Seizing Freedom
Archaeology of Escaped Slaves at Camp Nelson, Kentucky

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jointly administered by the Kentucky Heritage Council
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This publication is funded by a grant from the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program of the National Park Service. The authors would like to thank Diane E. Miller, Mary Krause and Barbara Tagger of the National Park Service, and Mary Kozak, Kelley Woolums, Evelyn Smith, and Tammy East of Jessamine County Fiscal Court for help in administering the grant. The Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park would not be possible without the steadfast support of the Jessamine County Magistrates and County Judge Executive W. Neal Cassity. Thanks also to Camp Nelson park staff Wayne Hayden, Sam Cassity, and Peggy McClintock and to the Camp Nelson Preservation and Restoration Foundation. Students from many institutions assisted with the fieldwork, including the University of Kentucky Department of Anthropology field school, the Kentucky Governor Scholars’ Program, Bob Bryant and Georgetown College Department of Sociology, and Centre College Department of Anthropology & Sociology. Thanks also to excavators from the Kentucky Archaeological Survey, aided by administrative assistance from David Pollack, Steve Atler and especially Ed Winkle, and supervisory assistance from J. David McBride. A special thanks to Kathie Danner who volunteered many hours in both the field and lab. Thanks to Emanuel Breitburg and Bruce Manzano for analysis of the faunal material. We are indebted to Jimmy Frye, Mike Scholer, and Lisa Morris of the Nature Conservancy for on-site assistance at Hall. A special thanks to Jimmy for sharing his home and knowledge. All site and artifact photographs were taken by W. Stephen McBride or J. David McBride. Thanks to Jim Fenton for his encouragement and support.

Quotations from army officials or missionaries are largely from the National Archives and the American Missionary Association papers, and have been reprinted in Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History, by Richard Sears (2002, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington); quote from Virginia Cox from the Berea Quarterly; 1902; quote from Dr. George Andrew from the U.S. Sanitary Commission papers at the New York Public Library; quote from and photo of Elijah Mears from Life and History of the Rev. Elijah Mears (1865, The Bradley and Gilbert Company, Louisville, Kentucky). Historic photographs of Home for Colored Refugees from Camp Nelson Photographic Collection (1864, 77PA102) and 1877 Beers and Lanagan atlas from University of Kentucky Special Collections and Digital Programs; period maps of Camp Nelson and the Home for Colored Refugees and New York Tribune article from the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; Jubilee Singers and John G. Fee images from Fee Papers, Berea College, Berea, Kentucky; Capt. Theron E. Hall image from U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Graphic design by Hayward Wilkinson, Kentucky Archaeological Survey.
Printed by Warner’s Printing Services, Nicholasville, Kentucky.

This material is based upon work assisted by a grant from the Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of the Interior.

Cover Teachers and pupils at the Home for Colored Refugees.
Below U.S. Colored Troops at Camp Nelson.
Introduction

See how much better off we are now then we was four years ago. It used to be five hundred miles to get to Canada from Lexington, but now it is only eighteen miles! Camp Nelson is now our Canada.

U.S.C.T. Sergeant, 1865

Camp Nelson is the rendezvous of soldiers and birthplace of liberty to Kentucky. It is hallowed in the minds of thousands.

Rev. John G. Fee, 1877

As the above quotes illustrate, Camp Nelson was viewed and remembered by many as a great Civil War and post-war center of emancipation. The emancipation story of Camp Nelson included African-American men, women, and children as well as the white missionaries, soldiers, politicians, and slave owners who helped or hindered these efforts to attain freedom. This story began in May 1864 when hundreds of enslaved men, often accompanied by their wives and children, entered Camp Nelson to join the U.S. Army and be emancipated. The sheer numbers of these men forced the army to remove earlier restrictions to their enlistment, and Camp Nelson, which was built in 1863 as a U.S. Army supply depot and hospital, eventually became Kentucky's largest, and the United States' third largest organizing center for United States Colored Troops (U.S.C.T.), as the African-American soldiers were known. These men were emancipated from slavery upon enlistment.
MAP
OF
CAMP NELSON
Showing the Location
OF BUILDINGS.
SCALE. 400 FEET TO ONE INCH

