



## **March 2011 Newsletter**

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

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

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

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

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

**Return to March 2011 Newsletter:  
<http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/news0311/news0311.html>**

## 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 be 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.

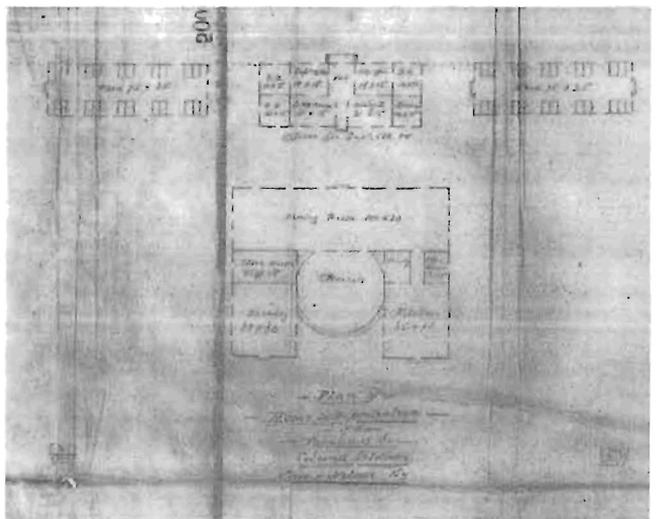
**Opposite** Initial plan for the Home for Colored Refugees.

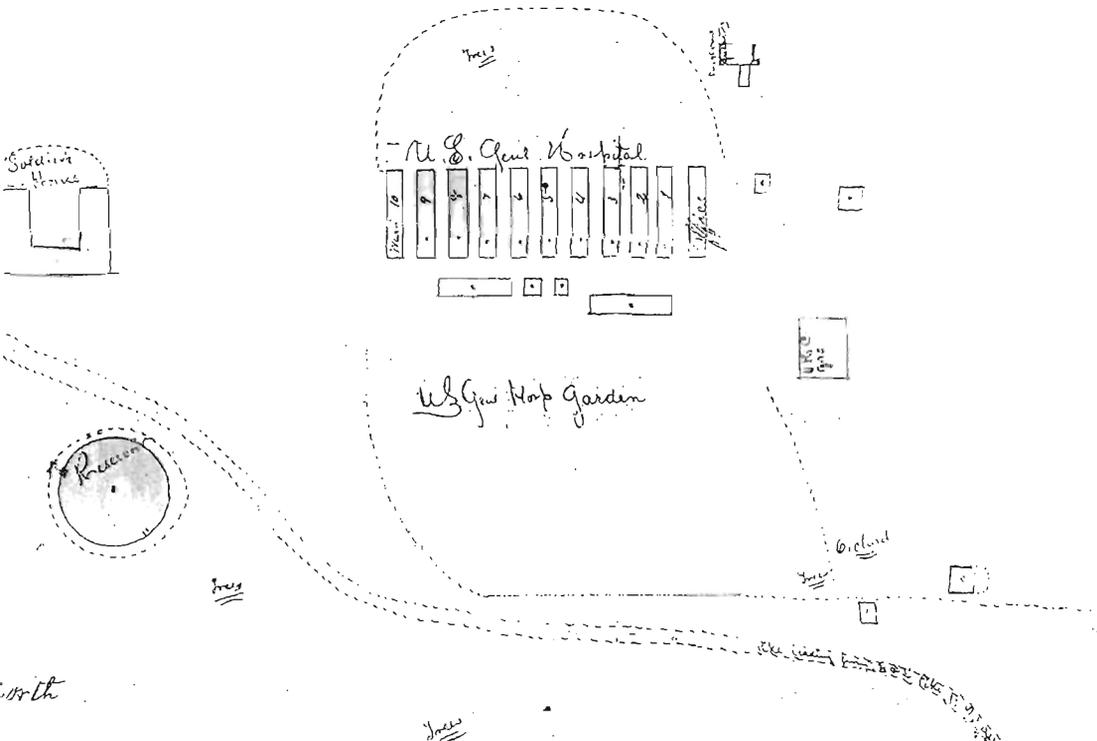
Fee lobbied Hall, the American Missionary Association and other camp officials for the construction of cottages, rather than barracks, citing the faster spread of disease in the latter and the fact that the refugees were more used to a family-based cabin setting. As fee stated,

*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.

