

Men in a cavalry unit of the US Colored Troops stand for review outside their barracks at Camp Nelson. More than 10,000 Black soldiers trained here.  
NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## Camp Nelson provides a window into America's complicated soul.

The year was 1863. The United States Civil War was entering its third year and the US Army needed a secure place for a new supply depot. Army engineers scouted south from Nicholasville. They came to this plateau and stopped. This was it. The land dropped steeply on three sides to the Kentucky River and Hickman Creek. The engineers quickly designed fortifications to protect the north end. (See the map on the other side.)

Camp Nelson served as a supply depot and staging area for operations in the surrounding region. It featured 300 buildings, including barracks, hospitals, workshops, stables, and mess halls. (Depot details are below.) From here, the US Army launched its successful campaign to liberate the people of East Tennessee from the Confederacy.

Military campaigns soon shifted to other parts of the country, and Camp Nelson evolved into a new role. It became a major recruitment center for the US Colored Troops (USCT). Thousands of Black men freed themselves from enslavement by enlisting. (See "Soldiers" below for how this happened.)

At Camp Nelson, Black soldiers were joined by their families, who were not freed. Their status was uncertain and dangerous until a tragedy brought their plight to national attention. (See "Refugees" about the hardships they endured.)

After the war, the army shut down Camp Nelson. Most refugees left Kentucky to search for new opportunities. A few stayed here, establishing a community called Ariel on the site of the refugee camp. Now known as Hall, its residents still include descendants of USCT soldiers and refugees.

The army disbanded the USCT after the war but soon formed permanent Black-only regiments. Many veterans enlisted again. Later nicknamed Buffalo Soldiers, some became the first rangers in America's national parks.

Camp Nelson National Monument is a portal to understanding how the Civil War inspired the fight for civil rights. This quiet landscape holds the stories of soldiers and refugees, freed and enslaved, attempting to forge their place in America and to secure their rights as humans and citizens. The fight for civil rights continues today.

*Come, look through the window with us.*

### ARMY DEPOT

**1** **HARNESS AND SHOEOING SHOPS** Farriers bend to the task of protecting horse and mule hooves with iron shoes.  
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Camp Nelson served as a major supply base for the US Army. A constant flow of people, animals, wagons, and cannons from central Kentucky stopped here on their way to the battlefields of Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia. The army also trained and equipped thousands of soldiers at this base.

The US Army relied on soldiers, civilians, and enslaved people to construct and operate the depot. Camp Nelson teemed with activity, and at times its population rose higher than Lexington's. Each day saw a variety of people coming on to the base to work or otherwise interact with the military. They included merchants, shop owners, photographers, leather

workers, horse trainers, teachers, preachers, doctors, and nurses.

The base also provided shelter for White refugees fleeing the war. Many found their way into military service at Camp Nelson. The army organized them into regiments of infantry, mounted infantry, cavalry, and artillery.

The US Army's liberation of Knoxville, Tennessee, in September 1863 showed Camp Nelson's important role in military success. However, the supply lines proved too long and difficult to maintain. As a result, Camp Nelson's mission evolved from supply depot to recruitment center for the US Colored Troops (USCT).

### SOLDIERS

**2** **SOLDIERS HOME AND CAMP OFFICES** Up to 300 wounded men could be cared for here before going back to war or being discharged.  
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Kentucky was a border state during the Civil War—it remained in the United States but maintained the institution of slavery. President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, defined a path toward freedom for enslaved people in most seceded (Confederate) states. It did not apply to people in the border states of Kentucky, Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, and West Virginia.

However, Lincoln's proclamation provided a new option for Black men in Kentucky starting in 1864. If they volunteered for the USCT, they would be emancipated—if they could get to an army base. Many were assaulted, murdered, or returned to

their enslavers. Even so, hundreds made it to Camp Nelson each day.

Most centers recruited for only one USCT branch, the infantry. Camp Nelson was different. It organized over 10,000 men into regiments of artillery, cavalry, and infantry. Some would fight in campaigns, including in Virginia at Saltville, Richmond, Petersburg, and Appomattox.

At Camp Nelson, the army also organized the 124th US Colored Infantry for boys and older men who could not enlist due to age. They served as guards and in other positions around the camp. Here they had refuge from enslavement.

### REFUGEES

**3** **ARMY-BUILT COTTAGES** Soldiers' families pose outside their cottages. Not everyone had such sturdy housing.  
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Camp Nelson's third major role in the Civil War was as a refugee camp. Thousands of civilians and enslaved people were being displaced by the war, and many found their way here.

The army's treatment of the refugees depended on their race. White refugees were provided shelter, food, and medical treatment. Black refugees, including the families of USCT soldiers, were considered fugitives who could be captured back into slavery or removed from camp.

The army forcibly removed Black refugees from Camp Nelson at least eight times in 1864. The most tragic incident occurred in late November. Over 400 people were

forced from the camp during a winter storm. As a result, more than 100 people died. Most were women and children.

