



Few Civil War-era reminders are found today at Camp Nelson, which spans some 400 acres above the bluffs of the Kentucky River.





NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION



CAMP NELSON PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

Clockwise from above, barracks housed African American soldiers; the Oliver Perry House was confiscated by the Union Army; a black-smith shop and a coal storage structure attested to the business of war.

# HONORING THEIR SERVICE



NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Camp Nelson, a nearly forgotten army supply depot and refuge for slaves, receives National Monument status

By Maryjean Wall  
Photos by David Stephenson

# HONORING THEIR SERVICE



Advocates hope that Camp Nelson's national monument designation will attract more visitors. Inset, the Oliver Perry House today serves as a museum.

**F**rom high above the Kentucky River over the bluffs, some 5,000 to 6,000 horses and mules joined the cacophony that sounded daily from Camp Nelson like scattershot across the cliffs.

These were the sounds of war approaching.  
War was a noisy business.

The Civil War and all its supply sources imposed the unfamiliar sounds of industry on the countryside, with hammers striking metal, nails hitting wood, and steam-powered sawmills piercing the stillness with a whining to match the screams of livestock crowded with strangers into unfamiliar pens.

Local farmers watched with curiosity and concern. Kentucky had barely recovered from the bloody presence of battle less than a year previously at Perryville. Now in 1863, six miles south of Nicholasville, a city of men and animals had sprung up almost overnight bringing all the accoutrements of war with them.

What this meant for the locale was anyone's guess.

The Northern army announced Camp Nelson's purpose as a supply depot, a hospital, and a recruiting ground. Federals requisitioned property from landowners, promising to pay rent later, and quickly assumed control of 4,000 acres. Looming large was the army's immediate intention: to supply a Union campaign to capture Knoxville, Tennessee, from the Confederacy. Later, Camp Nelson would supply Major Gen. William T. Sherman's 1864 Atlanta campaign, as well as the Union's 1864 Saltville, Virginia, campaign and the 1864 Southwestern Virginia campaign.





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Campaigns at the front required a steady supply of men, war horses, mules, and numerous other items right down to hay for the horses and uniforms and kits the soldiers wore. There were blacksmiths, some 62 of them, along with 27 harness makers, 415 teamsters, cooks, plumbers, 19 wagon masters, 22 wagon makers, and an ever-widening variety of civilian laborers. While bringing in all these people and supplies, the army could not have hidden its presence if it had wanted. Soon, in a flurry of construction, it raised 300 buildings at Camp Nelson. Over time, more than 8,000 soldiers passed through this place.

Civilians hired to assist the army became privy to fascinating information: The camp was building corrals to accommodate 12,000 mules and war horses, with stables for 2,000 more. The equids would be obtained through sale to the army or "impression" from wherever the army could locate animals.

Officers needed a place apart to live. They took over an antebellum mansion on one portion of the property, giving it the nickname of the White House. Soldiers moved into tents.

And then, quite unexpectedly, hundreds of refugees both

black and white began arriving to occupy shanties these newcomers built themselves inside the camp's gates. They sought the army's protection.

This was the Camp Nelson the National Parks Service elevated last autumn to National Monument status, a designation that has resulted in increased numbers of visitors to the site. Camp Nelson officials hope the new designation will raise awareness of the multiple purposes this army base served during the Civil War, from supply depot to beacon of freedom for the U.S. Colored Troops.

Awareness is long overdue. Until recent decades when Camp Nelson began regaining its historical place, memory of the site had slipped. Peggy McClintock, who attended school in this part of Kentucky, said Camp Nelson was not taught in the history books she studied. And if people were aware of the army base they thought of it only as a supply depot. They did not know about its major role in ending slavery in Kentucky through recruitment of slaves as soldiers.

"I didn't hear of it [Camp Nelson] and I was born here," said McClintock, who has worked 10 years at the site. She is tour administrator and a great source of historical knowledge about the army base.

Possibly, Camp Nelson's association with the U.S. Colored Troops slipped from memory for the same reason 19th century

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black jockeys slipped from collective consciousness. Both might have been collateral casualties of changing cultural trends. Memories about Camp Nelson also might have dimmed as time passed because the army completely dismantled the grounds following the Civil War. Few material reminders remained as the land reverted to farm fields.

