



## March 2011 Newsletter

### **Seizing Freedom: Archaeology of Escaped Slaves at Camp Nelson, Kentucky**

By W. Stephen McBride and Kim A. McBride\*

The booklet *Seizing Freedom: Archaeology of Escaped Slaves at Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, which is reprinted below, tells the story of African American women and children who escaped slavery in Kentucky during the Civil War and entered the U.S. army depot of Camp Nelson. The women and children, along with their husbands and fathers, began entering Camp Nelson in large numbers during the spring of 1864, as the men were attempting to join the U.S. Army. The men were successful in this venture and were emancipated upon joining one of the eight United States Colored Troop regiments organized at Camp Nelson. The women and children, however, who were generally the wives and children of the enlisting soldiers, were initially not successful in attaining their freedom, but many did stay within camp, at least in temporary encampments. It took the tragic November 1864 expulsion of the women and children from Camp Nelson, in which 102 died, to force the federal government to finally emancipate them (in March 1865) and create a more permanent refugee camp, known as the “Home for Colored Refugees.”

Archaeological excavations were conducted at both a pre-expulsion refugee encampment and at the “Home for Colored Refugees,” and provide new insights into the lives of these women and children. In particular, the archaeology illustrates differences in the women and children’s conditions, adaptations, and autonomy in the encampment versus the “Home” and in different settlement situations within the “Home.” This booklet was funded by a grant from the National Park Service’s National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program that also funded archaeology, archival research, and a museum exhibit on these women and children. The exhibit

is at Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park, which is located near Nicholasville, KY (see [campnelson.org](http://campnelson.org) for more information).

**Note**

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**This study is presented here, divided into two parts, both in Adobe pdf format, to increase download and display convenience.**

**Part I of *Seizing Freedom: Archaeology of Escaped Slaves at Camp Nelson, Kentucky* follows below.**

**Go to Part II of *Seizing Freedom: Archaeology of Escaped Slaves at Camp Nelson, Kentucky*:  
<http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/news0311/news0311-1B.pdf>**

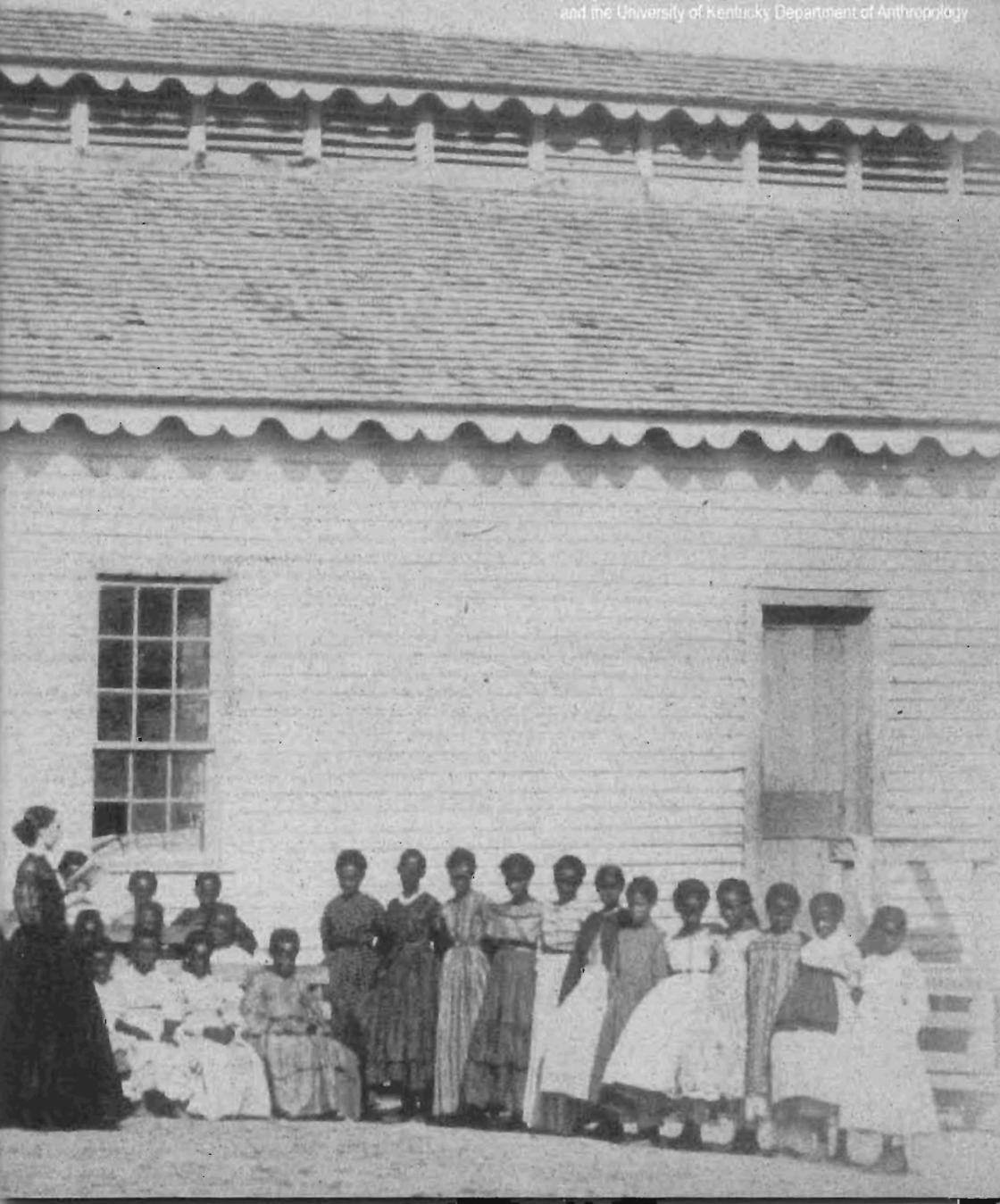
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# Seizing Freedom