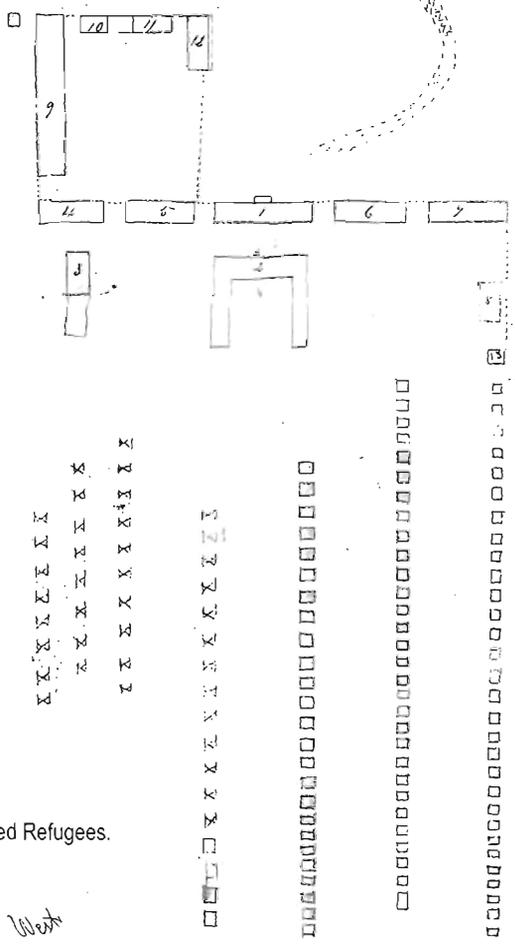
Ultimately what became the Home was a compromise between Capt. Hall, Rev. Fee and the refugees themselves. The barracks and mess house were built, but so were 97 duplex cottages, each 32 x 16 feet, with one family to live in each 16 x 16 foot half. The arrangement with the cottages was that the U.S.C.T. 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





Timber Land

□	Houses for Refugees.	7/12
⊗	Junks	50
△	Mills	53
Trees		
1	Head quarters	75 X 30
2	Dining Hall	100 X 30
3	School House	100 X 30
4	Hospital ward for each	75 X 25
5	Reception ward	75 X 25
6	Commission	25 X 25
7	Hospital Building	30 X 30
8	Store Room	25 X 25
9	Surgeons Quarters	20 X 20
10	Wash Room	18 X 22
11	Butter establishment	(Barn)



Above Detailed map of the Home for Colored Refugees.

West

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 12<sup>th</sup> 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*

