CAMP NELSON, KENTUCKY, DURING THE CIVIL WAR: CRADLE OF LIBERTY OR REFUGEE DEATH CAMP?

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Blacks entered Union lines with the arrival of the first Federal troops in Kentucky. Though slavery remained legal in the Commonwealth throughout the Civil War, thousands of bondsmen soon found employment in Union camps where they frequently enjoyed protection from their owners. As the war intensified, the Federal army's need for labor increased, and after March 1862 the military, over the protests of slave owners, regularly impressed blacks to work on roads, cut timber for bridges, and chop wood for locomotives. Kentucky's loyal slaveholders were irritated further by the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation of 22 September 1862 and the final one of 1 January 1863. Though not applicable to the Commonwealth, they resulted in additional numbers of bondsmen fleeing to Union camps which made Federal commanders less concerned with whether or not an impressed slave's owner was a Union or a Confederate sympathizer. With the ever increasing reliance of the Federal war machine on black labor in Kentucky, it was only a matter of time before slaves began enrolling in the army and their families began crowding into Federal camps.[1]

Though many black Kentuckians found their way into the Union army by fleeing to recruiting stations in Tennessee and states along the Ohio River, the Federal government did not

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1 Victor B. Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky: Emancipation and Freedom, 1862-1884* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 16, 45-46; James M. McPherson, *Ordeal By Fire: The Civil War* (3 vols.; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), II, 293; Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867. Selected From the Holdings of the National Archives of the United States.* Series I. *The Destruction of Slavery* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), I, 585.

actively recruit blacks in the Commonwealth until March 1864.[2] Even then Federal authorities promised Governor Thomas E. Bramlette to control recruiting procedures strictly by enrolling only those free blacks and slaves who desired to enter the military, by compensating loyal slave owners if their bondsmen enlisted, and by hurrying enlistees to rendezvous camps outside of the Commonwealth.[3]

The March call for black volunteers scarcely touched Kentucky's potential of 42,000 freemen and slaves available for military service, primarily because of the opposition of white Kentuckians, the hostility of guerillas, and the ease with which slaveholders were able to retrieve bondsmen from Federal officers.[4] Faced with the failure of his recruiting policy, Adjutant General of the Federal Army Lorenzo Thomas, the officer charged with the task of raising black troops in the South, decided to enroll all able-bodied slaves "regardless of the wishes of their owners." To facilitate their induction, Thomas promised them protection at garrisoned camps strategically located throughout the Commonwealth. Beginning in June 1864 a second and larger wave of Kentucky slaves flocked to the Federal camps to enlist.[5]

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2 Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky*, 51; John W. Blassingame, "The Recruitment of Colored Troops in Kentucky, Maryland and Missouri, 1863-1865," *The Historian* XXIX (1967): 538; John David Smith, "The Recruitment of Negro Soldiers in Kentucky, 1863-1865," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, 72 (1974): 383; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (hereafter cited as *OR*) (128 vols.; Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. III, Vol. IV, 59-60, 177-78. The Federal army began recruiting black troops in Kentucky west of the Cumberland River, which was administered militarily from Tennessee, in January 1864. See Howard, *Black Liberation*, 57; Major W. H. Sidell to Col. James B. Fry, 14 March 1864, The Negro in the Military Service of the United States 1639-1886, (hereafter cited as NIMS), National Archives (hereafter cited as NA), Microcopy 858, Roll 3, frames 0134-37.

3 *OR*, Ser. III, Vol. IV, 233-34, 248-49; Blassingame, "Recruitment of Colored Troops," 537-38; General Orders No. 34, 18 April 1864, Military District of Kentucky, Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands, Record Group 393 (hereafter cited as RG), NA, Washington, D.C.

4 *OR*, Ser. III, Vol. IV, 177-79, 501; Smith, "Recruitment," 384; *OR*, Ser. III, Vol. III, 1174-75, 1178-79; Joseph C. G. Kennedy to J. P. Usher, 11 February 1863, NIMS, Microcopy 858, Roll 2, frame 0037.

5 *OR*, Ser. III, Vol. IV, 548; Telegram, Major General S. G. Burbridge

The promise of protection for slave volunteers in Federal camps offered the vast majority of Kentucky bondsmen their first viable opportunity to flee slavery, and they responded initially by joining the army in large numbers. When volunteering slowed to a late summer trickle, however, Union authorities decided, in the fall of 1864, to impress every available black into the Federal army, a program that continued for the remainder of the war. That decision, a mortal wound to Kentucky slavery, resulted in a third flood of slaves into Union garrisons.[6] Unfortunately, the absence of a uniform policy of black recruiting and the general naiveté of Federal officials regarding refugees resulted in unmeasurable misery for both black soldiers and their families.