KENTUCKY RIVER

Small Pox
Hospital

Small Pox
Hospital

HOSPITAL FOR CHILDREN ADOLESCENT

SURVEYED AND PLATTED

by

A. B. Miller
Civil Engineer

This map was surveyed by Capt. R. M. Batefield, Feb. 19, 1866,
showing number and location of Government Buildings
there at that time.
Most of the initial refugee women who entered Camp Nelson came with their husbands, while many later ones entered without them. Some women entered with their children while others were unable to bring their children, which caused them great pain. While the women and children who entered camp in 1864 and early 1865 hoped to attain their freedom, this did not come immediately due to Kentucky's status as a Union state and a slave state. Because Kentucky never seceded, the January 1863 Emancipation Proclamation did not apply to Kentucky, and these refugees were still legally enslaved. It would take the forced expulsion of these people in late 1864 by the U.S. Army to force the federal government to finally free the wives and children of the African-American soldiers.

In this booklet, the lives of the African-American refugees at Camp Nelson will be investigated through both documents and archaeology. Although Camp Nelson has left a rich documentary record, including some letters and reports related to the refugees, few descriptions of their daily conditions exist, and none from the refugees themselves. Only through the artifacts and other material remains do we have a chance to possibly hear the refugees speak for themselves.

Above 1866 map of Camp Nelson.
African-American Refugees Enter Camp

In the spring of 1864 large numbers of African-American women and children entered Camp Nelson with their husbands and fathers when the latter were finally allowed to join the U.S. Army without the consent of their owners. Upon enlistment the men were emancipated, but their wives and children were not. The women and children nevertheless entered camp with the hope of finally escaping from slavery, gaining control of their labor, and creating a new life.

Initially the army did not have a clear policy for the women and children refugees, but allowed them to establish shanty villages in camp and even live in tents with their soldier husbands/fathers. By late May as the numbers of refugees grew, Camp Nelson’s commander, Col. Andrew Clark, became frustrated and began ordering that “the negro women here without authority will be arrested and sent beyond the lines.” By July 1864, orders originating with Brig. Gen. Lorenzo Thomas, who was in charge of African-American recruitment in the Mississippi Valley, and carried out by district commander Brig. Gen. Speed Fry, clarified that only women “in Government employ” were allowed to stay in camp. All others were ordered or escorted back “home” to slavery, where “their respective masters are bound to care for them,” according to Brig. Gen. Thomas. These army officers were caught in the paradox of Civil War Kentucky; a Union slave state in a war that now had an explicit goal to end slavery.

The women and children kept returning to Camp Nelson, however, and the ejection order had to be reissued at least seven times between July and November 1864, when a more dramatic ejection occurred. As the Rev. John G. Fee, a leading abolitionist working with the refugees, stated on September 22, 1864,

For months the officials have tried the experiment of sending the women and children out of camp. Like flies they soon come back...

Exactly how the women and children were able to remain or return to camp despite these orders is unclear, but there is mention of the women bribing guards. It is also possible that the women and sympathetic officers and employees used the “government employ” exception to stay in camp, although official employee records do not show any refugee women as being hired. Only two legitimate employment opportunities are mentioned in the documents; washerwomen and cooks, so perhaps
some women were operating more independently or were unofficially hired. A large number may have been continually removed from camp and just kept returning, as Rev. Fee stated. Between 200 and 400 refugees were in camp during the fall of 1864.

So, how can we learn more about these women and children and the life they made within Camp Nelson, especially since they did not leave a written record? Archaeological data, particularly artifacts related to activities, diet, architecture, clothing, and personal adornment from a refugee encampment site within Camp Nelson will be used to address these questions.

Above The Reverend John G. Fee.
Archaeology of a Refugee Encampment

During a 2001 archaeological survey of Camp Nelson we discovered an encampment site between the documented site of the commissary and quartermaster warehouses and the bakery. The presence of container glass, ceramics, clothing items, animal bone, and military accoutrements suggested that the site was an encampment. Later excavation of the site resulted in the discovery of numerous necklace beads, probable dress buttons, and porcelain doll fragments suggesting the presence of women and children. The beads also told us about the continued importance of decorative items in harsh and uncertain conditions. The discovery of these artifacts led us to re-examine the archival records; we located a June 17, 1864 order from Col. Clark through his adjutant Lt. George Hanaford that stated “a bevy of women and children are quartered near the Commissary Warehouses...” This certainly describes the location of the encampment site we found, and further survey failed to locate any additional encampments near the warehouses.

