

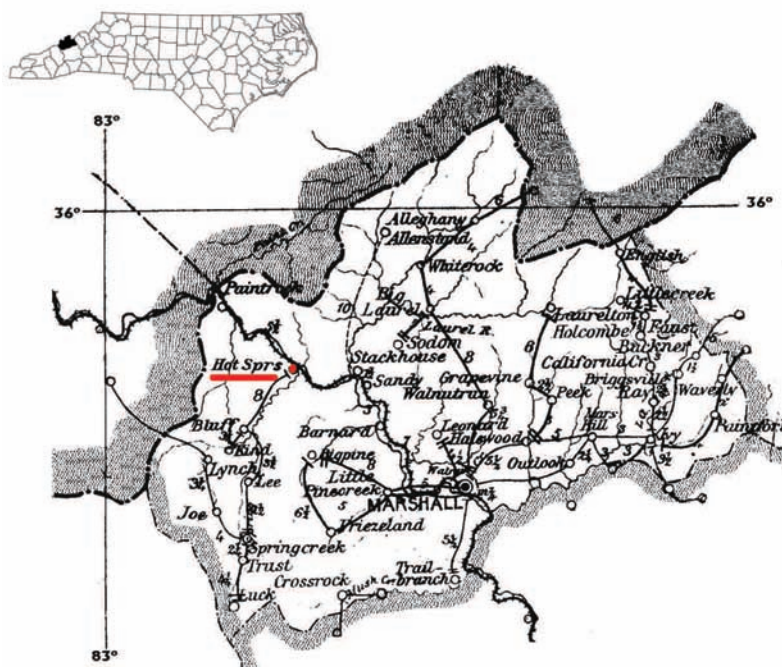
# Hot Springs, North Carolina — A World War I Internment Camp

by Richard Winter

It is hard to believe, but the beautiful location of Hot Springs, North Carolina, was, for a short time, an internment camp for Germans during World War I. This article will tell the story of the Hot Springs camp and illustrates some covers from the camp.

Hot Springs (**Figure 1**) is located in Madison County on the French Broad River about 26 miles north northwest of Asheville. The Appalachian Trail crosses Hot Springs at mile marker 114.5 (South to North), elevation 1,326 feet. Hot Springs is surrounded by the Pisgah National Forest. The town was originally named Warm Springs for a thermal springs located in the town that was discovered in 1778. The town has been a resort destination since the early 1800s.

The following information may be found on the web site for the Hot Springs:<sup>1</sup>



▲ **Figure 1**  
Detailed map of Madison County from *North Carolina Post Roads Map of 1911* with Hot Springs in red. Madison County is shown in black in the state map, upper left.

Hot Springs, North Carolina, a resort destination since the early 1800s, has long been renowned for its healing mineral springs and scenic mountain setting. Native Americans were the first to discover the 100-plus degree mineral water from which the Town of Hot Springs received its name. Traders from the colonies came next, and by 1778 the lame and the sick were traveling over the mountains to the hot springs for the healing waters. On March 19, 1791, William Nelson bought the hot springs property for “two hundred pounds in Virginia currency” and began catering to the visitors.

Buncombe Turnpike was completed along the French Broad River through Hot Springs (called Warm Springs at the time) in 1828, connecting Tennessee and Kentucky to the east coast. It was the superhighway of the South at the time. Farmers drove thousands of horses, cattle, hogs, and other livestock to markets in Charleston and Augusta on the Turnpike and stopped in Hot Springs to take the waters along the way. Recognizing the potential for tourism, James Patton of Asheville, bought the springs in 1831 and by 1837 had built the 350-room Warm Springs Hotel with thirteen tall columns commemorating the first colonies. Because of its size and grandeur, it was called Patton’s White House. Its dining room could seat 600. The next owner was James H. Rumbough, a stage coach operator, who bought the springs in 1862. In the hotel’s ballroom, second largest in the state, Frank Johnson, son of President Andrew Johnson, met his bride, Bessie Rumbough, daughter of the hotel owner.

