FORT BLISS, FORT SAM HOUSTON, KENEDY, SEAGOVILLE, AND CRYSTAL CITY

Enemy Alien Internment in Texas during World War II

Acknowledgements

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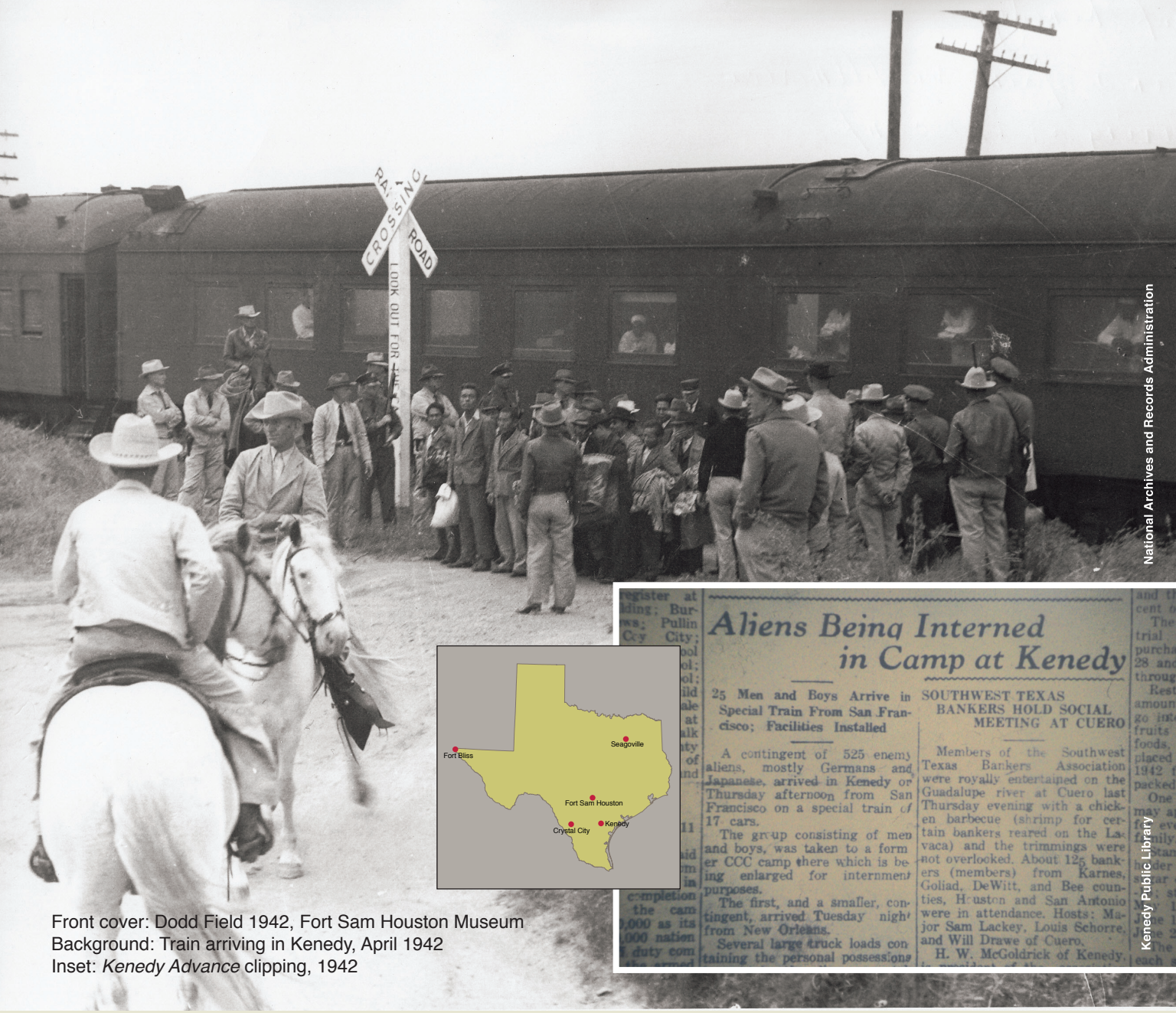
Enemy Alien Internment in Texas during World War II