**Archaeology of Escaped Slaves at Camp Nelson, Kentucky**

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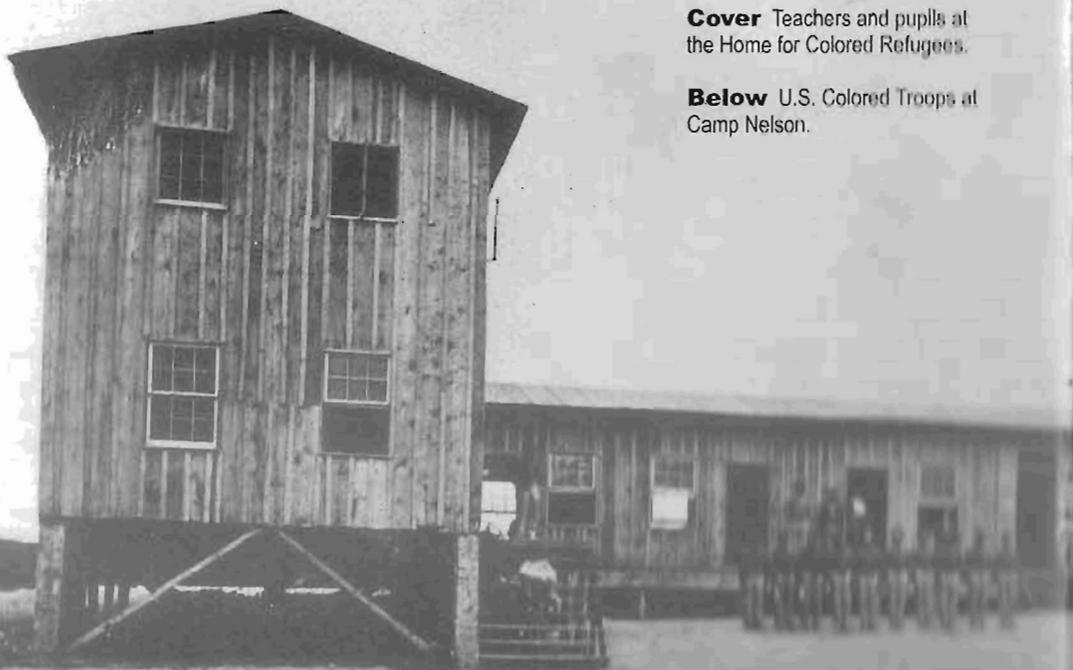
Quotations from army officials or missionaries are largely from the National Archives and the American Missionary Association papers, and have been reprinted in *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History*, by Richard Sears (2002, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington); quote from Virginia Dox from 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 Marrs from *Life and History of the Rev. Elijah Marrs* (1885, 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.