Camp Nelson proved to be the most important Federal recruiting camp for Kentucky blacks. It is estimated that forty percent of Kentucky's total of 23,703 black soldiers, about 10,000, passed through Camp Nelson.[7] Occupying about 4,000 acres high on a bluff overlooking a sharp bend in the Kentucky River in southern Jessamine County, Camp Nelson had served for several years as a base of supply for Federal operations in east Tennessee.[8] Located just south of one of the largest centers of Kentucky slaveholding, the camp offered the possibility of a haven for central Kentucky blacks who wished to enter the Federal army.

The first wave of black volunteers quickly filled the draft quotas in several central Kentucky counties as slaves ran off in

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to Sidell, 13 May 1864, Telegrams Received, Assistant Provost Marshal for Kentucky, Records of the Provost Marshal General's Bureau, 1863-1866 (hereafter cited as PMGB), RG 110, NA.

6 Richard L. Troutman, ed., *The Heavens Are Weeping: The Diaries of George Richard Browder 1852-1886* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 184, 189; Mother Columba Carrol to Mary Ann Murphy, 22 October 1864, Mother Columba Carroll Letters, (Nazareth Archival Center, Nazareth, Kentucky); Smith, "Recruitment," 385.

7 Louisville *Daily Union Press*, 9 April 1865; *OR*, Ser. III, Vol. IV, 1270; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 370. Black experiences at Camp Nelson were paralleled at other, smaller garrisons.

8 Bennett H. Young and S. M. Duncan, *A History of Jessamine County, Kentucky, from its Earliest Settlement to 1898* (Louisville, 1898), 185; *OR*, Ser. III, Vol. IV, 468; Louisville *Daily Union Press*, 9 April 1865.

droves to join the Federal army.[9] In Boyle County slaves "thronged" into the enlistment office the first day it opened, quickly formed into squads, and marched off toward Camp Nelson.[10] In Marion County slaves volunteered in such numbers that authorities had to close the recruiting office until they had processed the backlog of earlier enlistments.[11] By the end of May there were 400 recruits at Camp Nelson. Recruiters reported that slave volunteers came in by the hour, and at the end of the summer there were 2,000 black soldiers at Camp Nelson.[12] Once the Federal government created black units, it was almost inevitable that the troops in these outfits would coerce slaves they encountered in the field to enlist, a practice that increased considerably by the fall of 1864 when armed parties of blacks combed central Kentucky counties to impress slaves.[13]

The experiences of early black volunteers should have been an omen for the recruits and their families. Recruits leaving one central Kentucky county were "pretty severely injured" by a mob of angry whites, and upon arriving at Camp Nelson, "grievously dispirited" after a sixteen mile march without food or water, the post commander, an opponent of recruiting blacks,

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9 Telegram, Captain Thomas H. Moore to Sidell, 12 May 1864, Telegrams Received, Assistant Provost Marshal for Kentucky, PMGB, RG 110, NA; Jonathan Truman Dorris and John Cabell Chenault, *Old Cane Springs: A Story of the War between the States in Madison County, Kentucky* (Louisville, 1937), 123; Howard, *Black Liberation*, 63.

10 R. D. Mussey to C. W. Foster, 2 June 1864, clipping from *Nashville Dispatch*, n.d.; Letters Received, Colored Troops Division, Records of the Adjutant General's Office (hereafter cited as RGO), RG 94, NA; J. S. Newberry, *The U.S. Sanitary Commission in the Valley of the Mississippi, During the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1866* (Cleveland, 1871), 519-20; Howard, *Black Liberation*, 63.

11 Tri-Monthly Report of Business and General Transactions, Assistant Provost Marshal of Kentucky, Fourth District, PMGB, RG 110, NA; Telegram, Captain James M. Fidler to Sidell, 16 May 1864, Telegrams Received, Assistant Provost Marshal of Kentucky, PMGB, RG 110, NA.