TEXAS HISTORICAL COMMISSION



National Archives and Records Administration

Kenedy Public Library

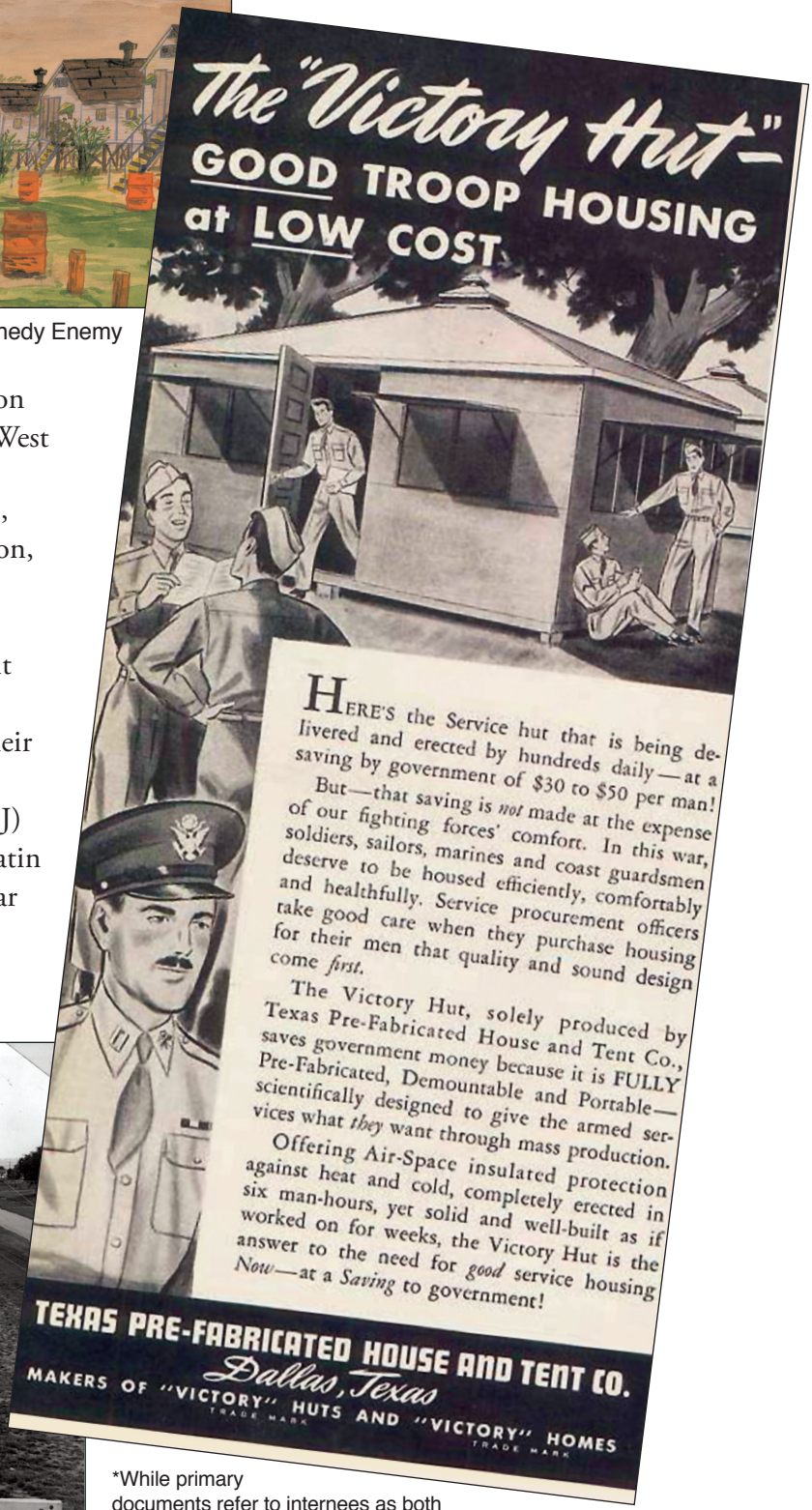
Front cover: Dodd Field 1942, Fort Sam Houston Museum
Background: Train arriving in Kenedy, April 1942
Inset: *Kenedy Advance* clipping, 1942

Texas hosted three confinement sites for enemy aliens, administered by the Department of Justice's Immigration and Naturalization Service in association with the Department of State, at Crystal City, Kenedy, and Seagoville. In addition, two U.S. Army temporary detention stations were located at Dodd Field on Fort Sam Houston (San Antonio) and Fort Bliss (El Paso).

Shocked by the December 7, 1941, Empire of Japan attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, that propelled the U.S. into World War II, one U.S. government response began in early 1942 with the incarceration of thousands of Japanese Americans on the U.S. West Coast and the territory of Hawaii.

Approximately 120,000 Issei (first generation, Japanese immigrants) and Nisei (second generation, U.S. citizens) from the U.S. West Coast were incarcerated in War Relocation Authority camps across the country. Through separate confinement programs, thousands of Japanese, German, and Italian citizens in the U.S. (and in many cases, their U.S. citizen relatives), classified as Enemy Aliens, were detained by the Department of Justice (DOJ) through its Alien Enemy Control Unit and, in Latin America, by the Department of State's Special War Problems Division.*

Japanese Latino Artwork, Kenedy Enemy Alien Detention Station



Victory Huts, Kenedy Enemy Alien Detention Station

*While primary documents refer to internees as both Alien Enemies and Enemy Aliens, for consistency with prior THC scholarship and projects, the THC chose to use the term Enemy Aliens.