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**Cover** Teachers and pupils at the Home for Colored Refugees.

**Below** U.S. Colored Troops at Camp Nelson.



## Introduction

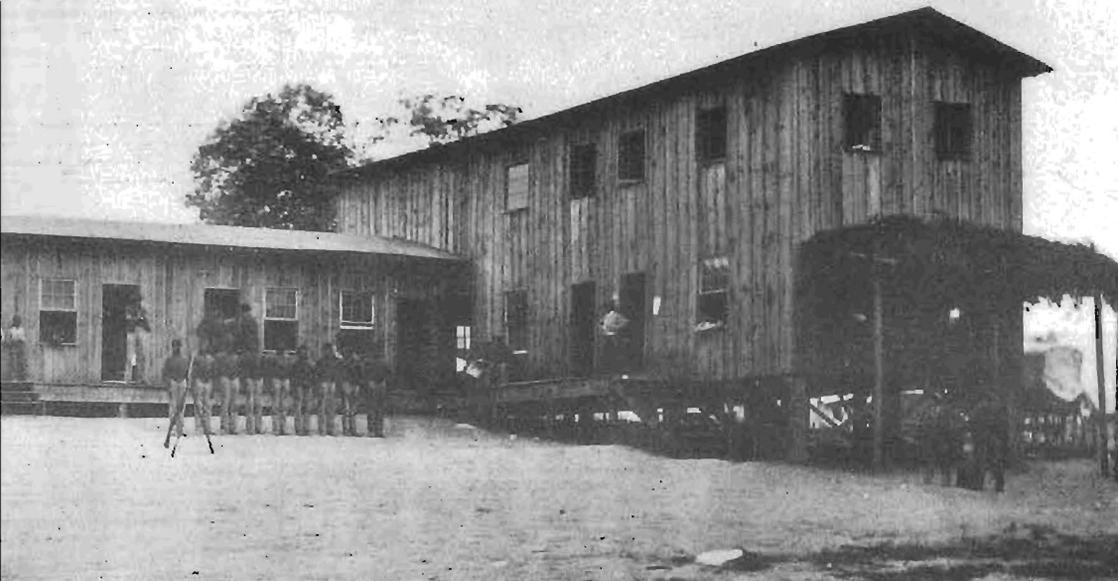
*See how much better off we are now then we was four years ago. It used to be five hundred miles to get to Canada from Lexington, but now it is only eighteen miles! Camp Nelson is now our Canada.*