12 Telegram, Captain T. E. Hall to Sidell, 25 May 1864, Telegrams Received, Assistant Provost Marshal of Kentucky, PMGB, RG 110, NA; Telegram, Thomas D. Sedgewick to Major W. H. Sidell, 7 June 1864, Telegrams Received, Assistant Provost Marshal of Kentucky, PMGB, RG 110, NA.

13 *OR*, Ser. III, Vol. IV, 1018; Berlin and others, *The Destruction of* Slavery, 511.

"refused to accept them."[14] Volunteers from other counties were also attacked as they left their homes. Some arrived with badly cut backs from whippings and others with their ears cut off.[15] Though government tents and food were available at Camp Nelson for newly arriving black recruits, the only assistance they received came from Thomas Butler of the United States Sanitary Commission. Repeated pleas from Butler for Federal officers to receive and organize the 1,500 black volunteers who arrived at Camp Nelson by the end of June were rebuffed. If it had not been for Butler, who housed several hundred recruits in one wing of the Sanitary Commission's Soldiers' Home, found tents for a thousand more, and fed those without food, suffering among black recruits would have been much greater. Finally, in mid summer, the army charged an officer with organizing black units, but the actual process continued in a semi-official manner at the Sanitary Commission's Soldiers' Home until officers began officially receiving black recruits in the fall of 1864.[16]

Black recruits faced additional problems when former owners, sometimes hot on their heels, arrived at Camp Nelson demanding the return of their slave property. The provost marshal of Boyle County, in cooperation with a number of slaveholders, personally attempted to persuade twenty recruits at Camp Nelson to return to slavery. The post commander intervened, but one recruit went home with his owner. On another occasion Boyle County's provost marshal, hoping to return them to slavery, lured three hundred volunteers from Camp Nelson to a rendezvous with their owners. Only the diligence of Thomas Butler foiled his plans.[17]

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14 R. D. Mussey to Foster, 2 June 1864, clipping from *Nashville Dispatch*, n.d.; Letters Received, Colored Troop Division, AGO, RG 94, NA; J. S. Newberry, *Sanitary Commission*, 520.

15 New York *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 9 July 1864; Fidler to Brigadier General J. B. Fry, 31 May 1864, NIMS, Microcopy 858, Roll 3, frame 0314.

16 Newberry, *Sanitary Commission*, 520-21, 524-26.

17 Ibid., 522-23.

The enlistment of slaves at Camp Nelson was followed by a general influx of their families into camp lines. During the summer of 1864, relatives of central Kentucky slave recruits lined the roads leading to Camp Nelson, swelling to thousands the number of black refugees from Kentucky and southern states, seeking haven there since late 1862.[18]

Families of volunteers fled to Camp Nelson for several reasons. In many instances slave owners viewed women and small children as an unacceptable financial burden and expelled them from their cabins after men ran away to join the army.[19] Hundreds more fled from their homes because of cruel treatment. Mary Boyce told Camp Nelson authorities of being horribly "whipped and beaten" after her husband entered the army, leaving her no choice but to flee. Nancy, another refugee, complained that she and her children were beaten "with anything at hand," and Dinah fled her home when her owner threatened her life.[20] The appearance of women and children with the marks of recent severe whippings provided ample evidence for Camp Nelson authorities that many slaves left their homes under duress.[21]

In other instances, soldiers urged their families to come to Camp Nelson, especially after promulgation of a March 1865 law freeing the wives and children of slave soldiers.[22] Lucinda, a Lexington slave of the Reverend William Pratt, learned through a letter from her husband Henry, a Camp Nelson enlistee, that she was free. Henry advised Lucinda of her options: she might hire herself to someone or come to Camp Nelson.

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18 William Pratt Diary, III, 4 July 1864 (Manuscript Division, Special Collections, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky); Newberry, *Sanitary Commission*, 385.

19 Microcopy, John G. Fee to George Whipple, 8 February 1865, American Missionary Association Manuscripts (Amistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana) (hereafter cited as AMA MSS); Gutman, *Black Family*, 374.

20 Elnathan Davis, "Freedmen," *The American Missionary*, IX (June 1865): 121.

21 Fee to Whipple, 8 February 1865, AMA MSS; Gutman, *Black Family*, 374.

22 *U.S. Statutes at Large* (Washington, 1866), XIII, 571.