In terms of the appearance of this, or other, refugee encampments, we have only found a few period descriptions. In another June 17, 1864 order, Lt. Hanaford, noted “the shanties near the commissary warehouses now occupied by the negroes.” Two other references to refugee housing at Camp Nelson were provided by Private John Higgins of the 124th U.S. Colored Infantry and the Rev. Abisha Scofield, a missionary and teacher. Pvt. Higgins stated that “In company with another man I built a small hut where I resided with my family...”
Rev. Scofield reported in Dec. 1864 that,

_The families of the colored soldiers who were in camp lived in cabins and huts erected by the colored soldiers or at the expense of the women. During my labors among them I have witnessed about fifty of these huts and cabins erected, and the material of which they were constructed was unserviceable to the Government._

Significantly, Pvt. Higgins and Rev. Scofield used the less loaded terms, cabins and huts, rather than the more derogatory term shanties. The number of huts Scofield mentions, namely 50, suggests that there were probably multiple encampments since the excavated encampment site is not this large. Architectural artifacts recovered from the encampment site, primarily nails, window glass, and bricks and a few structural remains, indicate that structures more substantial than tents, such as small huts or cabins, were present. The exact number of huts or cabins present is difficult to determine, but the distribution of architectural artifacts and structural remains suggests at least seven to nine were likely present.
Very few extant structural remains of these huts were found, but this is not surprising given their ephemeral nature. The structural remains found include two stacked rock chimney remnants or piers, six post molds (stains left by former wooden posts), and three fire pits. Five refuse pits were also discovered and excavated at the hut locations.

The distribution of architectural artifacts also suggests some variability in these huts. For instance, some huts (particularly Huts 2 and 3 and Unit 24) definitely had glazed windows while others did not (see map on pg. 10). Some huts (particularly Huts 2, 3, 4, and 7) had brick
or partially brick chimneys while others had stick and mud chimneys or none at all. These results hint at some social and/or economic variability within the camp.

This variability is supported by the distribution of different ceramic types across the site. Some areas, particularly the northern portion of the site (Huts 5, 6, and 7) and Hut 2 in the south, contained the greatest concentration of more expensive ironstone. Other areas contained mostly cheaper plain whiteware (white-pasted clear glazed ceramic), minimally decorated whiteware, and redware (red-pasted typically lead glazed ceramic). The presence of redware is interesting and surprising because it is rare on Kentucky sites after the 1840s. Perhaps these were curated items that the women brought with them.
Interestingly, the distribution of more expensive ceramics does not correlate perfectly with the distribution of window glass and brick. This lack of perfect correlation likely relates to the complex social and economic relationships within camp and their effect on material goods acquisition.

Another foodways item that is informative is animal bone, which suggests that encampment residents ate primarily low to moderate quality pork and beef cuts, including ribs, shanks, roasts, and leg joints. They also consumed some sheep, chicken, dove, rabbit and fish. How the refugees acquired this food is unclear, but we know from documents that they did not receive army rations. They either had money or goods and services to trade. Even if they did have money, it most likely came from goods or services they provided at Camp Nelson.

A number of artifacts likely associated with soldiers were also found in this encampment. These include shoulder scale clasps, a belt clasp, shoe heel plates, poncho grommets, a canteen stopper, bullets, and a straight razor. These discoveries suggest that the husbands/fathers sometimes lived with their families as Pvt. Higgins noted above.

Two artifacts that were perhaps our most exciting finds are a domed rubber button inscribed with an “X” and a pierced silver half-dime, since these artifacts offer a window into the refugees’ beliefs and suggest the survival of African religious beliefs, perhaps blended
with Christianity. “X” marked circular artifacts and pierced silver coins have been recovered from many African-American sites throughout the United States and are documented as having religious and magical associations. The “X” in a circle represents the West African BiKongo symbol of the universe. Silver coins were worn as protective magic. As a former Kentucky slave stated,

*Every one of my children wears a silver dime on a string around their leg to keep off the witches spell.*

We also found an un-pierced silver half-dime that may have also been more than just money. These coins were often worn in shoes for protection and used to detect conjurers. Silver coins were usually chosen for their reflective qualities.