The incident received national media attention. In response, the US Army built the "Home for Colored Refugees" at Camp Nelson (below). The complex included a school and hospital. Civilian charitable societies provided education and religious services.

After the base closed in 1866, Reverend John G. Fee and his wife Matilda helped Black veterans and their families purchase land for the community of Ariel. Now called Hall, the community is next to the Fee Memorial Church. The church is part of Camp Nelson National Monument.

See the map on the other side for locations of photos of 1-4.



**4** **HOME FOR COLORED REFUGEES** Unlike White families who followed their soldiers, Black families were not welcomed at Camp Nelson. The

November 1864 tragedy forced the army to build a barracks and about 100 cottages (center rear and upper right), then put up tents.

Some people built shanties (far left). Whatever their shelter, thousands of Black refugees were taking steps toward freedom.  
UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

# Explore Camp Nelson



Luminarias are placed in memory of a tragic night in November 1864. The US Army forced over 400 Black refugees to leave Camp Nelson during a winter storm. More than 100 people died.

## Why Here?

Almost all of Camp Nelson's 300-plus structures are gone, but the landscape remains. It and these maps show why army engineers chose this site. They had been scouting south from Nicholasville along a turnpike (now US 27) for a site easy to defend and with access to the south. On this hilly plateau, rocky palisades to the west and south plunge over 400 feet to the Kentucky River. To the east, the land drops steeply to Hickman Creek. And a bridge led south—the only river crossing in this part of the state. To secure the north, engineers designed earthen fortifications that are still visible today.

The people of Jessamine County knew Camp Nelson was an important part of US history. In the 1990s local residents and scholars collaborated to protect the current site as a county park. Camp Nelson became the 418th unit of the National Park Service in 2018.

## Civil War to Civil Rights

You can learn more about the Civil War and civil rights at many other National Park Service sites. In Kentucky visit Abraham Lincoln Birthplace National Historical Park, Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, and Mill Springs Battlefield National Monument. In Ohio visit Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers National Monument. You can visit these and other sites online at [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov) or with the NPS App.

## Visiting Camp Nelson

**The monument has three sections to visit:** Start at the visitor center, which has a short film and exhibits. The reconstructed barracks give you a glimpse of army life. Trails take you to earthworks and other sites. This area also includes the Oliver Perry "White House," the only historic structure remaining from the Civil War era. It is closed for renovations.

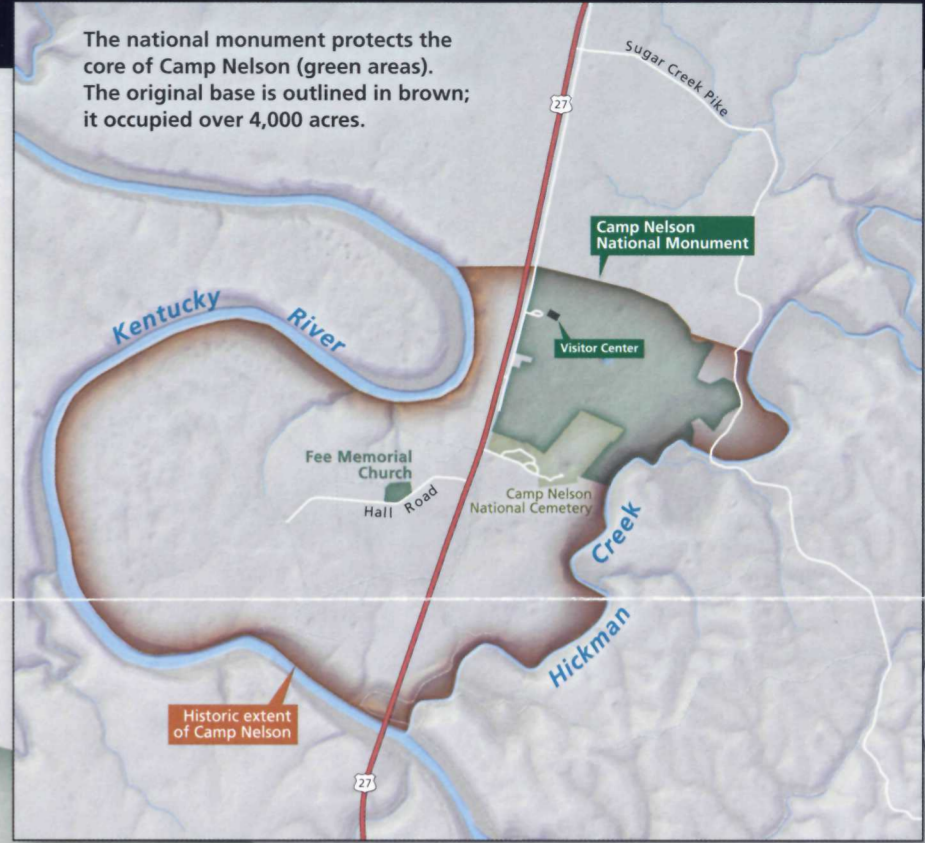
Fort Jones (Eastern Fortifications) can be reached by trails from the visitor center. Exhibits describe camp operations.