Lucinda decided to continue working for Pratt; after two weeks, however, Pratt awoke to find "the kitchen cleaned up, the bread . . . ready for baking & kindling at hand to start a fire," but no Lucinda. She had stolen away to Camp Nelson to be with her husband.[23] Still others fled to Camp Nelson seeking freedom. A young lad who helped support his refugee family by shining soldiers' shoes no doubt represented the feelings of many when he told Camp Nelson officials that he had "come for liberty."[24]

The first refugees arriving at Camp Nelson in the summer of 1864 found that they were no more welcome at the "cradle of liberty" than on the farms they had fled. The post commander, Brigadier General Speed S. Fry, rejected any responsibility for feeding or sheltering refugees. Fry, following the naive government policy that masters were honor "bound" to care for families of soldiers, promptly ordered the return to their owners of all women and children and men unfit for military service.[25] He promised that "the lash" awaited any expelled refugee who came back to Camp Nelson. When three women refugees expelled from camp returned the next day, Fry had them bound and whipped as an example for all. Fry, furthermore, cooperated with slaveholders who arrived to claim servants seeking refuge at Camp Nelson. Reports circulated within the camp of "men, women, and children, tied together," guarded by Union soldiers, waiting for their masters to claim them. Still others told of squads of soldiers "hunting slaves" throughout the camp, and "returning them to their masters." A slave girl employed as a cook at the camp hospital, arrested and held for her master on Fry's orders, "begged" to be shot rather than sent back into slavery. A band of sympathetic soldiers who heard her pleas eventually rescued the girl.[26]

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23 Pratt Diary, III, 1 April 1865.

24 Davis, "Freedmen," 121.

25 *OR*, Ser. III, Vol. IV, 474; *Lexington Observer & Reporter*, 16 July 1864.

26 *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 18 June 1864; *The Liberator*, 9 Dec. 1864.

In spite of the harsh treatment, women and children continued to arrive at Camp Nelson, often with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. Without food, clothing, firewood, shelter, and health care, the 500 to 1,500 refugees who remained at Camp Nelson after the spring of 1864 experienced some of the worst living conditions of the Civil War. Many of the women barely kept their loved ones alive by competing for the few jobs available as cooks and washerwomen for soldiers. Extended families lived in small tents, crude huts, and shanties built from scrap material. "Nowhere in the whole range of my observation of misfortune and misery occasioned by the war," a United States Sanitary Commission worker wrote, "have I seen any cases which appealed so strongly to the sympathies of the benevolent as those congregated in the contraband camp at Camp Nelson." The death rate was appalling, yet refugees continued to come, and, sadly, continued to die.[27]

General Fry periodically swept through the camp with troops, harassing refugees out of his lines, only to have them return. To solve the recurring problem, Fry decided to expel those refugees living inside Camp Nelson and to destroy their shanty town in order to prevent their return. Early on the morning of 23 November 1864, a bitterly cold day when the temperature did not rise above freezing, the warmly clad soldiers of the provost guard drove four hundred poorly clothed women and children, including the sick, from their huts into "the wintry blast."[28] Before the day ended the road to Nicholasville was strewn with the frozen corpses of those who fell by the wayside. Others, at the first opportunity, huddled in barns or outbuildings beside the road. A few sought shelter from the bitter weather in the woods.[29]

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27 Newberry, *Sanitary Commission*, 527-28; *The Liberator*, 9 Dec. 1864.
28 *The Liberator*, 9 Dec. 1864; Gutman, *Black Families*, 372.
29 Richard D. Sears, *"A Practical Recognition of the Brotherhood of Man": John G. Fee and the Camp Nelson Experience* (Berea, Ky.: Berea College Press, 1986), 10-11.

Joseph Miller, a Lincoln County recruit and former slave, described what happened to his wife and four children that day in an affidavit written 26 November:

> About eight Oclock Wednesday morning November 23 a mounted guard came to my tent and ordered my wife and children out of Camp The morning was bitter cold. It was freezing hard. I was certain that it would kill my sick child to take him out in the cold. I told the man in charge of the guard that it would be the death of my boy. I told him that my wife and children had no place to go and I told him that I was a soldier of the United States. He told me that it did not make any difference. He had orders to take all out of Camp. He told my wife and family that if they did not get up into the wagon . . . he would shoot the last one of them. On being thus threatened my wife and children went into the wagon My wife carried her sick child in her arms. When they left the tent the wind was blowing hard and cold and having had to leave much of our clothing when we left our master, my wife with her little one was poorly clad. I followed them as far as the lines. I had no Knowledge where they were taking them. At night I went in search of my family. I found them at Nicholasville about six miles from Camp. They were in an old meeting house belonging to the colored people. The building was very cold having only one fire. My wife and children could not get near the fire, because of the number of colored people huddled together. . . . I found my wife and children shivering with cold and famished with hunger. They had not received a morsel of food during the whole day. My [seven year old] boy was dead. He died directly after getting down from the wagon. I know he was Killed by exposure to the inclement weather. I had to return to camp that night so I left my family in the meeting house and walked back. . . . Next morning I walked to Nicholasville. I dug a grave myself and burried my own child. I left my family in the Meeting house — where they still remain[30]

