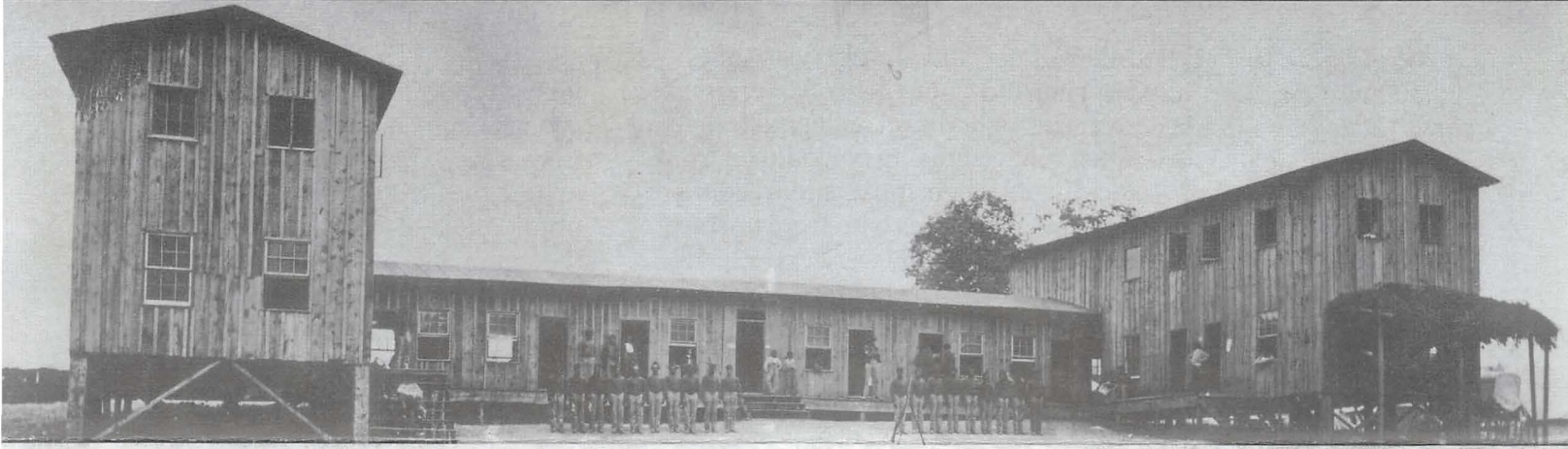


Camp Nelson

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Camp Nelson National Monument



Throughout history, people have desired a better life for themselves and their families. In the 1860s, Kentucky was no different. Enslaved and formerly-enslaved people - men, women and children - flocked to a Union Army supply depot to fight against slavery and for the right of self-determination. Camp Nelson tells their story of finding freedom.

Establishment

The Union Army needed a strategic place to build, store and repair the tools of war: wagons, guns, food, uniforms, horses and mules. In April 1863, Major General Ambrose Burnside chose a peninsula of land formed by a bend in the Kentucky River and protected by high bluffs. It was

near cities and on major transport lines. By June, the sprawling 4,000-acre site had been named for Major General William "Bull" Nelson, a division commander in the Army of the Ohio and a native Kentuckian.

The Supply Depot

Camp Nelson was an impressive operation. It was protected by earthen forts, built mostly by impressed enslaved labor - those not allowed to join the Army, but forced to work for it anyway. Over 300 buildings and tents housed depots for weapons and other supplies, a recruitment

center, provost marshal prison, hospital, and bakery. Steam power brought water up 470 feet from the Kentucky River to a 500,000 gallon reservoir. The camp's stables and corrals could hold 14,000 horses and mules. But Camp Nelson's story is bigger than the depot.



Wagon, shoeing and harness shops

Enlistment of US Colored Troops

Kentucky was not in rebellion against the United States. Slavery was still legal here. To meet state enlistment quotas, the Army began recruiting African American soldiers, but only free men or those whose owners allowed them to enlist.

Fighting to end slavery was a powerful incentive to join the Army. It became even more so in May 1864 when any black man, enslaved or free, could enlist. Camp Nelson soon became the nation's third-largest US Colored Troops (USCT) recruiting center.

By the time slavery ended in December 1865, roughly 10,000 African American men had enlisted or trained in the Union Army and claimed their freedom here.



"...this is better than slavery, though I do march in line at the tap of a drum. I felt freedom in my bones, and when I saw the American eagle with outspread wings upon the American flag with the motto E pluribus unum, the thought came to me 'Give me liberty or give me death.' Then all fear banished."

Sergeant Elijah Marrs
12th US Colored Heavy Artillery

African American Refugees at Camp Nelson



Marker at Camp Nelson Cemetery No. 1

Normally, reaching a place like Camp Nelson in a Confederate state would have offered protection to enslaved people. But Kentucky was not a Confederate state.

Many of the African American men pouring into Camp Nelson to enlist in the Army brought their families with them. They believed that they would be freed, too. Eligible men could gain freedom by enlisting, but slaves who were unable to serve in the Army were expected to return to their slaveholders. Most refused to leave and stayed at Camp Nelson as refugees living in tents.

Army officials tried to break up the camps, but they re-formed repeatedly. In late 1864, over 400 refugees were expelled into bitter, below-freezing weather and their makeshift homes were destroyed.

Joseph Miller, USCT infantry, stated that his wife and children, including a sick son, were expelled. He did not know where they were taken. That night, he found them in a black meeting house in Nicholasville, 6 miles away. They were huddled with others in a similar situation. The building was cold, and nobody had received any food since they were taken away. His son was dead from exposure.

More than 100 others also died. Newspapers reported the tragedy, prompting anger nationwide.

Camp Nelson Refugee Home

Negative press and a drop in recruitment of African American soldiers led the Army to reverse its refugee policy. In January 1865, the government-sponsored "Home for Colored Refugees" opened at Camp Nelson. It included a mess hall, a school, barracks for single women and the sick, and duplex family cottages.

Families who had been turned away or forced out of the camp were allowed to resettle in the new refugee home, entitled to sanctuary, but not freedom. Finally, on March 3, 1865, Congress freed the wives and children of USCT soldiers and provided legal protection for the refugees.

This law was also an incentive for more African Americans to join the Army.

When the Civil War ended a few months later, the War Department began closing Camp Nelson. After so much upheaval in their lives, a small number of African Americans chose to stay. The small village called Ariel grew at the refugee home site.

Those buildings are now gone. In their place is the modern community of Hall, where descendants of refugees and soldiers still live today. Camp Nelson is in their blood.



Camp Nelson Home for Colored Refugees

Visiting Camp Nelson National Monument

Established in 2018, Camp Nelson National Monument allows visitors to reflect on the African American journey from enslavement to citizenship and remember the lives of those who contributed to the story of Camp Nelson, the Home for Colored Refugees and the community of Hall. The park is jointly operated by the National Park Service and Jessamine County.

Facilities developed by Jessamine County remain open Tuesdays - Saturdays, 9:00am to 5:00pm Eastern Time. These facilities include a visitor center with a museum and film. A reconstructed barracks and

the Oliver Perry "White House," the only building remaining from the period, are open as staffing permits. Over 4 miles of unpaved trails, earthworks, fortifications and outdoor exhibits detailing the Camp's history are open daily dawn to dusk. Admission is free.

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