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

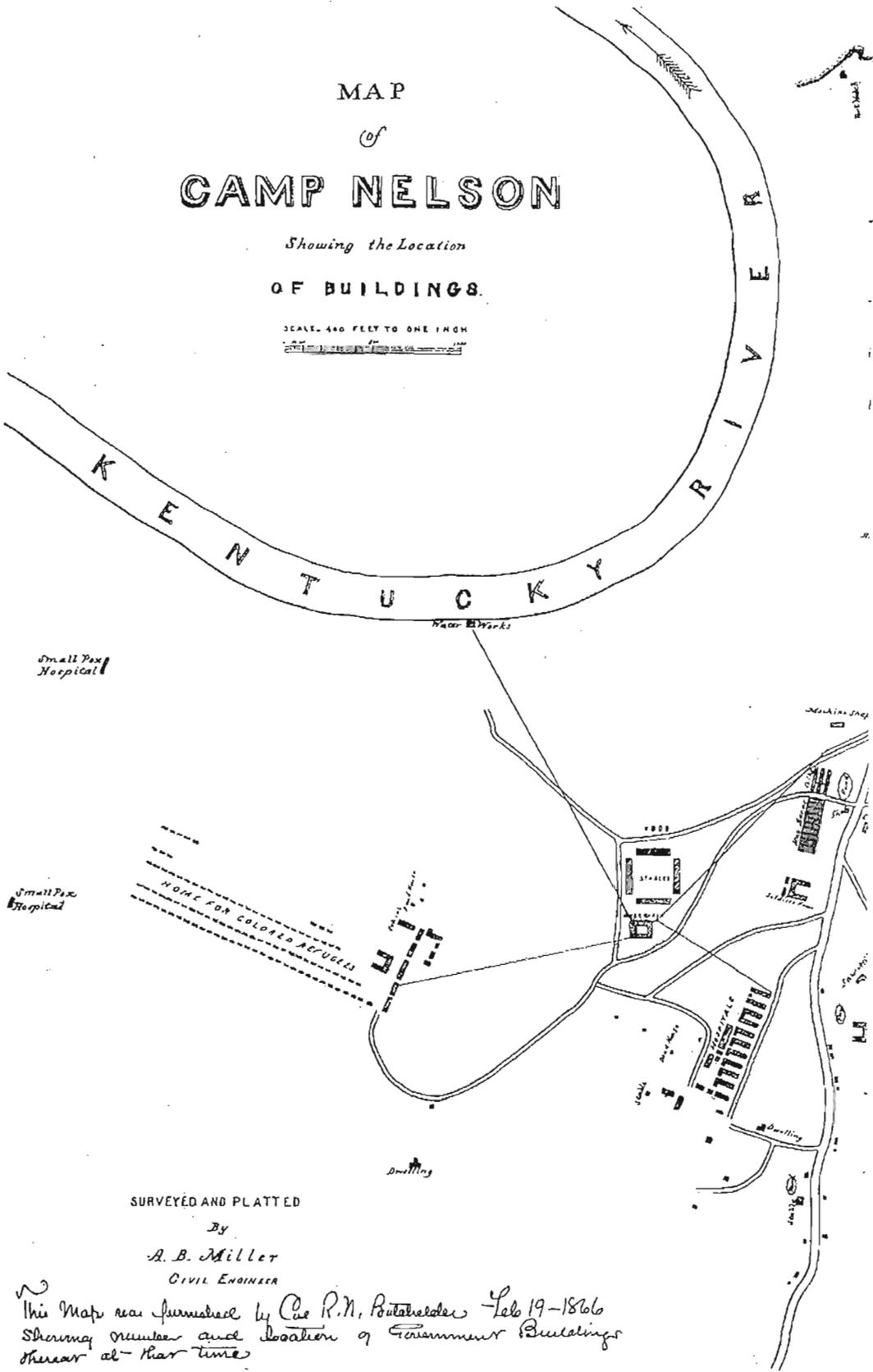
As the above quotes illustrate, Camp Nelson was viewed and remembered by many as a great Civil War and post-war center of emancipation. The emancipation story of Camp Nelson included African-American men, women, and children as well as the white missionaries, soldiers, politicians, and slave owners who 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  

SURVEYED AND PLATTED  
By  
A. B. Miller  
CIVIL ENGINEER

This Map was furnished by Col R. M. Postels - Feb 19-1866  
showing number and location of Government Buildings  
thereat at that time