Garden

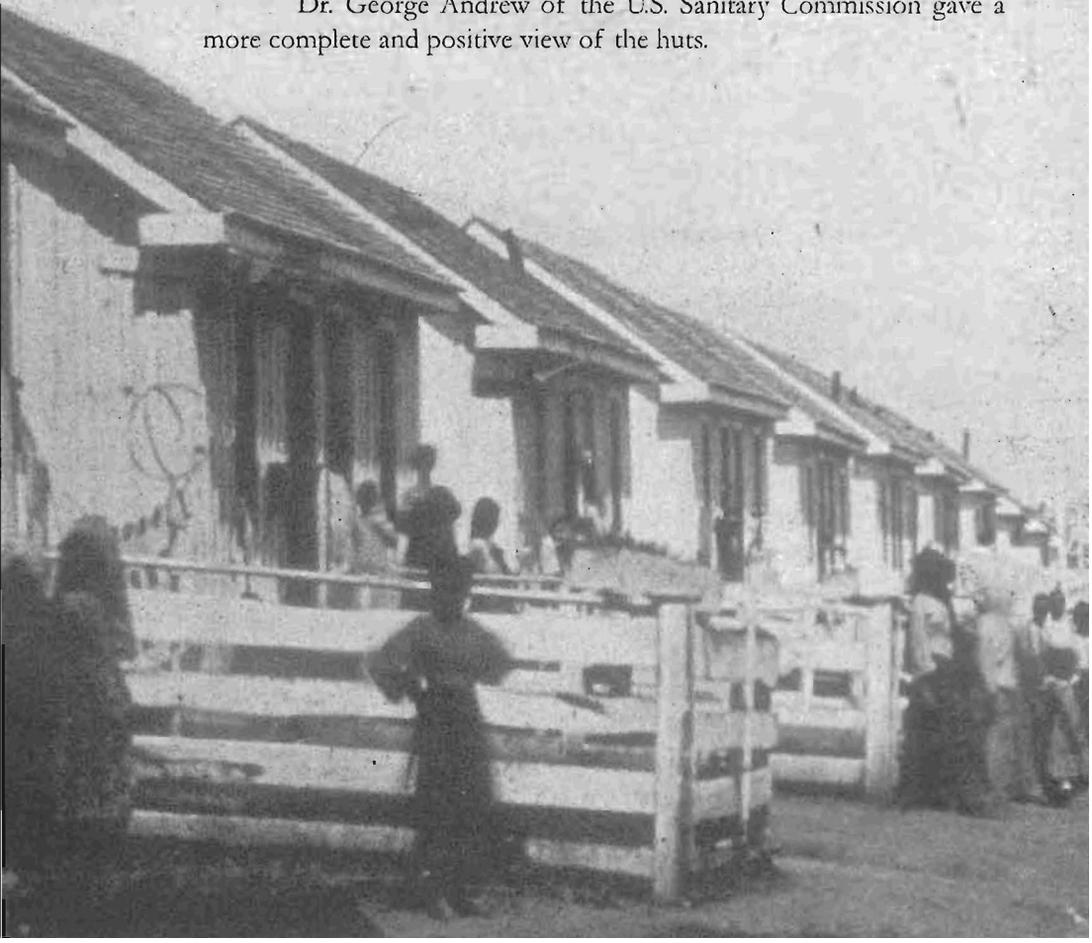
200 Acres  
for Refugees

*Father and Mother the flour 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



Cottages at the Home for Colored Refugees.



**Left** Sergeant Elijah Marrs.

**Opposite** Cottages, tents, and huts at the Home for Colored Refugees.

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.

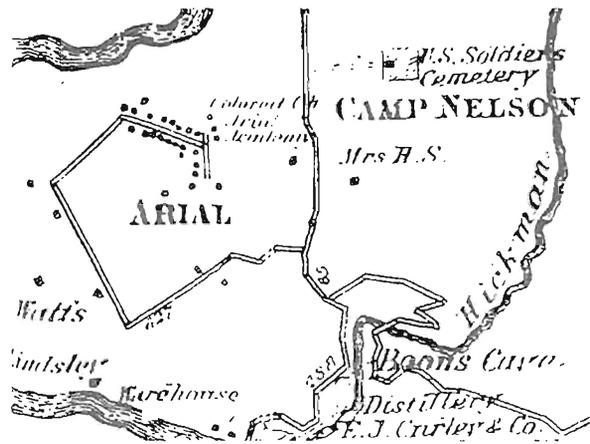
This transition was not always peaceful. Reports from the Freedmen's Bureau document widespread white resentment against Camp Nelson, and local white men, sometimes called Raiders or Regulators, attacked the Home for Colored Refugees area in the fall of 1866. Several African-Americans were badly injured 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 114<sup>th</sup> 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.