"All natives, citizens, denizens, or subjects of [Japan, Germany and Italy], being of the age of fourteen years and upward, who shall be in the United States and not actually naturalized, shall be liable to be apprehended, restrained, secured, and removed as enemy aliens."

— FDR's Presidential Proclamations
December 1941

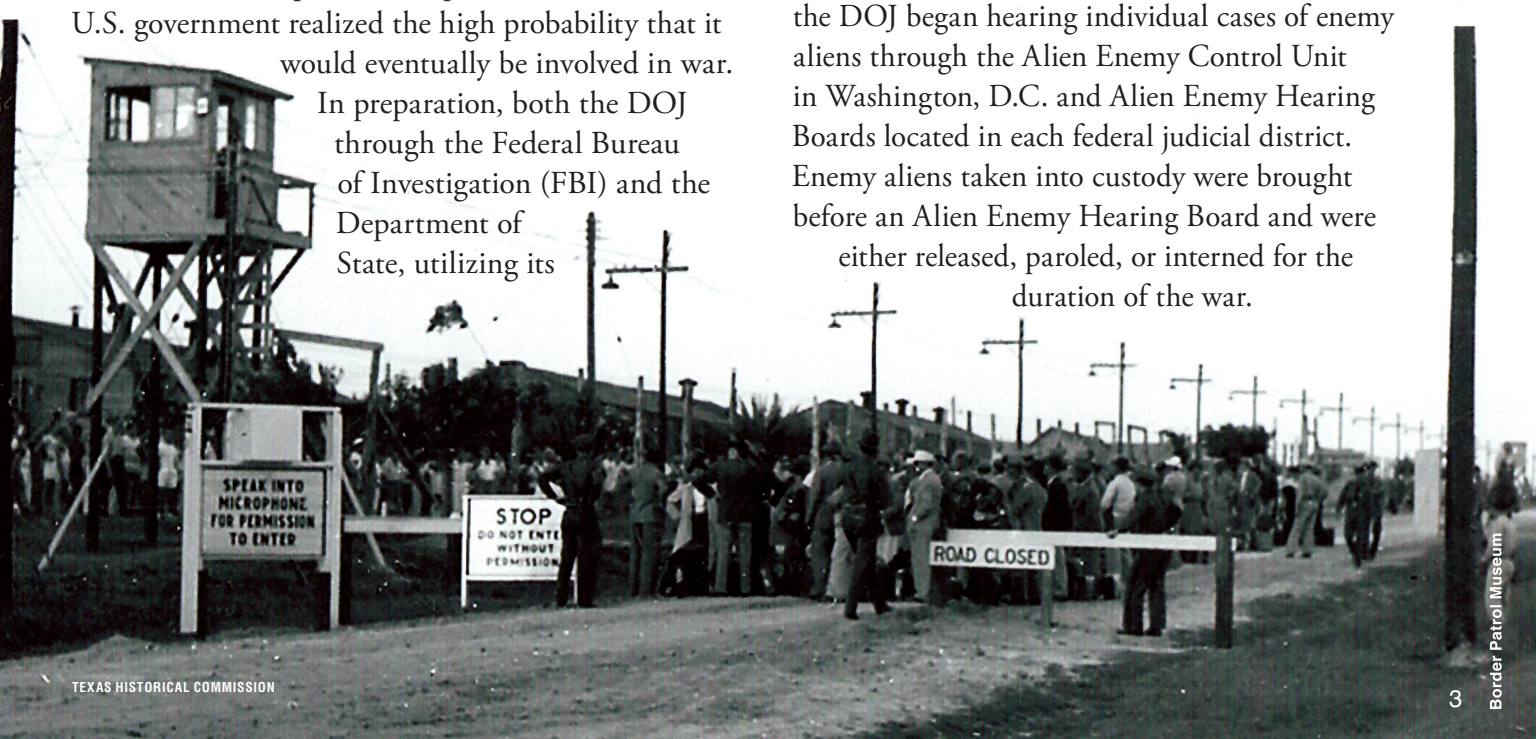
Roosevelt's Proclamation

The U.S. government's authority over enemy aliens, and where applicable, their American-born spouses and children, came from U.S. Code, Title 50, Section 21, *Restraint, Regulation, and Removal*, which allowed for the arrest and detention of enemy aliens during war. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's proclamations—modeled on the Enemy Alien Act of 1798—collectively stated, "All natives, citizens, denizens, or subjects of [Japan, Germany and Italy], being of the age of fourteen years and upward, who shall be in the United States and not actually naturalized, shall be liable to be apprehended, restrained, secured, and removed as enemy aliens."