## African-American Refugees Enter Camp

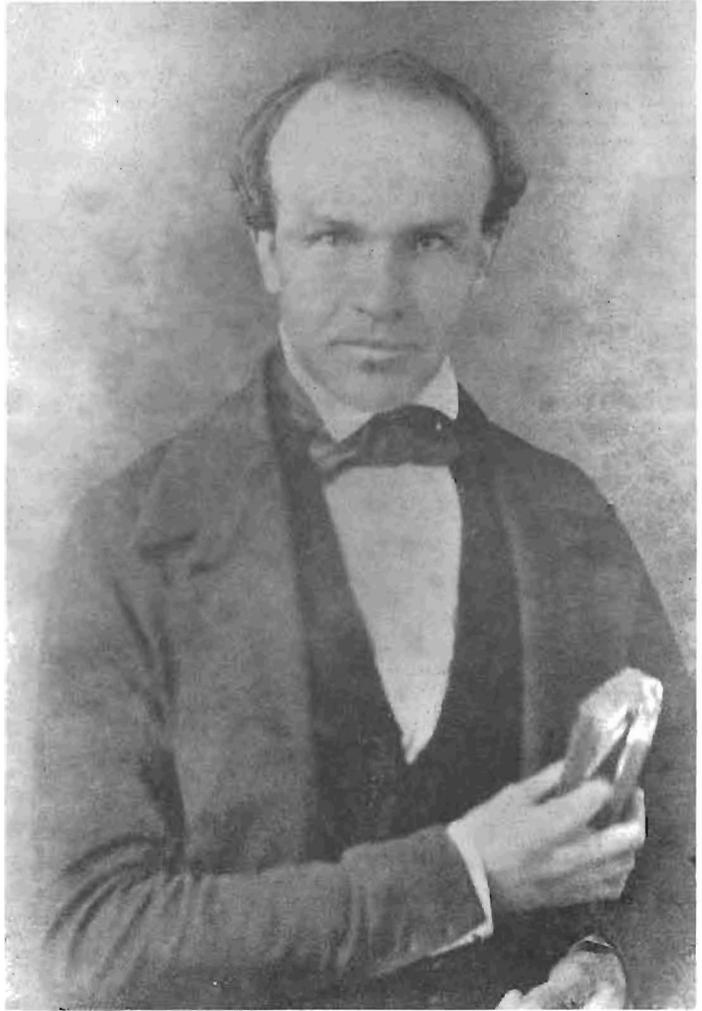
In the spring of 1864 large numbers of African-American women and children entered Camp Nelson with their husbands and fathers when the latter were finally allowed to join the U.S. Army without the consent of their owners. Upon enlistment the men were emancipated, but their wives and children were not. 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.

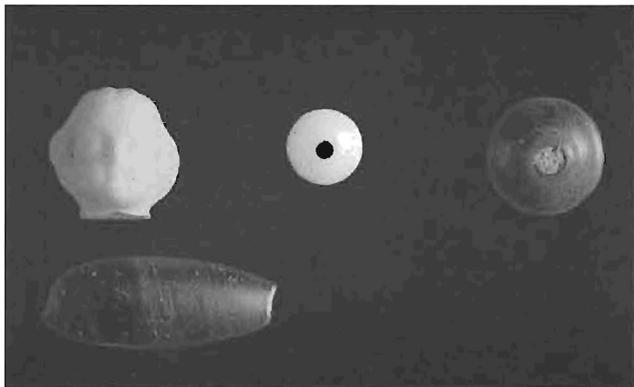
## Archaeology of a Refugee Encampment

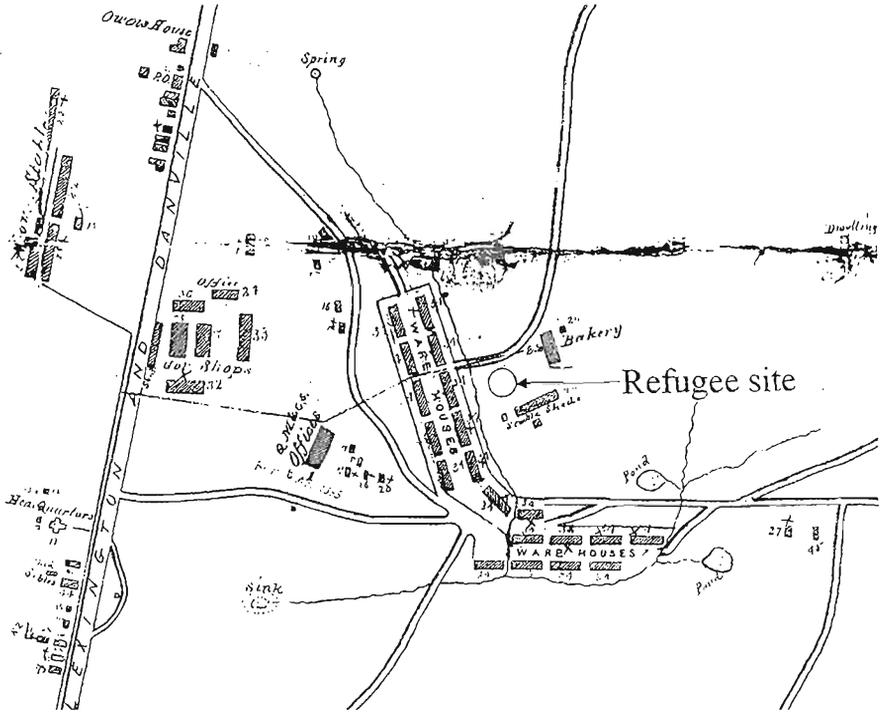
During a 2001 archaeological survey of Camp Nelson we discovered an encampment site between the documented site of the commissary and quartermaster warehouses and the bakery. The presence of container glass, ceramics, clothing items, animal bone, and military accoutrements suggested that the site was 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 124<sup>th</sup> 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...”