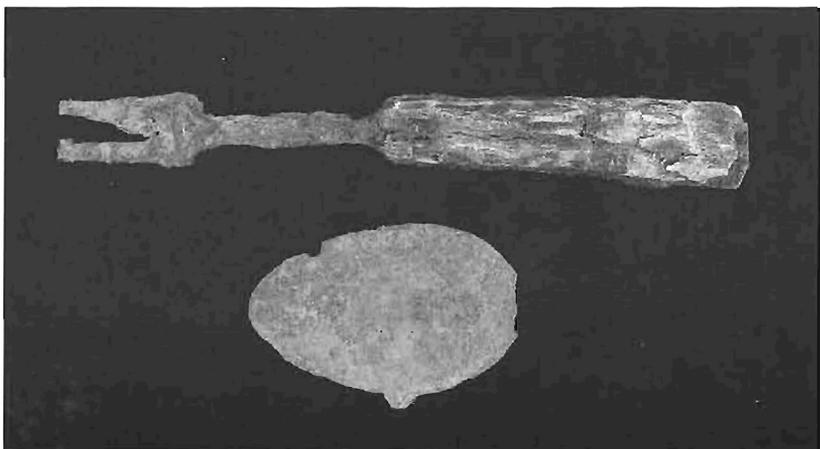
**Left** Archaeologist uncovering ceramics at the Home for Colored Refugees hut site.

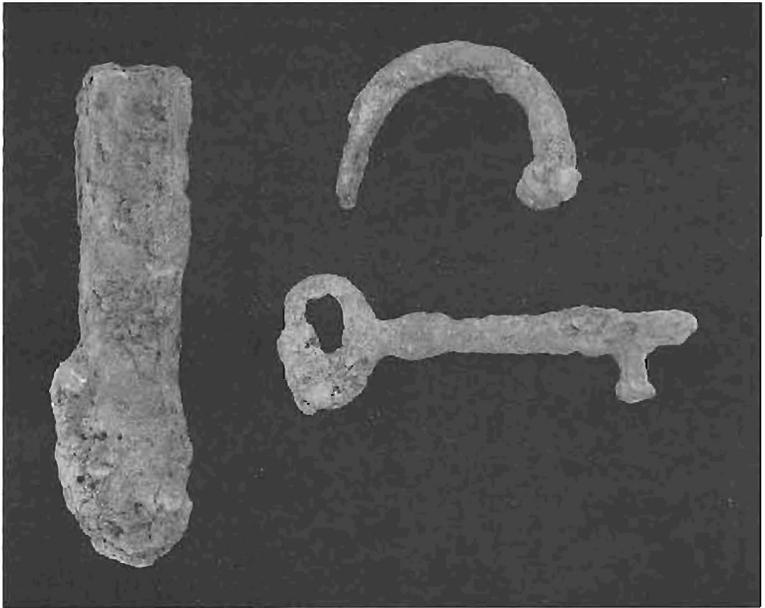
**Below** Fork and spoon bowl, Home for Colored Refugees hut site.