Prior to these presidential proclamations, the U.S. government realized the high probability that it would eventually be involved in war. In preparation, both the DOJ through the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of State, utilizing its Special War Problems Division, produced Custodial Detention Lists. This indexed thousands of people as potentially dangerous individuals in time of war that were currently residing in the U.S. and Latin America. With this questionable legal foundation in place, the FBI began arresting select enemy aliens from Axis nations, currently residing in the U.S., as early as the night of December 7, 1941 and placing them in detention centers.

Registration Required

By January 1942, all enemy aliens in the U.S. were required to register at local post offices, where they were fingerprinted, photographed, and required to carry photo-bearing registration cards. Early in 1942, the DOJ began hearing individual cases of enemy aliens through the Alien Enemy Control Unit in Washington, D.C. and Alien Enemy Hearing Boards located in each federal judicial district. Enemy aliens taken into custody were brought before an Alien Enemy Hearing Board and were either released, paroled, or interned for the duration of the war.



Border Patrol Museum

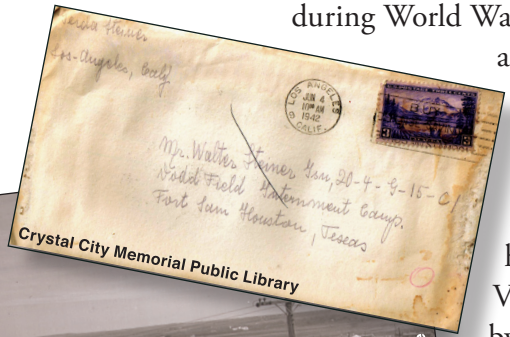
DODD FIELD, FORT SAM HOUSTON
Bexar County

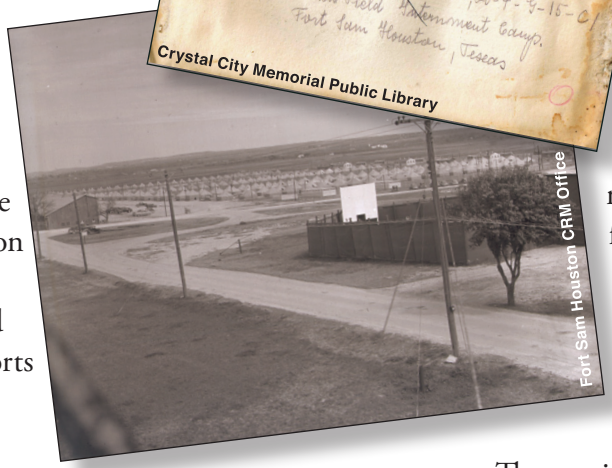
The U.S. Army detained enemy aliens for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) at posts across the U.S. where the number of apprehensions was so small that it was not feasible for the INS to operate detention facilities in that vicinity. The internment camp at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio opened in late February 1942. The confinement site's first internees were Japanese, German, and Italian enemy aliens living in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. On April 30, 1942 the Spanish Consul, serving as the protectorate nation for the Empire of Japan, and joined by representatives of the Special Division of the Department of State, inspected the confinement site and reported a total population of 107 enemy aliens. Due to the INS's efforts to parole and the Department of State's efforts in repatriating enemy aliens, the confinement site's average population does not appear to have peaked above 150 total detainees while in service.

At first, internees were held at one of the post's "Old Infantry Long Barracks;" however, this site was temporary as internees were soon relocated in April to the northern edge of the post at Dodd Field, an airfield. The stockade covered an estimated 20 acres, surrounded by a double barbed-wire enclosure consisting of two 10-foot high fences, around two compounds connected by a passageway. There were eight elevated guard towers placed at intervals, and the entire stockade was under constant armed guard.

Due to the small number of enemy aliens held at Fort Sam Houston, people of all three nationalities were grouped together. Internees wore their own civilian clothing, and the detention station's regulations permitted internees to write two letters and one postcard each week with no restriction placed upon the persons to whom the communications were addressed. Internees were housed in walled tents mounted on a wooden foundation measuring approximately 16-feet square. These tents were nicknamed Victory Huts during World War II for the ease in assembly, adequate protection from the elements, and low cost to the government, which purchased these housing units in the tens of thousands to house U.S. servicemen. The Victory Huts could be heated by stoves during the colder months and had mosquito netting for the summer.