**Right** Artifacts suggesting women and children at the encampment site.

**Opposite** Location of the encampment site between the warehouses and bakery.





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 that at least seven to nine were likely present.



**Above** Stacked stones from pier or chimney, encampment site.

**Right** Post-mold stain in cross section, encampment site.

**Opposite** Archaeologists exposing rock concentration at the encampment site.



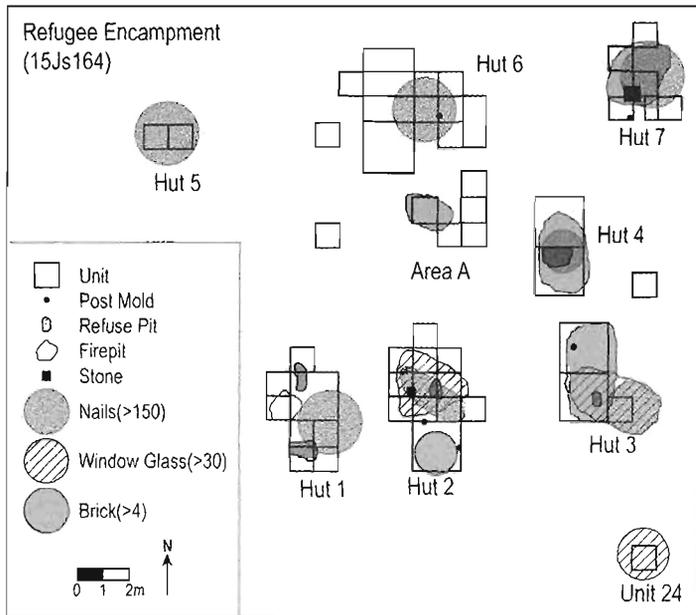
Very few extant structural remains of these huts were found, but this is not surprising given their ephemeral nature. The structural remains found include two stacked rock chimney remnants or piers, six post molds (stains left by former wooden posts), and three fire pits. Five refuse pits were also discovered 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.

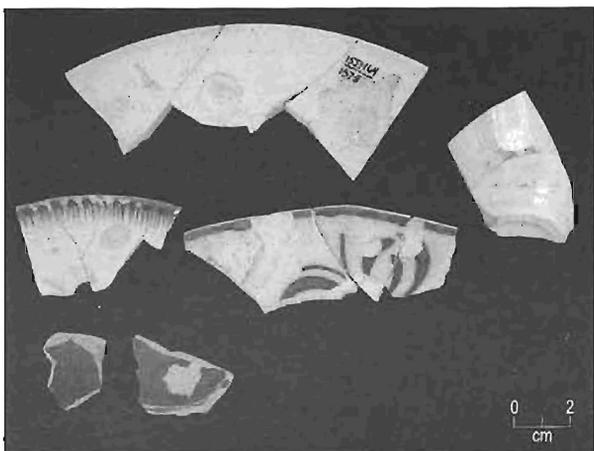
Another foodways item that is informative is animal bone, which suggests that encampment residents ate primarily low to moderate quality pork and beef cuts, including ribs, shanks, roasts, and leg joints. They also consumed some sheep, chicken, dove, rabbit and fish. How the refugees acquired this food 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