**Opposite** 1877 atlas showing the Ariel community.

## 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.



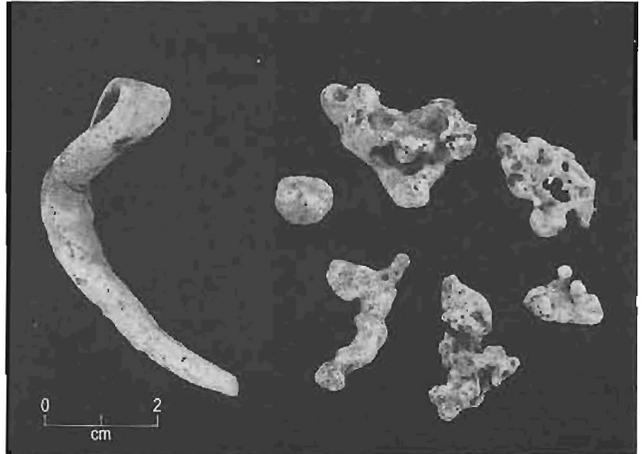
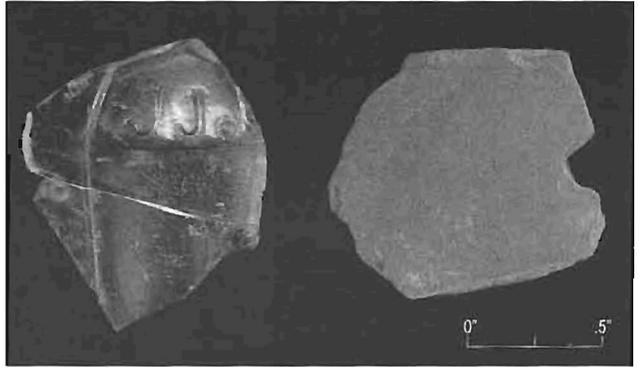


**Left Top** Rock concentration, Home for Colored Refugees hut site.

**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.

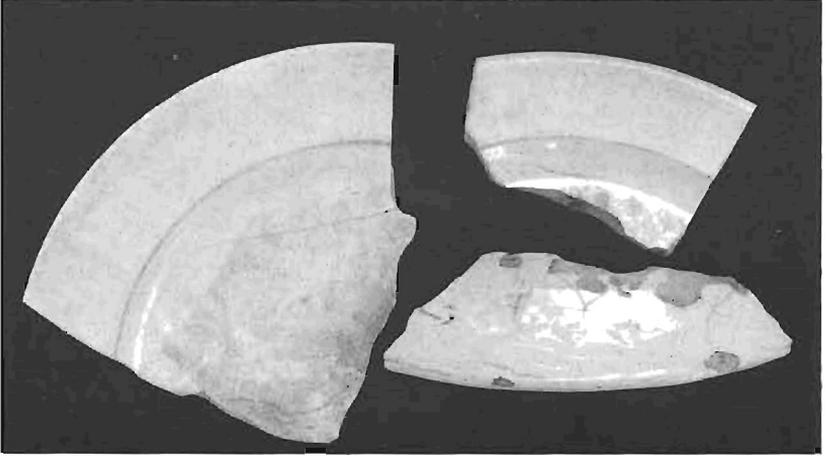
In 2010 more intensive excavations were conducted at the sites of both refugee cottages and huts with a goal of exploring differences in refugee living conditions between the site types. The excavation at the huts area resulted in the discovery of two occupation areas that produced a large quantity of 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.



**Left** Cow bones *in situ*, Home for Colored Refugees hut site.

**Above** Whiteware and ironstone, Home for Colored Refugees hut site.

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.”