The Special Alien Enemy Hearing Board, announced by the DOJ on August 22, 1943, began the transfer of internees from U.S. Army posts to INS camps. The special board conducted visits to U.S. Army detention centers to conduct hearings, eventually moving 4,120 internees to INS-controlled camps across the U.S., including all three Texas sites. This was conducted primarily because the U.S. War Department believed the unfolding two-front war in Europe and the Pacific would generate a need to house hundreds of thousands of enemy prisoners of war taken on the field of battle. As a result, Dodd Field stopped holding enemy aliens before the end of 1942, and became a base prisoner of war camp.





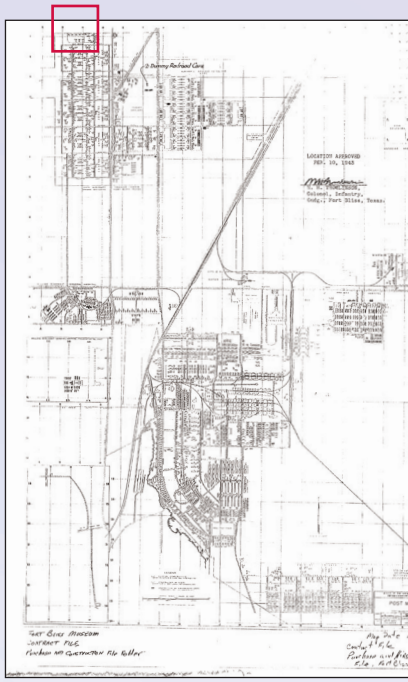
Letters helped internees communicate with loved ones back home; Aerial, Dodd Field during WWII

FORT BLISS
El Paso County

The exact date of the opening of the internment camp at Fort Bliss is unknown, but it likely opened in either February or March 1942. A U.S. Army report of the Spanish Consul's visit gives a unique glimpse into this little-known confinement site. The Spanish Consul, joined by representatives of the Special Division of the Department of State, first inspected Fort Bliss on May 2, 1942 and found a very small internee population. Nearly halfway into the first year of the war, only 29 Japanese, 18 German, and nine Italian enemy aliens made up the detention station's population of 56 individuals. Each awaited hearings by Alien Enemy Hearing Boards and the completion of arrangements for parole, extended internment, or repatriation to their ancestral nation from this Far West Texas internment camp.

Located on the extreme northern edge of Fort Bliss's Logan Heights, the square-shaped internment stockade measured 365 feet per side, and enclosed two compounds within a double barbed-wire fence. At the four corners of the stockade, elevated towers were manned by armed guards. The confinement site never held a large number of internees; however, unused neighboring infrastructure could have held up to 1,350 additional detainees if needed.

Similar to Fort Sam Houston, internees were permitted to wear their civilian clothing, and were permitted to send two letters, consisting of approximately 24 lines each and one postcard to friends and relatives each week. They were not permitted to have radio receiving sets, but could subscribe to newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals approved by the camp's administrative arm.



Directorate of Public Works, Fort Bliss

Several Japanese Americans held at Fort Bliss were from New Mexico, and it appears that German and Italian enemy aliens held at the camp were also taken into custody from western states. The historical record indicates that while the Fort Bliss site housed primarily male detainees, a number of Japanese Americans, whose families were left destitute from their internment, were joined by spouses and children prior to November 1942 and the closing of the Fort Bliss Enemy Alien Detention Station.

Top right: Red box notes the location of the detention station, Fort Bliss map, 1942;
Below: Logan Heights, 2012

Japanese, German, and Italian Latin American Internment

During the war, the U.S. Department of State—in cooperation with 15 Caribbean, Central American, and South American countries (see map)—worked to increase the security of the Western Hemisphere, especially the vulnerable and vital Panama Canal Zone.

This was accomplished primarily through financial and material support—via programs such as the Lend-Lease Act—to participating American nations. At a conference of Western Hemisphere countries in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in January 1942, the U.S. called for the establishment of the Emergency Advisory Committee for Political Defense. This new security program was tasked with monitoring enemy aliens throughout Central and South America. The result was thousands of Axis nationals, as well as citizens of these Latin American countries of Japanese, German, and Italian ancestry, were taken into custody by local officials. While a number of those arrested were legitimate Axis sympathizers, most were not. Forcibly deported, these detainees were shipped to the U.S., considered security risks, and detained in internment camps across the country, including the three permanent INS camps in Texas.

Stripped of their passports en route to the U.S., these Latin Americans were declared "illegal aliens" upon arrival, a fact many former internees and historians have referred to as "hostage shopping" and "kidnapping," by the U.S. and Latin American governments. These Latin American internees provided the U.S. with an increased pool of people for exchange with Japan and Germany, each of which held comparable numbers of U.S. and Allied personnel taken prisoner earlier in the war.

By late January 1942, the U.S. began transporting the diplomatic staffs of Germany, Japan, and Italy residing in Mexico through Laredo, Texas and on to predetermined destinations on the East Coast.