Fee Memorial Church, built on the site of the "Home for Colored Refugees," is the farthest south of the park's sites. An exhibit explains the refugee camp and town of Ariel.

Also visit Camp Nelson National Cemetery, run by the US Department of Veterans Affairs. It includes graves of US soldiers who died here and at other nearby Civil War sites. Open daily dawn to dusk.

Park grounds and trails are open dawn to dusk. The visitor center is typically open 9 am to 5 pm. Check the park website or NPS App for seasonal changes.

Find more visitor information at the bottom right of this page.



The national monument protects the core of Camp Nelson (green areas). The original base is outlined in brown; it occupied over 4,000 acres.

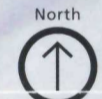
**P** Parking

0.5mi 0.8km Distance indicator

Camp Nelson National Monument

Trail

Historic Site (flag color matches color on ground)



0 0.25 Kilometer 0.25 Mile

Home for Colored Refugees site



See the other side for photos of sites 1-4. Photos for sites 5-10 are below.

5



**REFUGEE SCHOOL** Over 100 students and teachers pose by the school, built in 1865. Reverend John Fee hired the teachers and organized the classes as part of his missionary work at Camp Nelson.

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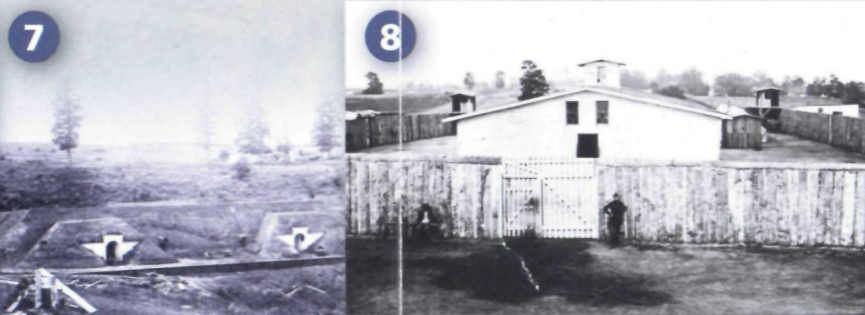
6



**AMBULANCE YARD** A grim reminder of war, dozens of ambulance wagons wait. What battlefield would they go to next? Who would they bring back?

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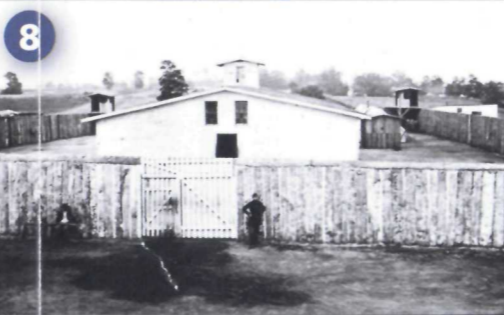
7



**POWDER MAGAZINE** This earth-covered structure stores weapons and barrels of gun powder. It was set deliberately far from barracks and shops in case it exploded.

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8



**PRISON** Like any city, Camp Nelson needed a secure place for people who broke the law. Soldiers and civilians were kept behind this ten-foot-tall fence while serving their sentences.

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**BAKERY** Workers take a break from the hot ovens inside. They baked enough fresh bread each day for the over 10,000 people who lived and worked at Camp Nelson.

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10



**PUMP STATION** A steam-powered engine pushed water from the Kentucky River up 470 feet to the camp. As much as 150 gallons a minute poured into a reservoir.

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**DEMONSTRATIONS** Members of the 12th US Colored Heavy Artillery Reactivated demonstrate skills used during the Civil War. Their unit keeps alive the history of the USCT soldiers of Camp Nelson.

NPS

## CAMP NELSON NATIONAL MONUMENT

### Visiting the Park

**Stay Safe and Protect the Park** Stay on the trails and keep off the earthworks. • All dogs must be leashed and waste properly disposed. • Be aware of biting insects and poison ivy near the trails. • Seek shelter if thunderstorms approach; lightning is common. • Private lands surround the monument; respect landowner privacy. • Metal detectors and relic hunting are prohibited. • Federal laws protect all natural and cultural features.

**Accessibility** We strive to make facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. Check the park website for details.

**More Information**  
Camp Nelson National Monument  
6614 Danville Loop 2 Rd.  
Nicholasville, KY 40356  
859-881-5716; [www.nps.gov/cane](http://www.nps.gov/cane)

### Emergencies call 911

Use the official NPS App to guide your visit. Follow us on social media.

To learn more about national parks, visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

**National Park Foundation**  
Join the park community.  
[www.nationalparks.org](http://www.nationalparks.org)

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