strong, emotional words are included.	Letter communicates some emotion, although it may seem a little forced.	Letter writer provides a powerful, authentic sense of his or her emotional state of mind.
Awareness of Audience (person receiving letter)	Made almost no references that indicate circumstances of person receiving letter	Shows some awareness of person back home, but that awareness appears limited.	Makes some references to what person back home could be thinking or feeling.	Displays a strong awareness of what the person back home might be thinking and feeling about the war's progress (and its effect on his or her life).
Grammar, Punctuation & Sentence Structure	More than four major errors	No more than three to four major errors	No more than one or two major errors	No major errors

## QUIZ ON POW CAMPS

1. Approximately how many prisoner of war camps were built in the United States?
  - a. 50
  - b. 700
  - c. 300
  - d. 100
2. How many major camps were built in Alabama?
  - a. 3
  - b. 2
  - c. 1
  - d. 4
3. The Aliceville prison camp was located
  - a. Near Mobile
  - b. In the eastern part of the state
  - c. In the western part of the state
  - d. On the outskirts of the city of Birmingham
4. How many prisoners did the Aliceville facility hold (at its maximum capacity)?
  - a. 60
  - b. 600
  - c. 6,000
  - d. 60,000
5. What is the name of the treaty that governed how POWs were treated in American POW camps (the same treaty was also adopted by the British)
6. Give one example of a rule this treaty specified.
7. Identify and explain one way the community of Aliceville benefitted from either the prison or the prisoners.