In March 1942, the U.S. began to negotiate with Japan and Germany for the safe return of U.S. and Allied citizens. The first repatriation that included Japanese American internees took place in June 1942. German enemy aliens, German Americans, and German Latin Americans were also voluntarily and involuntarily repatriated in massive movements during the war.

German march, Seagoville Enemy Alien Detention Station, 1942

Inset, headstone; above, Kenedy Cemetery

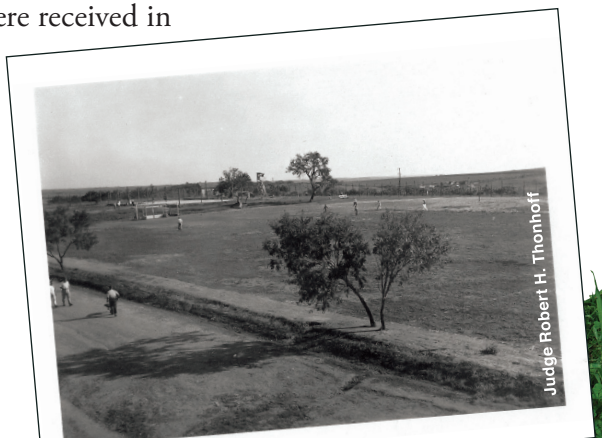
KENEDY ENEMY ALIEN DETENTION STATION
Karnes County

Under different names, organizations, and even two World Wars, Camp Kenedy has had a long and storied service life. During World War I, the site served as a U.S. Army training post. During the Great Depression, the site served as Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Camp #3806. In March 1942, the site was transferred from the CCC to the INS. The site was designated to hold detainees that the Department of State brought in from Latin America.

The Kenedy Enemy Alien Detention Station received its first internees on April 21, 1942. The first internee group arriving that April included 156 Japanese, 456 Germans, and 14 Italians. This group was augmented by an additional 355 internees (chiefly of German nationality) who were received in May, and by 253 Japanese internees in June. The population consisted primarily of adult males and a very small number of teenage boys. In an effort to provide internees with activities, the camp had a large recreational field, 600 feet long by 450 feet wide, and three plus acres of gardening areas outside the barbed-wire fence.

Victory Huts were added to the existing CCC buildings to afford the confinement site with accommodations for 1,200 internees, and a staff of 84 INS and civilian workers. However, the camp's population averaged closer to 600 internees per month. Through the remainder of 1942, and the beginning of 1943, a portion of the detainees were repatriated, while others were reunited with their families at Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp and Seagoville Enemy Alien Detention Station.

By August 1944, Kenedy Enemy Alien Detention Station still held 525 internees that, with the exception of 30, all originated from Latin American countries. According to Protectorate Nations' inspection visits, the majority of internees desired repatriation to their home countries or return to the Latin American country from which they were taken into custody. At this point in the war, the U.S. Military needed additional prisoner of war camp space, and the remaining internees were transferred to other INS camps, paroled, or repatriated. The INS ceased operation of the facility in September 1944. After the internment camp closed, the site became a German and later Japanese branch prisoner of war camp, administered out of Fort Sam Houston's base prisoner of war camp.



Right: Recreational area, Camp Kenedy; far right: Japanese Latino fountain still stands in the backyard of a postwar house built over the former camp.

SEAGOVILLE ENEMY ALIEN DETENTION STATION
Dallas County

Next to historic Ellis Island in New York City, the most architecturally significant INS confinement site was at Seagoville. The Geneva Convention of 1929 prohibited the detention of prisoners of war, as well as enemy alien civilians, in prisons. This eliminated the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons from being assigned the responsibility for the internment of civilians during World War II. Originally built by the Bureau of Prisons as a minimum-security women's reformatory in 1941, Seagoville Enemy Alien Detention Station was transferred to the INS on April 1, 1942.

The INS utilized the Seagoville facility for the detention of Japanese, German, and Italian families (briefly), childless couples, and single women detained as enemy aliens arrested within the U.S. and those brought from Latin American to be interned, while awaiting parole or repatriation to their ancestral country of origin. While a small number of families lived at this detention station in 1942 and 1943, this was considered a temporary fix, which the INS resolved with its largest site in Crystal City.

This internment camp included its own hospital with quarantine section, an auditorium, industry and service buildings, and 352 rooms for detainees. Each dorm-esque living quarters was a self-contained housing unit with small kitchen and dining area, and adequate recreational facilities. However, these accommodations did not provide enough living quarters for detainees as the population grew in 1942 and 1943 to its peak population of 650 internees and a staff of approximately 120 INS and civilian employees.