The railroad reached the village in 1882, and it was necessary for Rumbough to enlarge his hotel. Two years later the hotel burned, and the springs and much of the town were sold to the Southern Improvement Company, a northern syndicate.

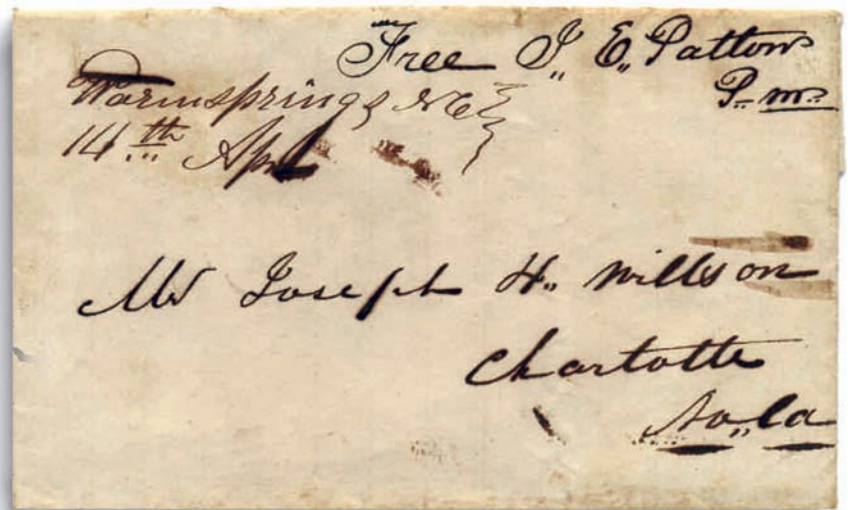
The Mountain Park Hotel was built in 1886, and a higher-temperature spring was discovered, prompting the company to change the town’s name from Warm Springs to Hot Springs. The Mountain Park was one of the most elegant resorts in the country during its heyday. It consisted of the 200-room hotel, a barn and stables, a spring house, and a bath house of sixteen marble pools, surrounded by landscaped lawns with croquet and tennis courts. The Mountain Park Hotel established the first organized golf club in the Southeast with a nine-hole course.

By May 1917, however, fewer and fewer people were taking the waters, and the Mountain Park Hotel and grounds were leased to the federal government as an internment camp for hundreds of German merchant sailors captured in U.S. harbors when war was declared. The internees were treated well by the townspeople, and several returned to visit after the war.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hotspringsnc.org/>

## The Post Office

The Warm Springs post office opened in Buncombe County when William C. Neilson, Jr. was approved as postmaster on 24 April 1801. **Figure 2** shows a folded letter dated 14 April 1845 from Warm Springs, Buncombe County. The postmaster of Warm Springs at the time was John E. Patton, whose signature appears in the upper right corner. By endorsing letters with their signature, postmasters were allowed free postage on mail. On 27 January 1851, Madison County was formed from Buncombe and Yancey Counties and Warm Springs became a part of Madison County.<sup>2</sup> **Figure 3** illustrates an envelope from Warm Springs dated 4 May 1875. On 21 June 1886, the name of the post office was changed to Hot Springs, when the town changed its name. Presumably this was because a higher-temperature spring was found. A 24 November 1895 envelope with the business marking of the Mountain Park Hotel in Hot Springs, the location which would become the internment camp, is shown **Figure 4**.