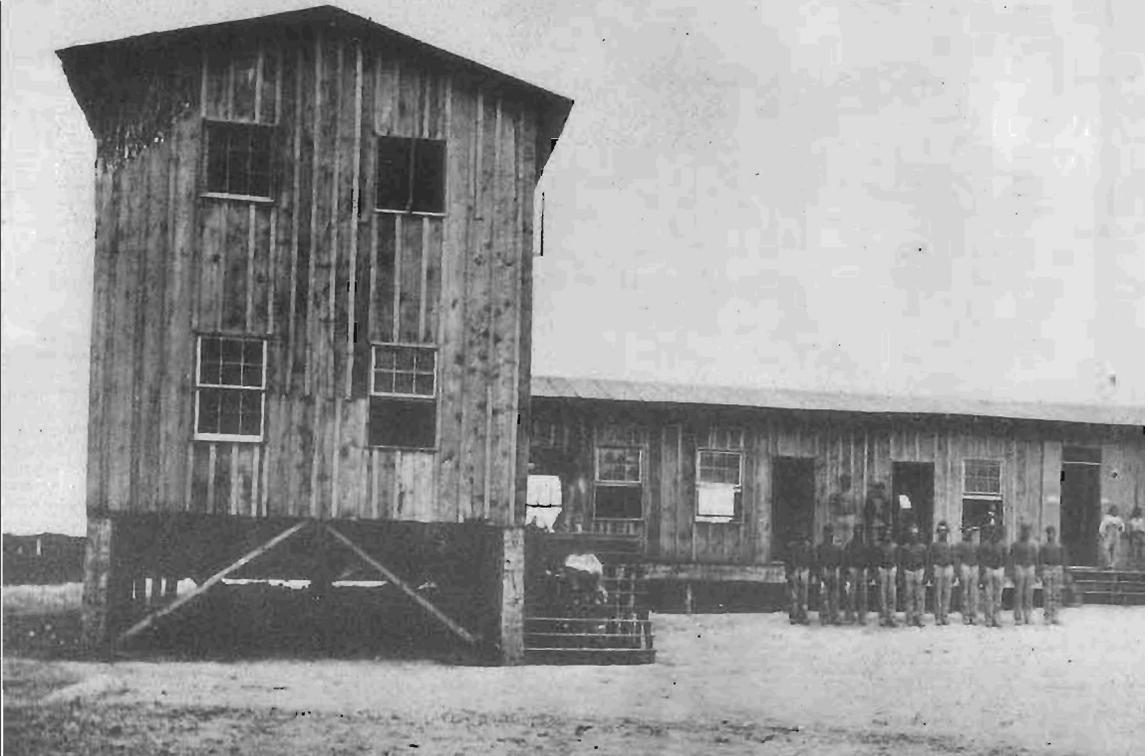
## Epilog

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

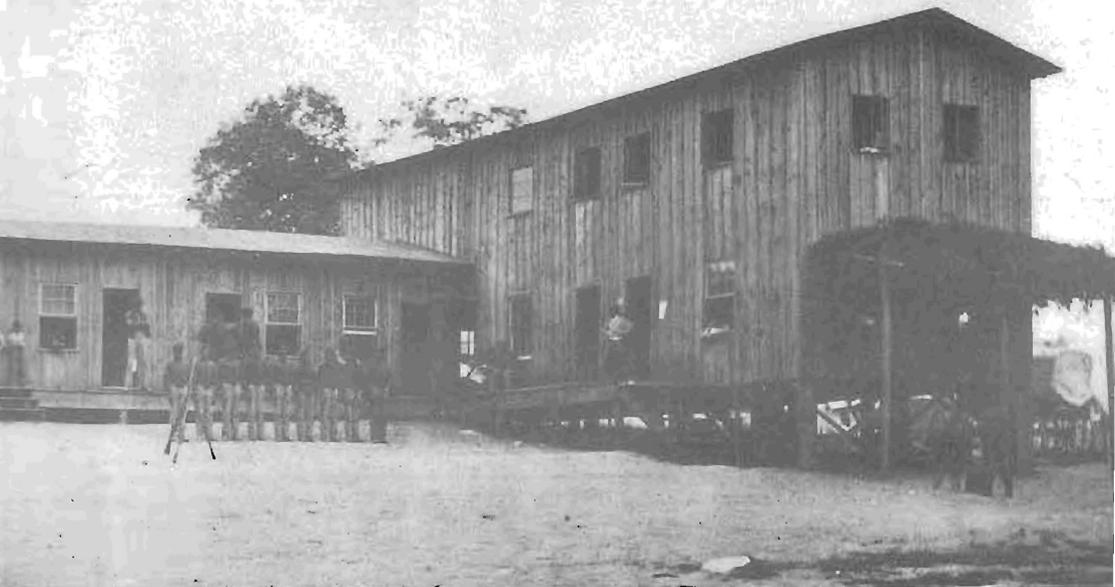
**White House and Interpretive Center Tours**