Above: Postwar aerial, Seagoville Enemy Alien Detention Station,1947
Inset: Porcelain traditional Japanese doll presented by Mayaso Iwamura to FCI-Seagoville in October 1990. Iwamura was born as an internee at the facility in 1943. (Malcom Potts, FCI-Seagoville, TX)

The Third Geneva Convention—*Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War* (1929)—stipulated that the U.S. must provide internees from different nations separate and equal access to living quarters. To provide additional living quarters in 1942 for the approximately 250 Japanese Latin Americans brought to the U.S. from Central and South America, a "Colony" of 50 Victory Huts, with its own dining, lavatory, and laundry facilities, was established within the existing footprint of Seagoville Enemy Alien Detention Station. By September 1943, with few exceptions, all of the Japanese Latin American internees at Seagoville were repatriated, with some families transferred to the INS's largest facility dedicated to interning family units at Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp. From late September through the closure of the camp in May 1945, when the site was returned to the Bureau of Prisons, the remaining detainees were single women and childless couples.

One of the site's lasting features is a large mural—reportedly painted by internees—in the internment camp's hospital. According to oral history interviews with former Seagoville Federal Correction Institution staff, internees painted a landscape mural on a concrete retaining wall (light well), outside the building's basement floor, then serving as a dining area. Speculation is that this mural was painted as a visual escape for internees having lunch. From 2007 to 2013, the Texas Historical Commission (THC) researched confinement sites of Japanese, German, and Italian enemy aliens in Texas during World War II, and this is thought to be the only mural still in existence in the state.

The site's lasting legacy is evident not only in the historical record, the internee mural, oral history interviews, and historic photos, but also through the site's architectural significance. While not purposefully built for the detention of enemy aliens, the site began its service life as a confinement site located within a well-constructed district of buildings. In 2006, the THC concurred that the former confinement site is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Japanese "Colony" of Victory Huts, Seagoville Enemy Alien Detention Station,1942

The Third Geneva Convention stipulated that the U.S. must provide internees from different nations separate and equal access to living quarters.

—Treatment of Prisoners, 1929

Aerial, Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp,1945

CRYSTAL CITY (FAMILY) INTERNMENT CAMP
Zavala County

Many enemy aliens were fathers, and from the beginning the INS faced an ever increasing number of requests from wives and children volunteering internment to be reunited with the head of their households. Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp is unique because it was the only INS camp established specifically for families. In seeking a location to place this expected large confinement site, the INS looked for a facility that was removed from important war production areas and had quality water and electrical services. Noting the pressing need for the camp to open before the end of 1942, the INS went to a location identified in January 1942 as a good place for an internment camp. During the Great Depression, the U.S. Farm Security Administration had acquired land on the outskirts of the city.

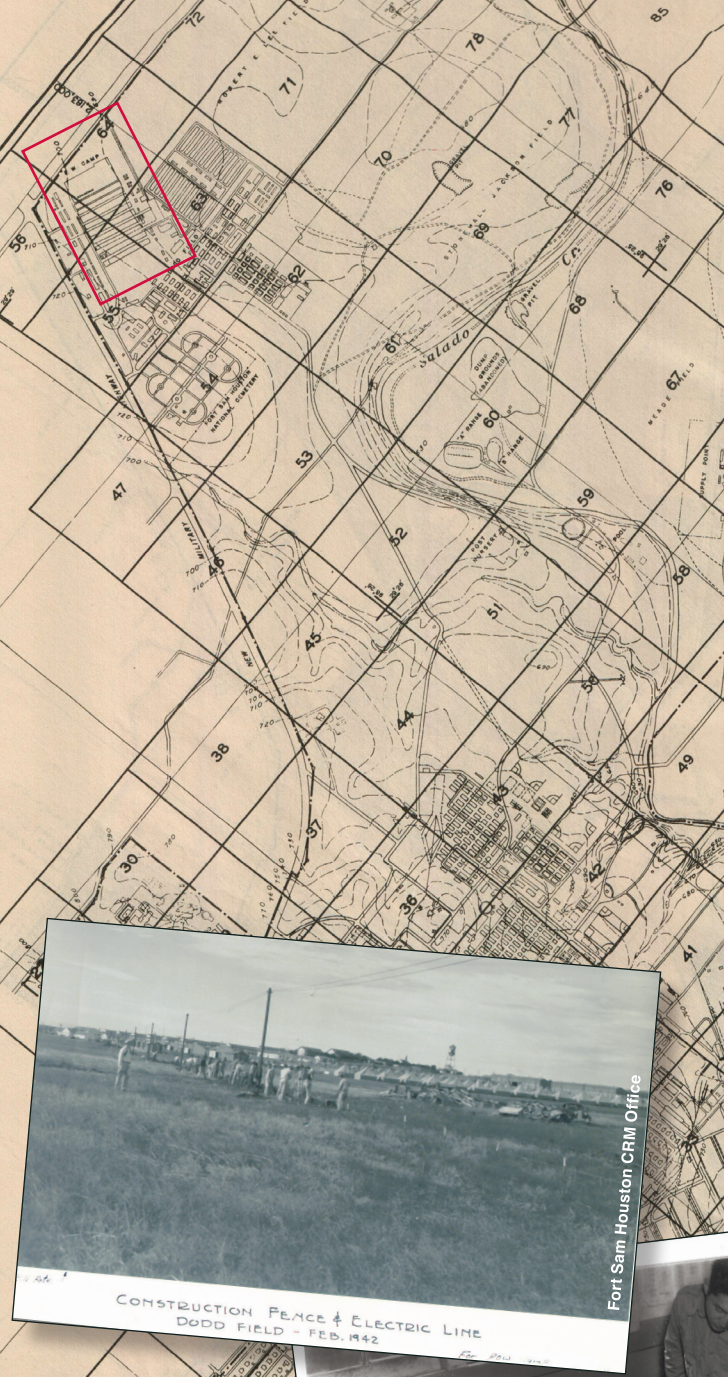
On December 12, 1942, the camp's first internees to arrive were German. On February 12, 1943, the first group of Latin Americans arrived—also Germans—deported from Costa Rica. On March 17, 1943, the first group of Japanese American internees arrived. Before closing, both the Kenedy and Seagoville camps transferred a portion of their internees here. The Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp closed on February 27, 1948, nearly 30 months after the end of the war on September 2, 1945. In addition to the camp's national significance, built to reunite enemy aliens and their families, this confinement site was the largest such wartime measure that brought together enemy aliens and American citizens representing multiple nationalities in one camp.