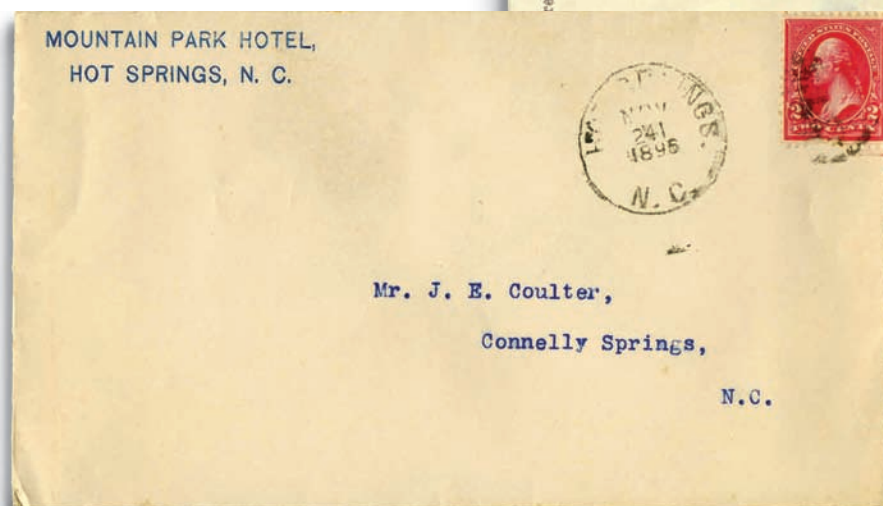


▲ **Figure 2**

14 April 1845 folded letter from Warm Springs, Buncombe County postmaster John E. Patton to Charlotte, N.C. sent free of postage.

▼ **Figure 3**

4 May 1875 envelope from Warm Springs, Madison County to New York City. Eleven years later, the name of the post office would change to Hot Springs.



◀ **Figure 4**

24 November 1895 envelope from Hot Springs to Connolly Springs, N.C., with the business marking of the Mountain Park Hotel, soon to become the location of the internment camp.

<sup>2</sup> David Leroy Corbitt, *The Formation of the North Carolina Counties 1663–1943* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Division of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1987), p. 144.



**Figure 5** illustrates the picture side of a 1910 post card showing this beautiful resort hotel as it appeared before the internment camp significantly altered the grounds.

### The Internment Camp

On 6 April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson announced that the United States was entering World War I, which had been in progress since 1 August 1914, when Germany declared war on Russia. German shipping in the ports of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and New Orleans was interned as prizes of war and the crews placed in custody as “enemy aliens.” These were not prisoners of war but civilian internees who would spend the remaining 19 months of the war in American internment camps. On 9 May 1917, Frederick C. Howe, Commissioner of Immigration, announced that “the 1,200 Germans interned at Ellis Island [New York harbor] soon would be removed to an open-air internment camp selected for them at Kanuga Lake estate, midway between Asheville and Hendersonville, N.C.”<sup>3</sup> The recreational camp at Kanuga Lake had been selected because of its location in the pine forest and that cold weather was limited to only two months of the year.<sup>4</sup> As Secretary of Agriculture W.B. Wilson stated:<sup>5</sup>

Under the Hague treaty this government is empowered to work the interned men, or to farm them out to individuals or corporations. When worked by the government they will receive the pay of soldiers, and when farmed out will be remunerated at prevailing wage rates. After making deduction for their maintenance, the interned men will be given at the time of their discharge by the government whatever sums they shall have earned. The men in the camp in North Carolina will be used to cultivate the tract, and will be farmed out for lumbering and road building. In view of the necessity for guards these two latter occupations appear to be the only ones in which they can be conveniently worked by private capital. Arrangements have been made already with the department of agriculture for the employment of a number of men at road building on the Vanderbilt tract that adjoins the camp which has been taken over by that department as a forest preserve.

The camp could accommodate about 2,000 men. A protest was immediately filed by George Stephens of Charlotte, who had a financial interest in the Kanuga Lake site and did not want the prisoners sent there. A dispute over the property rights caused the Labor department to cancel their plans for Lake Kanuga.

By 26 May 1917, Secretary of Labor Wilson authorized the rental of the Mountain Park Hotel at Hot Springs, North Carolina.<sup>6</sup> This new location was about 45 miles north northwest of the Lake Kanuga site. The hotel property contained 160 acres located along the French Broad River.