**Left** Detail of map of encampment site excavations.

**Right** Ceramics from the encampment site.



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



**Left** Button with inscribed "X", encampment site.

**Right Top** Military artifacts, encampment site.

**Right Middle** Variety of buttons, encampment site.

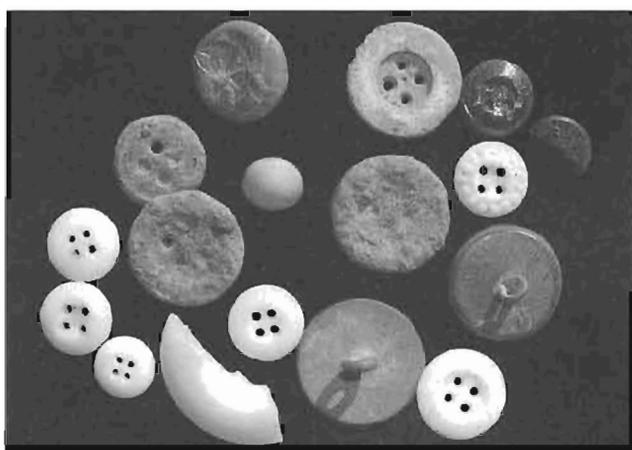
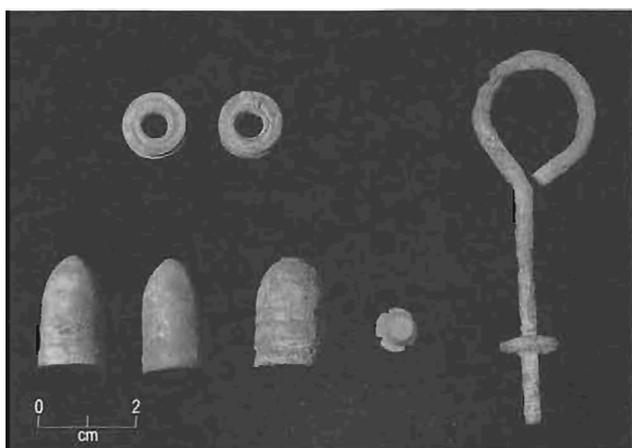
**Right Bottom** Burned artifacts, encampment site.

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





1837

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.

**Left** A coin worn as protective magic, encampment site.

**Right** A portion of an 1864 *New York Tribune* article on the refugee expulsion.

**FROM KENTUCKY**  
**Cruel Treatment of the Wives and Children of U. S. Colored Soldiers.**  
Correspondence of The N. Y. Tribune.  
CAMP NELSON, KY., Nov. 26, 1864.  
This camp has recently been the scene of a system of deliberate cruelty, which, in ferocity, of design, and humanity, of execution, surpasses painful misgivings as to whether we, indeed, live in a nineteenth century and a Christian land. At this moment over four hundred helpless human beings—frail women and delicate children—having been driven from their homes by United States soldiers, are now lying in barns and wool sheds, wandering through woods, languishing on the highway and literally starving, for no other crime than their husbands and fathers having taken aside the manacles of Slavery to shoulder Union muskets. These deluded creatures innocently supposed that freedom was better than bondage, and were presumptuous enough to believe that the pledged protection of the Government would be preserved inviolate.  
Since June last, Camp Nelson has been a recruiting rendezvous for slaves. During this period over nine thousand colored soldiers have entered the army from this post. When these men left their masters they assumed the responsibility of their own acts. Most of them left without their master's permission, and knowing the nature of Southern chivalry, they had clear perceptions of the torture to which their families would be subjected at the hands of their indignant masters. Indeed, in some instances, the wife and children were turned out of doors when the husband enlisted. Hence the recruit was frequently accompanied with his family, and received assurance that, on his entering the army, his wife and children would be provided with shelter, and allowed an opportunity to earn a livelihood by cooking, washing, &c., within the limits of the camp.

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