Another surprising discovery at this refugee encampment was a tremendous quantity and variety of buttons. Interestingly, these buttons are of many types, including civilian men’s and women’s buttons, military coat and pants buttons, some definitely from white officers’ clothing—that is, from some people that did not live at this site. This pattern, coupled with the fact that these buttons were mostly concentrated at Huts 1, 2, and 6, suggests that a special activity took place here, probably laundry or sewing. Further support for this interpretation is that other clothing items such as tiny seed and tubular beads and hooks and eyes were also concentrated in these areas.

The Camp Nelson pattern of a high density and variety of buttons and other clothing items closely parallels the patterns found at washing sites in South Africa and on the East Coast of the
U.S. The near absence of sewing artifacts such as pins, needles, and thimbles at the refugee encampment strongly suggests that washing and not sewing was the major activity here. While some documents mention washing and cooking as occupations for the refugees, none say where this was done or that the women operated at home, more or less independently as entrepreneurs. The women probably set up wash tubs in this area near the campfires or stoves where the water was boiled. The presence of a spring-fed stream just below this encampment may have been an important factor, along with its secluded nature, in its location.

Laundry on slave plantations was usually a communal activity where women could interact and importantly also care for their children. At Camp Nelson doing laundry also made the women needed or even indispensable and gave them a legitimate reason to be allowed to stay in camp. This occupation helped them create their own home and community.

Unfortunately this adaptation, by itself, could not overcome the politics and legal situation of Kentucky. On November 22-25, 1864, District Commander Brig. Gen. Speed Fry (a native Kentuckian himself) succumbed to pressure from slave owners, and expelled all of the 400 African-American women and children from camp. Fry utilized armed white troops to forcibly, sometimes under threat of death, load the women and children onto wagons and escort them out of camp. Following the ejection, soldiers destroyed the refugee huts.

Archaeology also provided concrete evidence of the tragic November expulsion of the refugees. Severely burned artifacts, including nails, window glass, a comb, container glass and ceramics, and thick ash soil layers were found at the encampment site. The distribution
of burned nails and ash suggests that the refugee huts were torn down, pushed into piles, and set on fire. This event ended the first refugee encampment at Camp Nelson.

While this expulsion was a tragedy for the women and children, it was not the end of the refugee story. The harshness of this action, which caused the deaths of 102 of the refugees who were abandoned and dispersed on the road north of camp from exposure and disease, created an uproar that the allies of the women and children, including Camp Nelson Chief Quartermaster Theron E. Hall and the Rev. John G. Fee of the American Missionary Association, used to reach the ears of high ranking Washington officials and the northern public. Soon this led to a reversal of army policy and the resettlement of the refugees in the newly constructed “Home for Colored Refugees” within Camp Nelson. Finally on March 3, 1865 a Congressional Act was passed that freed the wives and children of U.S. Colored Troops. In this latter case, the events at Camp Nelson led to policy with national repercussions.
History of the Home for Colored Refugees

Soon after the refugees return to Camp Nelson, Capt. Theron E. Hall, the camp’s former Chief Quartermaster and strong supporter of the refugees, was made superintendent of the planned refugee community at Camp Nelson, known as the “Home for Colored Refugees.” Capt. Hall stated, “I propose to receive at the Home only the families of colored soldiers or those dependent upon them for support.” His passion for this endeavor is evident when he wrote “This must be a success. It is the death blow to slavery in Kentucky.”

The initial plans by Capt. Hall called for four large barracks or wards, an office, a large mess house and kitchen, a school, and a work shop. The Rev. John G. Fee strongly opposed Capt. Hall’s plans. Hall’s more paternalistic approach can been seen in his statement that “…most of these people are field hands and know comparatively nothing of cooking or sewing...It is not sufficient that these people be taught to read. They must be taught to take care of themselves.” In contrast, Fee suggested “Let government give title and protection and then hands off.”

Left Captain Theron E. Hall, former camp quartermaster and superintendent of the Home for Colored Refugees.

Opposite Initial plan for the Home for Colored Refugees.
Fee lobbied Hall, the American Missionary Association and other camp officials for the construction of cottages, rather than barracks, citing the faster spread of disease in the latter and the fact that the refugees were more used to a family-based cabin setting. As fee stated,

*The habits of these people must be considered. They have been accustomed to the fireplace and cabin.*

Fee was also opposed to the refugees eating army rations in a communal mess hall and requested that basic foodstuffs be distributed to each family to cook themselves. He not only wanted to provide for the immediate health needs of the refugees, but also to help them learn skills and habits that would ease their transition into self-sufficient people. To this end, he asked that four to eight acres be provided to each family for gardens.