▲ **Figure 5**

Post card showing the resort Mountain Park Hotel in December 1910 before the camp was established.

<sup>3</sup> *New York Evening Post*, 9 May 1917.

<sup>4</sup> *Raleigh Times*, 10 May 1917.

<sup>5</sup> *Asheville Times*, 10 May 1917

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 May 1917.

Along with another 500 acres of an adjoining tract, the expectation was that there would be no difficulties in accommodating the German internees. The well-tended lawns of the Mountain Park Hotel soon were filled with rows of quickly built single-story structures sheathed in tarpaper. Eleven barracks with accompanying lavatory buildings, mess hall, cook house, and bath houses were constructed in the upper lawn over the famous golf course. The grounds were torn up with water lines and sewer pipes, while overhead electric and telephone lines were added. On the lower lawn was built an office building and five more barracks buildings and lavatories. Around the perimeter was built a combination of board and wire fencing topped with barbed wire.<sup>7</sup>

The town of Hot Springs was on the Southern Railroad between Morristown, Tennessee, and Asheville.<sup>8</sup> On 8 June 1917, the first small unit of 18 men arrived at the internment camp. By 29 June 1918, 2,314 “aliens” had been transferred to the U.S. Internment Station at Hot Springs.<sup>9</sup> They had come from New York, New Orleans, Boston, Philadelphia, Jacksonville, Florida, Atlanta, San Francisco, and Manila, Philippine Islands. Many were officers and crews of German merchant vessels of the Hamburg American and the North German Lloyd Lines, such as the *S.S. George Washington*, *Friedrich der Grosse*, *Barbarossa*, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, *Prinzes Irene*, *Wittekind*, *Amerika*, *Kronprinzessin Cecelie*, *Präsident*, and *Vaterland*. Ship captains, crews, and even a 35-member German Imperial Band, caught in China during the 1914 Allied capture of Tsingtao, a German harbor, ended up in this camp. The latter turned out to be a great benefit to the local people. The band gave concerts to the internees, and their concerts could be heard over the walls of the camp by the local people and visitors. The officers generally were housed in the Mountain Park Hotel and the crew members in the barracks built on the hotel’s lawns.

Jacqueline Burgin Painter explains that the internment camp brought significant economic changes to Hot Springs.<sup>10</sup> Money immediately went into the pockets of local men hired for camp construction and the hiring of guards. Seventy five to one hundred civilian guards were employed in three eight-hour shifts. Additional jobs went to messengers, matrons,

mechanics, watchmen, commissary clerks, and inspectors. Men were hired not only from Hot Springs but also from the surrounding towns. While most of the material for the camp was purchased in bulk from government suppliers, incidentals were bought locally as well as electricity, telephone service, ice, milk, butter, and vegetables to augment those grown by the prisoners on the grounds. Prisoner occupations ranged from butcher, barber, boatswain, musician, machinist, and masseur.

Twenty seven German wives and nineteen children moved to Hot Springs, either renting houses or rooms to be near their interned loved ones.<sup>11</sup> The families were allowed to go and come freely and the children were enrolled in the local school. The German families were readily absorbed into the community and enjoyed.

In the spring of 1918, the government decided that it would be prudent to remove the internees from Hot Springs and place them in the custody of the War Department at the Army camp of Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, a small town close to Chattanooga, Tennessee, which was housing all classes of prisoners. An 18 June 1918 article in the *Asheville Citizen* indicated that the move was underway and would be completed by the end of the month. This was a harsh blow for the German internees at Hot Springs, who enjoyed a peaceful and productive internment at the resort site in the North Carolina Mountains. The shift from civilian to military control was not looked forward to by the German internees. The Hot Springs location was to be used by the Medical Department as a convalescent center for American servicemen from the French battlefields.<sup>12</sup> The move was delayed until August 1918, when a large number of German internees became ill with typhoid fever. It was decided to keep the ill prisoners in Hot Springs until they were well again and then complete the move to Camp Oglethorpe. By 31 August 1918, all 2,124 alien prisoners had been relocated to Fort Oglethorpe except those ill with typhoid fever that remained in North Carolina or were released and transferred to other locations. Of that number, 26 died of typhoid fever and were buried in cemeteries at Hot Springs or Asheville.<sup>13</sup> An additional 13 internees died of other causes.