## Better understanding of history

Modern times have brought Camp Nelson into a new era. The site's inclusion in the National Parks system "will broaden the interpretation of America's history," according to James Lighthizer, president of the American Battlefield Trust. Quoted in the Trust's magazine, *Hallowed Ground*, he reminded readers that "Camp Nelson played an important and often forgotten role in the Civil War."

Largely through archaeological digs and historical research, Camp Nelson's forgotten role has brought a significant portion of Kentucky and American history back into general understanding of the Civil War.

Back in 1863, though, as Camp Nelson arose from the meadows atop the cliffs, the only understanding local farmers gleaned from the camp's imposing presence was the cold fact that war was here to stay in Kentucky. Perryville had not been the last of it.

At the same time, everyone had to wonder in 1863 what the army was thinking when it picked this location for a base. Camp Nelson was far from everything, with the nearest railroad six miles north up the dusty Danville Road in Nicholasville.

Ah, but the river, you will be told if you visit Camp Nelson: The river was the winning card. Whoever controlled the waterways controlled defense and transportation. You could have asked Ulysses Grant how this worked for him in 1863. He took Vicksburg and gained a large chunk of the Mississippi.

The Kentucky followed a timeless, twisting course past Camp



Jim Hunn descends from a member of the U.S. Colored Infantry.



Archaeologist Steve McBride has made important discoveries.

Nelson on its westward journey toward the state capital at Frankfort. Beyond Frankfort it spilled its waters into the Ohio River at Carrollton, north of Louisville. The Ohio, mixed with the waters of the Kentucky, raced over the rocky "falls" at Louisville and eventually flowed into the Mississippi for the long journey south.

The river afforded the camp unrivaled protection. The limestone palisades lining the Kentucky rose 500 feet straight up along the western and southern borders of Camp Nelson. Hick-

man Creek, flowing past the camp's eastern edge, mimicked the Kentucky River with its own set of limestone cliffs. The fort's single unprotected side, facing north, received a more typical army treatment: construction of a defensive system of bayonet-shaped earthen works, called forts, equipped with cannons ready to fire through holes dug into the mounded earth. The chief quartermaster at the camp, Capt. Theron E. Hall, called the site "one of the most impregnable points in the country."

It is possible that some who walk about the grounds today sense the spirits of those who went before them, much in the way some people feel a "communing with ghosts" on battlefields. No battle was fought here, but

the meadows impart a similar sense of lives lost to war.

Some visitors find closure at Camp Nelson: Searches into their family histories have led them to this army depot where someone's great-uncle or grandfather was a part of this Civil War community. Their ancestors might have been white — or black. In addition to the army recruits, there came to Camp Nelson white refugees, usually family members of soldiers, all from East Ten-




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nessee. They were Union loyalists whose lives were in danger had they remained in Confederate territory.

## Chance for freedom

Late in 1863, Camp Nelson headed in a new direction. Its purpose morphed into a recruiting ground for slaves who wished to become soldiers, a transition coinciding with President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The war that had begun to keep the United States together now took on the added purpose of a war to abolish slavery. If the Union was to bring an end to this long-running conflict, the Union would need soldiers in greater numbers than the army had managed to attract.

The question was where to find these men. The answer was in creation of the U.S. Colored Troops. An order the War Department issued in 1863 created a procedure for incorporating slaves and free men of color into the army if they wished to join. For the United States, in its search for more soldiers, this proved a broad stroke of genius.

The stroke of genius loomed even larger for black men in the border states of Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, and Delaware. Slavery did not end in these states despite the Emancipation Proclamation, because the Proclamation affected only rebel states. Kentucky, for example, had chosen to remain with the United States following three months of neutrality, a time during which state legislators hotly debated which road to take, north or south. North won out, and Kentucky sent far more soldiers to the Union forces than it saw go south to join the Confederates. As a token of gratitude to border states that remained in the Union, Lincoln allowed these states to retain slavery even following his Proclamation. Otherwise, he feared these states would abandon the Union and possibly turn the tide of war for the Confederates. He once said that to lose Kentucky would be to lose the whole game.

With creation of the Colored Troops, border-state slaves initiated an end-run around the Proclamation's restrictions. The army offered a signing bonus that was hard to turn down: freedom to enlisted men. The slaves made their choice, and a trickle showing up at Camp Nelson turned over time into 10,000 recruits. Camp Nelson evolved into the third largest recruiting ground for black men nationwide. Camp Nelson organized eight Colored Troops regiments and trained five additional units formed elsewhere. These regiments saw action in Southwestern Virginia, in Central and



Tour administrator Peggy McClintock guides visitors in the museum.