Ultimately what became the Home was a compromise between Capt. Hall, Rev. Fee and the refugees themselves. The barracks and mess house were built, but so were 97 duplex cottages, each 32 x 16 feet, with one family to live in each 16 x 16 foot half. The arrangement with the cottages was that the U.S.C.T. soldiers were to play a one-time fee for the use of a cottage by their family, although official documents hint that no clear method of collecting this fee was ever worked out. While Fee was successful in getting the cottages built, he was not successful in establishing family cooking or placing the cottages on
Above Detailed map of the Home for Colored Refugees.
larger lots. The cottages were placed close together in three main rows. A Freedmen's Bureau map indicates that 200 acres was eventually set aside for communal gardens.

Other buildings at the Home included a large two-story school, a two-story office, a work shop, teachers' quarters, a sutler's store, and a hospital mess house and kitchen that were built after the two northern barracks or wards were transformed into the refugee hospital. The latter was needed as sickness was very prevalent at the Home, with subsequent high mortality.

White teachers were brought in by the American Missionary Association and the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission to teach the refugees. Rev. Fee brought in an African-American teacher, Belle Mitchell, but her stay was very brief because of prejudice and animosity between Fee and the Rev. Lester Williams, the civilian superintendent of the Home. Fee also had an African-American minister and soldier, Gabriel Burdett, assist him in ministry work.

The population of the Home grew quickly from 400 in December 1864 to 750 in February 1865 to over 1200 in early April and nearly 2000 by late April. The large increase during April 1865 was certainly the result of the March 3, 1865 Joint Resolution of Congress which freed the wives and children of the U.S.C.T. The death knell to slavery begun by the creation of the U.S. Colored Troops was now greatly accelerated. As Serg. Elijah Marrs of the 12th U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery stated,

_Thousands of people are coming in [to Camp Nelson] from all directions, seeking their freedom. It was equal to the forum of Rome. All they had to do was get there and they were free._

Through the summer of 1865 the home continued to grow significantly, particularly after it became the major refuge center for the whole state. By late July the population of the Home peaked at 3060. Sadly, we have little information on the identities of the refugees, despite the fact that official records were kept. The one exception is provided by a November 1865 letter from Capt. R.E. Farwell, then head of the Home, to Brig. Gen. C. B. Fisk, head of the Freedmen’s Bureau.

_Cabin No 71 Occupants Sophy Smothers and three little children of her own all less than six years old. Besides her own, three motherless children and three more full Orphans and her Old_
Father and Mother bolted out of them and nothing but the bran left. The Husband of Sophy and a number of Brothers in the Army & away in Texas.

When the population began to surpass 2000 the government housing became strained. Eventually 60 large wall tents were brought in, but this was still not enough housing. Eventually the refugees began constructing their own cabins and huts, much like those built before the expulsion. Rev. Abisha Scofield, from the American Missionary Association, described one of these huts as follows:

Slabs nailed in the form of a pen, about eight feet square, with a rude fireplace at one side, one bench and a pail, comprised the whole furniture. On a few loose boards, which served for a floor, lay a pile of rags which served for a bed, a loose board answered for a door, and open cracks and corners supplied the place of windows!

Dr. George Andrew of the U.S. Sanitary Commission gave a more complete and positive view of the huts.
These huts are of various sizes and descriptions, built in nearly every instance by the negro women. The majority of them are of small logs...notched together at the corners...with the usual “filling and daubing” of log cabin architecture. A few have been made with boards of varying lengths, breadth, and thickness...Each hut is separated from the others by a space of from 10 to 30 feet, and in all but a single instance is furnished with an open fire-place. The cooking here is done by the families.

About 50 of these huts were constructed on the northern side of the Home and these housed over 200 refugees. Dr. Andrew’s inspection suggests that the refugees in the huts were living more independently from the army than those who lived in the barracks, cottages, or tents.

The ending of the Civil War in the spring of 1865 brought major changes since Camp Nelson was no longer needed as an army supply depot. Some recruitment of U.S. Colored Troops continued through the summer of 1865 as a means to free enslaved African-Americans until the 13th Amendment, which was made law in December 1865, finally gave all enslaved persons in Kentucky their freedom. But overall, the scale of Camp Nelson was much reduced and in October 1865 the Home for Colored Refugees was transferred to the newly created Freedmen’s Bureau.