<sup>7</sup> Jacqueline Burgin Painter, *The German Invasion of Western North Carolina, A Picture History* (Johnson City, Tennessee: The Overmountain Press, 1992), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> The Southern Railway was created in 1894 and included the Richmond and Danville Railroad which served the western region of North Carolina.

<sup>9</sup> Painter, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 25–30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

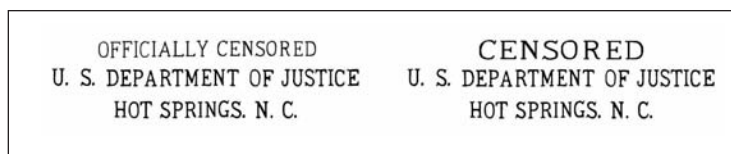
<sup>13</sup> 159 sick internees were moved to U.S. General Hospital #12 at Biltmore near Asheville, where there were better facilities to treat the sick. About a dozen internees were still at the Biltmore Army hospital by December 1918.

## The Covers

According to John Hardies and Wilfred N. Broderick, the Censorship Board, formed by Executive order No. 2729-A of 12 October 1917, applied postal censorship to mail from the civilian internment camps going abroad.<sup>14</sup> Two different handstamps, shown in **Figure 6**, were applied at the Hot Springs Internment Camp in magenta ink. Mail to U.S. destinations did not show censor handstamps. Hardies and Broderick show only the marking without the word “OFFICIALLY” before the word “CENSORED” on the top line. This marking is reported in both serif lettering and san-serif lettering, but I have not seen an example of the latter.<sup>15</sup>

The Hague Convention of 1907, Article 16, stated that “Letters, money orders, and valuables, as well as parcels by post, intended for prisoners of war, or dispatched by them, shall be exempt from all postal duties in the countries of origin and destination, as well as in the countries they pass through.”<sup>16</sup> This was consistent with the same mail rules established for prisoners of war by the UPU Congress of Rome in 1906. While both of these were silent about civilian internees, in practice the same privileges were applied.

Covers from the Hot Springs Internment Camp are particularly difficult to find, perhaps not rare, but decidedly uncommon. I have seen only 11 covers, from which a few observations can be made. Of these covers, all but three were post cards. Some of the post cards have interesting pictures from the camp as will be seen later. Adhesives were used on only the three post cards to United States addresses. The post card rate increased on 2 November 1917 from 1¢ to 2¢, a war emergency rate. In the United Kingdom, mail from prisoners of war and internees often was paid the inland rate with adhesives to accelerate getting them into the postal system.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps a similar practice was used here. Since only three examples were to United States addresses, one to Hot Springs and two from Hot Springs, I can not be certain. There were no adhesives on any covers to overseas destinations.



▲ **Figure 6**

Enlarged tracings of the two different censor markings used at the Hot Springs N.C. internment camp, always in magenta ink.

By April 1918 the Hot Springs post office shifted from a hand canceler (metal duplex with a seven horizontal bars in an ellipse killer) to an International Machine Company Hand-Driven machine cancel, Type AT/S 2721. I have seen only one example of the censor marking, **OFFICIALLY CENSORED/U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE/ HOT SPRINGS, N.C.**, which was used in September 1917. The remaining censor markings do not have the word “OFFICIALLY” in the first line. Each of the censored covers from 1918 has a handstamp **INTERNEED CAMP** struck in the location where an adhesive might have been placed. This was consistent with the practice of not requiring postage on internee mail (**Figure 7**). The color is the same as the censor markings. Each of the overseas covers except the one to Chile in September 1917 has this marking. From May 1918, a rubber handstamp date in the same color ink as the censor markings was struck in the lower left corner of each cover. This date was either the day of or a day later than the item was prepared. The censored dates were generally 9 to 10 days before

the postmark dates on the covers indicating that they were sent to the post office in batches much later than written. By



▲ **Figure 7**

“INTERNEED CAMP” handstamp in magenta ink struck where adhesive normally would have been placed suggesting the adhesive was not needed.