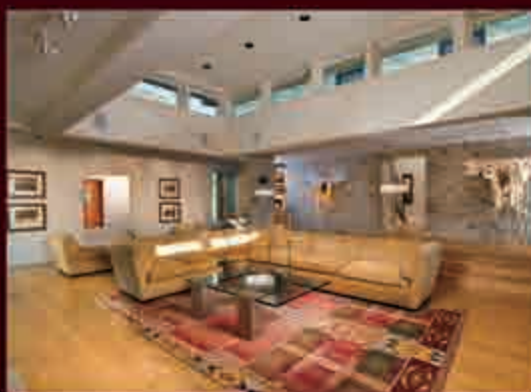
## ENHANCED STATUS

Camp Nelson became Kentucky's first National Monument in the National Park System Oct. 27, 2018, greatly enhancing the status of this Civil War site. The American Battlefield Trust and the National Park Foundation helped transition ownership of the nearly 400 acres to the National Park Service. The site is under direction of Wayne Hayden, park manager.

The site previously was known as the Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park, a National Historic Landmark, and was under care of Jessamine County. The Antiquities Act of 1906 requires that land named as a national monument must be on federal government property prior to the new designation. Jessamine County consequently transferred ownership of the site to the American Battlefield Trust, which in turn donated the site to the National Park Service, according to the Trust's magazine, *Hallowed Ground*.

Upon elevation of the site's status to a National Monument, Camp Nelson became the 418th unit of the National Park system. It is a separate entity from the Camp Nelson National Cemetery, which is situated about a mile south of Camp Nelson, although numbers of Civil War veterans are buried at the national cemetery.

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Western Kentucky, and at Petersburg, Virginia.

Modern historical interpretations give slaves far more self-agency than they were previously afforded in working to win their freedom. Camp Nelson adds valuable evidence to this interpretation, as suggested by Steve McBride, Ph.D., the resident archaeologist at these historic grounds. As newer interpretations go, slaves did not wait for the government to pass laws granting them freedom. They initiated the quest, by running away to Camp Nelson or to other army recruitment grounds. Along the way they faced grave danger. If caught, they would be returned to their owners and no doubt punished. Their families also would be at risk of retribution.

So, despite the Emancipation Proclamation intended to free slaves in the Rebel South, slavery did not end in Kentucky until ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment Dec. 6, 1865, eight months following the war's end. Until that time Camp Nelson and six other recruiting grounds in Kentucky became the easiest way to freedom.

"It used to be 500 miles to get to Canada [and freedom] from Lexington, but now it's only 18 miles! Camp Nelson is now our Canada," wrote one African American soldier.

"It was the beginning of the end of slavery in Kentucky," said McBride. And this occurred, at Camp Nelson, nearly two years before slavery in the state officially ended.

## Refugees suffered

Among the many slaves who turned up at Camp Nelson was Jerry Skillman, father of a boy named Isaac. The boy, his mother, America, and a sister followed their father to Camp Nelson where

they joined hundreds of refugees seeking safety within the army encampment. Skillman mustered into the 114th Colored Infantry but never saw action. He died of disease in the camp. The boy, then 3, eventually realized freedom along with his family close to the end of the war. Later he became the leading jockey in the United States, riding under the name of Isaac Burns Murphy.

Murphy and his family realized their freedom a month prior to the war's end, when in March 1865 a Congressional Act emancipated the wives and children of enlisted soldiers. The families of soldiers had endured much suffering prior to this moment. They ran away to the army base with their husbands, yet the army would not house or feed them. Women and children inhabited shanties they built from scrap material. They scrambled to find their own food and they often went hungry.

The army did not behave well toward these refugees, issuing seven eviction orders between July and November 1864, all intended to rid the camp of refugee families. Ordered to leave, the women and children habitually returned because they had nowhere else to go. Then on one bitterly cold November day in 1864, mounted soldiers made their last stand against these unwanted folks. Soldiers evicted 400 refugees at gunpoint, turning them out beyond the gates into the inclement weather. The result was that 102 refugees died without getting far from camp.

Newspapers learned of this incident and published highly critical accounts. Pellom McDaniels III quoted Horace Greeley, publisher of the New York Tribune, in his book about Isaac Murphy titled *The Prince of Jockeys*: "At this moment, over four hundred helpless human beings ... having been driven from their homes by United States soldiers are now lying in barns and mule sheds, wandering through the woods, languishing on the highway and literally starving, for no other crime than their husbands and fathers having thrown aside the manacles of slavery to shoulder Union muskets."