What would happen to the refugees who had gathered at Camp Nelson? Since some of the U.S.C.T. troops would not finish their service until 1867, and were stationed as far away as Texas, their wives and children understandably did not want to leave Camp Nelson until the men returned. Many other refugees were orphaned, sick or
infirm, and generally lacking a place to go. The government was aided in this difficult transition by many private organizations, such as the American Missionary Association, which helped find positions for hundreds of Camp Nelson refugees in Ohio and Indiana. The army also had connections to place refugees on plantations in Mississippi and Arkansas. Between these kinds of arrangements and the refugees simply taking their own leave, only about 250 refugees remained at the Home by the spring of 1866.

This transition was not always peaceful. Reports from the Freedmen’s Bureau document widespread white resentment against Camp Nelson, and local white men, sometimes called Raiders or Regulators, attacked the Home for Colored Refugees area in the fall of 1866. Several African-Americans were badly injured and American Missionary Association minister Abisha Scofield and his family fled in fear for their lives. Scofield’s duties were taken over by Rev. Gabriel Burdett, a local ex-slave from neighboring Garrard County who had recently returned from his duty with the 114th U.S.C.T. Burdett had worked with the Rev. John G. Fee in setting up the refugee camp after the 1864 expulsion. He served as a preacher and teacher at the camp and subsequent Ariel community before moving to Kansas with a group of Kentuckians in 1877.
What happened to the buildings of the Home for Colored Refugees? Details are very sketchy, but by 1868 only two or three of the larger institutional buildings and 20 to 30 cottages were left. The Rev. John G. Fee had requested that cottages be made available to families who had saved soldier’s wages or were waiting on a husband still in service; perhaps this explains the fate of some of the 97 cottages.

Fee’s dream was for the refugee families to acquire enough land to farm independently, a goal shared by many other reformers nationally. However, with the lack of federal redistribution of land as part of the Reconstruction program, Fee in 1868 turned to family savings to buy from white landowner Joseph Moss the land encompassing the Home for Colored Refugees. Fee divided the land into small lots, typically from a half acre to an acre, and sold them, in his words, at about a fifth of their real value. Records suggest he built houses on some of the lots. He named the new community Ariel.

Fee reserved a larger parcel for a church and school, called Ariel Academy. This school, which focused on training teachers, had close ties to Fee’s Berea College, with John G. Fee’s son Howard S. Fee serving as the first head teacher. Remaining institutional buildings from the old Home for Colored Refugees were paired with some new construction. Students were known to have come from as far away as Louisville.
We can look to the federal population census of 1870 for a glimpse into the young Ariel community. A minimum of fifteen African-American households can be identified in the area. One person was born in Virginia, and all the rest in Kentucky. All of the men were listed as farm hands, save for John Tracy, listed as a tanner; Gabriel Burdett, listed as minister; and Amsted Wade and William Butler, both listed as preachers. All the women were listed as “Keeping House.” Most of the children were listed as “At School.”

Another useful document shedding light on the early history of Ariel is the 1877 Beers and Lanagan atlas. This map shows 24 houses oriented on a northwest to southeast line in the area where the Home for Colored Refugees had been located. The orientation of these houses matches exactly with the cottage streets in the original Camp Nelson Home for Colored Refugees.

Contemporary residents have provided many stories about the later years of Ariel, but it is difficult to get back to the experiences of the earliest inhabitants, those creating new lives as freed persons. One interesting exception is the story told by Margaret Hunter True. Margaret was from a white family who lived not far from Ariel. During one visit to Ariel she and Marion Carpenter, an older African-American gentlemen much revered in the community as a stone mason and folk doctor, were standing near the main road when they were approached by an older white man who asked to be directed to Marion Carpenter (not recognizing him after the passage of many years). When Marion replied that he was such a person, the old white man identified himself as Marion’s former owner, come to ask for forgiveness. Marion replied he could forgive though he could never forget. Later, Mr. Carpenter showed Margaret the scars on his back.