<sup>14</sup> *The Postal History of the AEF, 1917-1923*, second edition, edited by Theo. Van Dam (Fishkill, New York: War Cover Club, 1990), Chapter 10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> *Laws of War : Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague IV)*; October 18, 1907, Art. 16. (<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/lawofwar/hague04.htm>)

<sup>17</sup> Correspondence with Graham Mark, Editor and Librarian, Civil Censorship Study Group.



June 1918, envelopes and blank post cards were used that had printed inscriptions on the left side stating they were provided by the “Y.M.C.A./Aid/for/Interned Aliens.” The printed information on them also has a place for the name of the internee, his Division or Barracks No., the date with

“1918” pre-printed, and the name of the internment camp, providing return address information. Apparently these items were distributed to the different internment camps by the Y.M.C.A. The following examples will demonstrate the appearance of Hot Springs Internment Camp mail:

**Figure 8**

Front and reverse of 14 September 1918 picture post card from German internee showing pre-internment camp picture of the Mountain Park Hotel. On the reverse in faint purple ink are “OFFICIAL CENSOR...” and “INTERNED CAMP” markings. This post card is to Corral, Chile. Note the duplex circular datestamp of Hot Springs, upper right.





▲ Figure 9 ▶

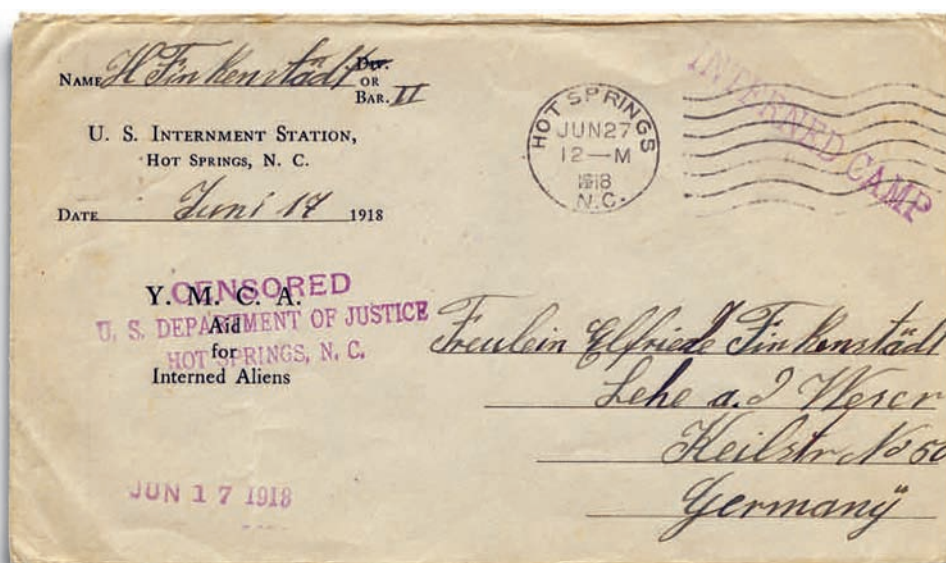
3 April 1918 picture post card from German internee to New York City address. Note the Hot Springs machine cancel in use by April 1918 and the absence of censor markings. To the right is the picture side of the card showing a church in the German village constructed by the prisoners.



◀ Figure 10

15 May 1918 picture post card from German internee to Görlitz, Germany. Note that the censor date is one day later but the postmark date is nine days later. The "INTERNEED CAMP" hand-stamp is where the adhesive would normally be canceled by the Hot Springs machine cancel.