Although mentioned briefly in this brochure, please contact the THC directly for a free copy of the Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp brochure for a more detailed history of this confinement site.

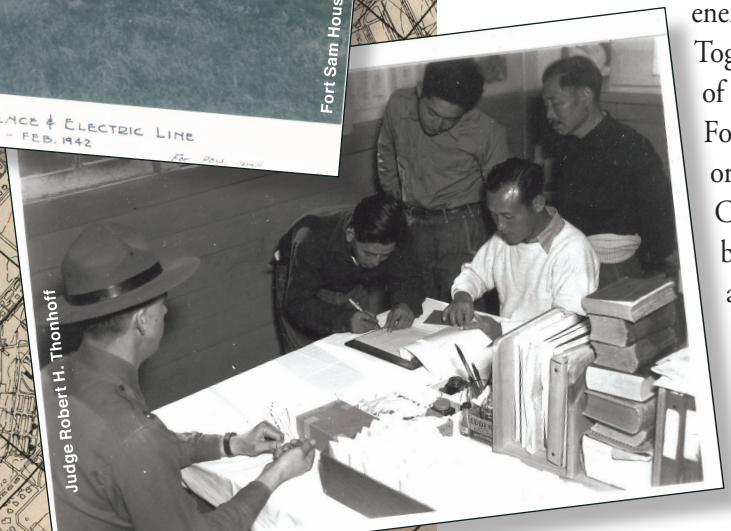
An Undertold Story

The U.S. implemented three programs to identify and, if necessary, detain civilians considered a threat to the country during the war years: the War Relocation Authority, the DOJ Alien Enemy Control Unit, and the Department of State's Special War Problems Division. In all three programs, citizens of their respective countries, legal resident aliens, and naturalized citizens were targeted alongside individuals legitimately identified as enemy aliens. Within weeks of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the DOJ took into custody several thousand Axis nationals. Although not legally administered in each case, and often spurred by prejudices, the action was intended to assure the American public that its government was taking firm steps to look after the internal safety of the nation. After arrest and detention, the U.S. looked toward the possibility of exchanging enemy aliens with Japan, Germany, and Italy. Between 1941 and 1945, the U.S. and its Allies suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties to the advancing Japanese and German armies across the globe. In addition to these combat casualties, U.S. and Allied civilians caught overseas were taken prisoner as countries fell to the Axis. In some cases, enemy aliens held in the U.S. were exchanged not only for detained civilians, but for severely injured service members.

The five internment camps in Texas: Dodd Field at Fort Sam Houston, Fort Bliss, Kenedy, Seagoville, and Crystal City each housed Japanese, German, and Italian enemy aliens, and a number of U.S. citizens. Together they make up an undertold part of U.S. and Texas World War II history. For more information on the Texas camps or to download a free copy of this or the Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp brochure please visit the THC's website at www.thc.state.tx.us.



Fort Sam Houston CRM Office



Judge Robert H. Thonhoff

Background: Red box notes the location of the detention station, Fort Sam Houston map; top photo: fence and electric line, Dodd Field, 1942; bottom photo: Japanese registration, Kenedy Enemy Alien Detention Station