Seizing Freedom
Archaeology at the Home for Colored Refugees

Archaeological explorations at the former Home for Colored Refugees began in 1995 by the University of Kentucky and have continued until the present day. The initial excavations had a goal of locating evidence of the cottages, the barracks and the school, while more recent work has focused on the huts area. This research began with comparisons of the modern Hall street layout with the Civil War era maps of the Home, and suggested that the two most northern streets of the present community retained the southeast-to-northwest orientation of the original rows of refugee cottages. Examination of a Freedmen's Bureau map of the Home and Civil War era photographs suggested that the refugee-built huts were located in a draw or drainage area, to the north of these present streets.
**Left Top**  Rock concentration, Home for Colored Refugees hut site.

**Left Bottom**  Rim lock, padlock shackle, and key, Home for Colored Refugees hut site.

**Right Top**  J.J. Butler ink bottle and slate fragment, Home for Colored Refugees hut site.

**Right Bottom**  Lead strap and melted lead, Home for Colored Refugees hut site.

This initial archaeological investigation consisted of the excavation of small test units spread evenly every 5 to 10 meters over the study area, as well as some metal detecting, and resulted in the discovery of artifacts likely associated with Home for Colored Refugees sites. Artifacts recovered include whiteware, bottle glass, window glass, square machine-cut nails, a porcelain doll foot, glass and metal buttons, a marble, and two U.S. Army eagle buttons of the Civil War era. Unfortunately, no architectural features, such as stone or brick foundations, were discovered during this work, but given the simple construction of both the cottages and huts, this was not unexpected.

In 2010 more intensive excavations were conducted at the sites of both refugee cottages and huts with a goal of exploring differences in refugee living conditions between the site types. The excavation at the huts area resulted in the discovery of two occupation areas that produced a large quantity of whiteware sherds, bottle and drinking glass fragments,
square cut nails, and animal bone. Lesser amounts of more expensive ironstone and porcelain, stoneware, lamp chimney glass, eating utensils, window glass, other architectural hardware, clay chinking, and buttons were also found. The low quantity of buttons found here contrasts with the high quantity of buttons found at the pre-expulsion refugee encampment near the warehouses, suggesting that large-scale laundry was not a major activity in this Home for Colored Refugees site area.

The discovery of clay chinking, nails, window glass, and two door rim-lock fragments indicates the presence of one or two log huts and may point to more substantial construction than expected. Possible architecturally related features include a post mold and a large limestone rock concentration. Although these rocks were redeposited in a drainage ditch, they likely were associated with a nearby, but as yet undiscovered, chimney. The discovery of the rim lock fragments, a key, and a padlock fragment suggests that the occupants wanted to secure their residence and possessions.

Two particularly interesting finds in the huts area were a J. J. Butler ink bottle fragment and a slate board fragment (see photo on pg. 27). These two items suggest that some of the residents were either literate or were taking classes at the refugee school. These artifacts may reflect the transition from slavery to freedom occurring at Camp Nelson.
Another intriguing but mysterious artifact type recovered is melted and shaped lead (see photo on pg. 27). A number of these fragments were found at both hut concentrations, but their function is unclear. They could have been from bullets, as three were found in this area, and could be residue from making weights or some unknown objects, and one appears to be a lead strap. Besides these bullets, the only other artifacts likely associated with soldiers are two eagle buttons and a poncho grommet. There is much less evidence of men at the Home for Colored Refugee huts compared to the pre-expulsion encampment site, suggesting tighter restrictions of men’s visiting and residence at the Home.

The large quantity of ceramics, including cups, saucers, plates, some serving vessels and crocks, and the animal bone recovered indicate that cooking and eating and even food storage routinely took place at the huts area. The animal bone found here is dominated by cow hyoid (tongue area), ankle, and feet bones, although some pig bones were found, and suggests a diet much less variable than that found at the pre-expulsion encampment and also different from that found at excavated slave cabins. There may have been more limited food selection available at the Home and it is possible that the huts’ residents were given rations.
Archaeological excavations at the Home cottages show a strikingly different pattern from that of the huts. The cottage area produced ceramics, bottle glass, square cut nails, window glass, tin can fragments, and buttons, but at a much lower density than found at the huts. The low quantity and density of ceramics was particularly striking and coupled with the complete absence of animal bone, suggests that much less cooking and eating occurred at the cottages. The cottage dwellers likely depended more on the government mess house.