◀ Figure 11

17 June 1918 Y.M.C.A printed envelope from German internee to Lehe a. Weser, Germany. Note the printed envelope has a place for all the required return address information. This letter was censored the same day as written but posted 10 days later.



◀ Figure 12 ▶

14 June 1918 picture post card from German internee to Antwerp, Belgium, showing normal magenta ink censor (upper left) and "INTERED CAMP" (upper right) markings with censor date in lower left corner. Note the Hot Springs machine cancel was applied 10 days after post card was censored. The reverse shows a photograph of a carousel of swinging chairs built by the prisoners, one of numerous projects built in a German village on the grounds.





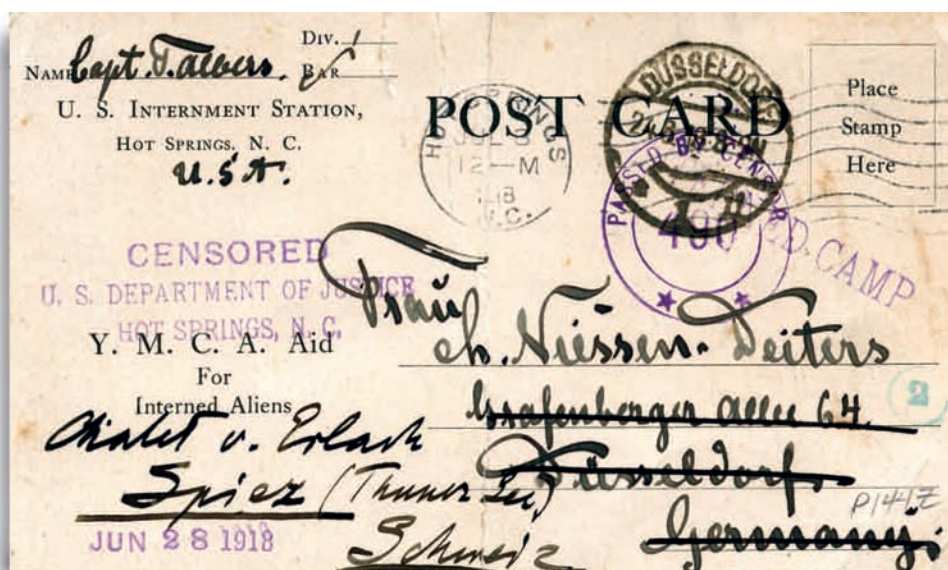


Figure 13

28 June 1918 Y.M.C.A. printed post card from German internee to Düsseldorf, Germany, redirected to Spiez, Switzerland. In addition to the censor markings found on other mail from the camp, in the upper right corner is a purple censor marking from the civilian censorship station in New York City, "PASSED BY CENSOR/490/\* \*."

Through the courtesy of the Madison County Public Library, we have access to pictures from the internment camp. They were taken by photographer Adolph Thierbach, an internee. He put his photographs along with his captions in an album, which now resides in the library. Digital images from this album have been made available by the library on their web site at <http://www.ibiblio.org/ww1gd/Index.html>. A sampling of pictures from this site documents part of the German village constructed by the prisoners as follows:



Figure 14

German village street scene with church.



Figure 15

Swiss cabin constructed in the German village.





◀ **Figure 16**

Another house in the German village.



▲ **Figure 17**

German Imperial Band captured in 1914 at Tsingtao, China, and sent to the Hot Springs internment camp in 1918. They regularly gave concerts for the internees that also were enjoyed by the town's people.



◀ **Figure 18**

Small chapel in the German village.

I wish to thank Tony Crumbley, Ed Dubin, and Al Kugel for sharing covers from their collections with me in this study of the Hot Springs internment camp postal history. For additional information I recommend Jacqueline Burgin Painter's delightful pictorial history of the camp, *The German Invasion of Western North Carolina*, cited earlier. Included in her book is an excellent map produced by the U.S. Government of the grounds of the internment camp alongside the French Broad River. ■