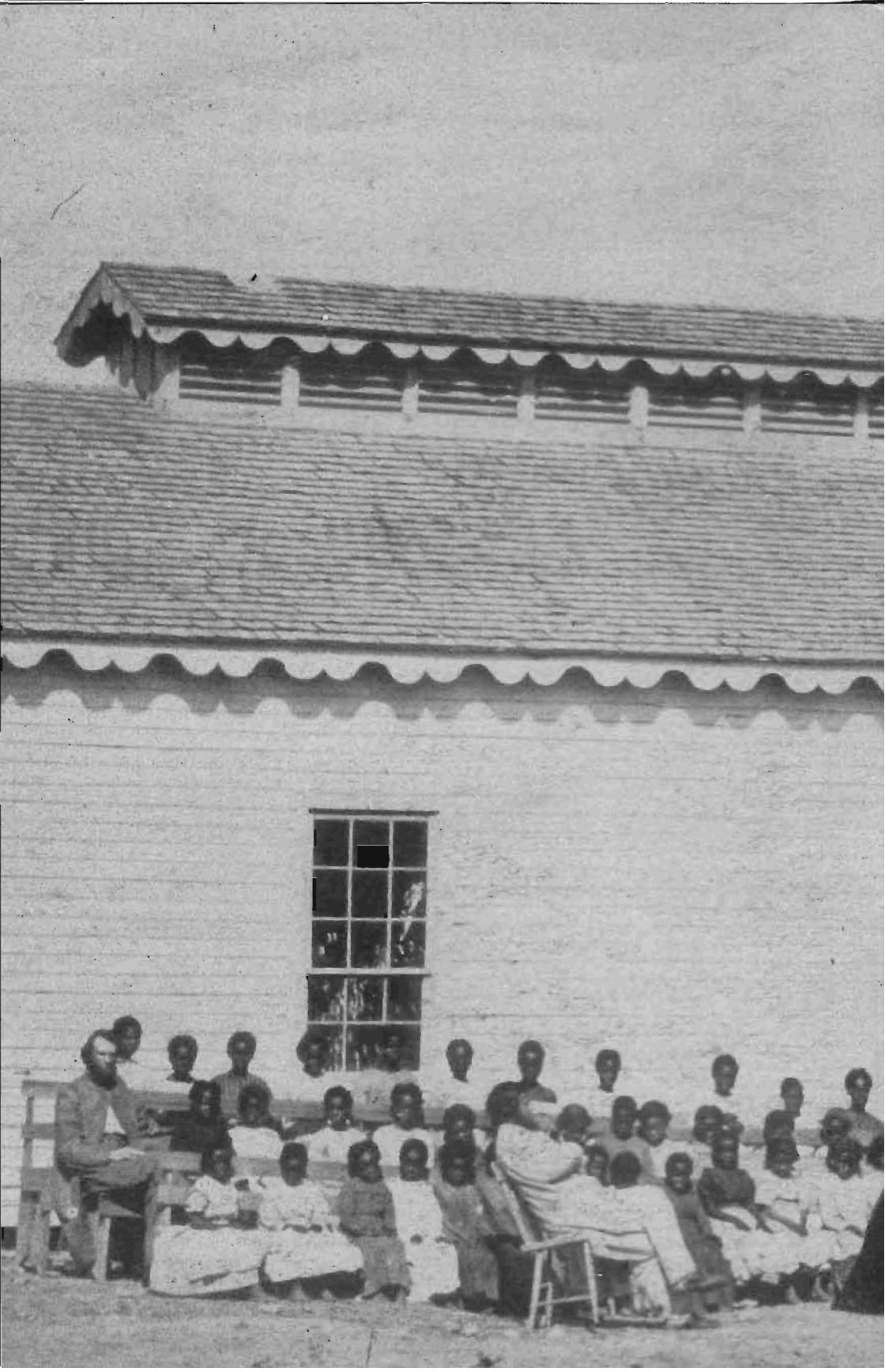
Tuesday - Saturday, 10 am - 5 pm  
No admission fee

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)**





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