These differences in diet and housing between the huts and cottage areas are of great significance. Dr. George Andrew of the U.S. Sanitary Commission visited the Home for Colored Refugees in July 1865. He concluded that “the causes of the increased sickness and mortality [at the Home are] owing to 1. The construction of their houses [cottages] differing…from which they have been accustomed [and] 2. The change

*Above* Jubilee singers.
in the elements of their food and the mode of its preparation...in the public kitchen and served in the general dining-hall.” He explained the better health of the huts occupants as follows: “In the one case [the cottages] the community system has supplanted that of the family; in the other [the huts] the family arrangement has been preserved.”

Epilog

Today, none of the original Home for Colored Refugee buildings remain and only a few residents with Home ancestors still reside in the community, now known as Hall or The Hall. But, the community does remain, even though it has gone through many changes. Over time the center of Ariel moved to the southwest to take advantage of higher ground, and have a more east-west orientation, away from the southeast to northwest orientation of the original Home cottage streets. Some of the more northern streets kept the original orientation, however. The community quickly grew to between 35 and 40 households by the 1900 census, where some of the men were listed as farmers instead of farm laborers, others having traded their farm hand occupation to work at a nearby distillery. Eventually the name of Ariel was replaced by Camp Nelson, or The Hall after its popular Benevolence Hall. Ariel Academy initially served both girls and boys, and like Berea, was integrated. After 1898 it served only African-Americans, and by the 1920s, only girls, and was called Camp Nelson Academy or the Fee Institute.

Possibly it was the influence of Ariel Academy that accounted for the community’s “air of refinement” described by Virginia Dox in a 1902 visit. Both Dox and more recent oral history informants highlight Ariel’s reputation for well-kept yards with lavish flower displays, and above all, for music. A group called the Jubilee Singers performed for Dox, who commented that “I shall never forget the happy picture of them, all dressed in white, with white chrysanthemums in their hair, as they sang for me in their rich, clear voices, “My Old Kentucky Home.” Later the community hosted a 16 piece brass band and a string band known as the Booker Orchestra. Major changes followed the end of WWII, when many families left to take advantage of factory jobs, often in other states. As noted above, today only a few residents have ties to the original settlement. Despite this fact, the rich history of this community and the supportive context it provided to those working out new lives as freed people will not be forgotten.
A strong reminder of the community’s heritage is preserved in the landscape, in the form of a spring that residents in 1902 were calling “Old Refugee.” Today it is more simply called the “Refugee Spring.” Resident Helen Booker Stewart’s grandmother had walked away from a life of slavery in Pulaski County, Kentucky to a life of freedom at Camp Nelson. As she told the story to Helen, the refugee spring provided her first drink of water on that long and dangerous trek. This spring provided for her throughout her life, as it did for the whole community.

Meanwhile, as Camp Nelson was dismantled, most of the land reverted back to farmland. It remained so until the early 1990s, when the Jessamine County Fiscal Court became interested in preserving the site and communicating its rich history. Today, over 500 acres of the original camp, including some of the Home for Colored Refugee land in modern day Hall, are part of Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park. This park, operated by Jessamine County Fiscal Court, has benefited from partnerships between private citizens, county, state, and federal agencies. Camp Nelson’s rich history is told at the Interpretive Center, the White House officer’s quarters, the barracks, and over five miles of interpretive trails. The site is on the National Register of Historic Places, is part of the National Park Service’s National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, and is on the Civil War Discovery Trail, Kentucky’s Civil War Trail, and the Lincoln Bicentennial Trail.
Come Visit **Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park**, where you can walk five miles of interpreted trails, and tour the restored historic White House, a barracks and interpretive center where you will see exhibits about Camp Nelson’s role as a portal to freedom and a Union army supply depot and hospital.

Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park  
6614 Danville Road  
Nicholasville, KY 40356  
(859) 881-5716  

**White House and Interpretive Center Tours**  
Tuesday - Saturday, 10 am - 5 pm  
No admission fee  

Interpretive trails providing site overview open nearly every day dawn to dusk.

Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park is located along US 27 about 20 miles south of Lexington, 6 miles south of Nicholasville on US 27, and 7.5 miles southeast of Wilmore along US 1268. The Park entrance is on the original Danville Pike, adjacent to US 27, one mile north of the Camp Nelson National Cemetery.

For more information, visit [www.campnelson.org](http://www.campnelson.org)