McDaniels suggested that America Murphy and her children



CAMP NELSON PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION (UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)

Left, a refugee camp housed women and children; right, Camp Nelson sheltered wounded soldiers in a convalescent camp.



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might have been among those evicted into the cold.

Word of this crisis alerted humanitarians, who pressured Congress into passing the March 1865 Act granting freedom to the wives and children of men enlisted in the U. S. Colored Troops. The army also subsequently built housing for women and children on a plot that is now about a mile south of Camp Nelson. The people named the place Ariel, later renaming it Hall. The army constructed a comfortable Home for Colored Refugees on this property, along with a school, a hospital, 97 cottages, and 50 wall tents that housed between 1,200 and 3,000 women and children.

## Business of war

While the army at Camp Nelson was forced to deal with the plight of refugees, army life at the same time also carried on. The quartermaster was the busiest man on the base, always under pressure to supply equids to the front. Requisitions for 3,000 horses and mules needed “at once” would send him scurrying to fill orders.

In addition to those equids quartered at Camp Nelson were many more stabled throughout Central Kentucky with private contractors. Among these contractors was the Madison County estate, called White Hall, owned by abolitionist Cassius Marcellus Clay. Clay pastured 19 horses for the military, according to army records. Clay’s wife, Mary Jane Clay, was the one actually pasturing the horses. She ran the estate during her husband’s wartime absence while he served as U.S. Ambassador to Russia. Many in Lexington knew Mary Jane Clay well. She was the daughter of Dr. Elisha Warfield Jr., breeder and original owner of the renowned racehorse Lexington.

Mary Jane Clay actually was better known for raising mules and selling them to the army. She once wrote, “I have had upwards of a thousand mules on the farm, eight hundred and fifty are gone now.” When her husband returned home from Russia, he brought his wife a gift: an illegitimate son he had fathered in that country. It was not surprising that the couple divorced. Mary Jane found herself homeless and penniless, destitute under Kentucky laws. Perhaps this influenced the four Clay daughters, led by Laura Clay, to take leading roles in the national women’s suffrage movement.

McBride has attempted to find more stories about Camp Nelson through archeology and historical research.

“We found the original refugee camp where they first settled

before they were ejected,” McBride said. “What was particularly interesting was the tremendous quantity and variety of buttons and seed beads and other clothing items we found there. From doing a lot of research, this was a good indicator that [the refugees] were doing laundry for the army: a way that women could have made some money or bartered for food.”

McBride tells of another fascinating find: some buttons, each marked with a cross, or an X. He also found some silver coins drilled so they could be worn. These also were unearthed in the original refugee encampments. Research in the Works Progress Administration’s slave interviews conducted in the 1930s turned up an explanation of what these items were: spiritual tokens, according to the WPA interviews. Coins were worn as protective devices, mostly against spells. “They’re like mirrors. They’ll reflect the spells,” McBride said.

He also found “tremendous archaeological evidence” of the refugees’ shanties being burned, most likely following the ejection of the refugees from the camp in 1864.

“It looks like what they [soldiers] did was tear them down and pile them into a couple of big wood piles, like bonfires. We know these wood piles were huge because they got too hot,” McBride said. “We found 2,000 or 3,000 nails in a small area and we found melted glass. It takes a hot fire to melt glass. The nails suggested they were piling them up: way more nails than one hut would have.”

With so much about Camp Nelson discovered in recent years, it seems remarkable that historical memory of the camp did indeed decline. Or that some still don’t have their facts right. “I can’t

tell you the number of people who would come down here and say their ancestors had been at Camp Nelson in the Confederate Army,” McBride said.

Perhaps the camp’s new designation as a National Monument will help change misperceptions and the lack of information.

“When you come into the museum and see the video you’re just blown away with how much happened here in such a short time,” said McClintock, the tour director.

Walk the grounds, and perhaps you will hear the ghostly whispers of those who went here before you. Perhaps you will catch the distant sounds of steel pounded on anvils, of firearms discharged in practice drills, and of the desperate cries of women and children who wandered about the camp. You might hear mules and horses braying and neighing and sometimes, the loud crack of bone on bone as a limb connected with a neighbor’s flying hoof. These were the sounds of war setting up camp in Kentucky, an orchestra of ominous dissonance that spilled its warnings over the limestone cliffs. **KM**

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