Only the efforts of Christian humanitarians, such as John G. Fee, and northern philanthropic organizations, like the Sanitary Commission, prevented Camp Nelson from being an even greater adversity for refugees. These friends of the refugees had worked for months to ameliorate some of the worst conditions, protesting the government's policy at every opportunity. It was not, however, until accounts of the November expulsion of Camp Nelson refugees reached the northern press that the protests had sig-

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30 Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation 1861-1867. Selected from the Holdings of the National Archives of the United States.* Series II. *The Black Military Experience* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 270-71.

nificant impact. On 15 December 1864, Adjutant General Lorenzo Thomas announced a new policy which would provide shelter and rations for families of recruits in all rendezvous camps, easing, though not solving, the harshest conditions.[31]

In early 1865 Major General S. G. Burbridge, the commander of Union forces in Kentucky, took another step that greatly aided refugees when he appointed Captain T. E. Hall superintendant for refugees at Camp Nelson.[32] At John G. Fee's suggestion, authorities set aside the west end of Camp Nelson as a protected area for refugees,[33] and Hall, with lumber furnished by the government and labor supplied by soldiers, began constructing homes, similar to army barracks, for refugees.[34] Women and children, many of whom were still improperly fed and clothed and some of whom were ill, quickly crowded into these barracks by the hundreds, resulting in deprivation and disease. By February 1865 half of the more than six hundred women and children in the refugee quarters were sick, many with pneumonia or smallpox, and the death rate rose daily. Hospital patients "huddled together in rags and dirt," helplessly waiting for the hand of death to pass over them.[35]

Construction costs had forced Hall to build barracks for the refugees rather than cabins, as John G. Fee had urged. When

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31 *The Sanitary Reporter* [Louisville], 1 September 1864; Hall to General O. O. Howard, 22 June 1865, Letters Received, Assistant Commissioner's Office, Tennessee, Box 2, Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (hereafter cited as BRFAL), RG 105, NA; Order No. 29, 15 Dec. 1864, NIMS, Microcopy 858, Roll 3, frame 0567; Berlin and others, eds., *The Destruction of Slavery*, I, 513; Louisville *Daily Union Press*, 27 March 1865. For an interesting account of the humanitarian activities of John G. Fee, see Richard Sears, "John G. Fee, Camp Nelson, and Kentucky Blacks, 1864-1865," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 85 (1987): 29-45.

32 Fee to Whipple, 8 Feb. 1865, AMA MSS; Hall to Howard, 22 June 1865, Letters Received, Assistant Commissioner's Office, Tennessee, Box 2, BRFAL, RG 105, NA.

33 John G. Fee, *Autobiography of John G. Fee, Berea, Kentucky* (Chicago, 1891), 179.

34 Howard, *Black Liberation*, 115-16.

35 John G. Fee, "Kentucky," *The American Missionary* IX (April 1865): 85; Newberry, *Sanitary Commission*, 528; *The Sanitary Reporter*, 15 March 1865.

crowded dormitories seemed to breed rather than to alleviate diseases, Fee renewed his call for cottages. Kentucky's blacks "have been *accustomed* to the fire place and cabin," he complained, not to wards haunted by disease. Fee urged Superintendant Hall to divide the barracks into family rooms and build only cottages in the future. While some complained about the cost of firewood for cottages, Fee commented sardonically: "It is cheaper to buy additional fire wood than coffins and graves."[36] Hall finally agreed and began building duplex cottages, thirty-two by sixteen feet. Authorities expected each sixteen-foot, square apartment to house between ten and twelve refugees. By the end of the Civil War carpenters had completed about twenty-nine cottages, easing slightly the worst of the housing problems.[37]

The end of the Civil War did little to diminish the suffering of Camp Nelson refugees. Because slavery existed in Kentucky until December 1865, thousands of slaves, some from as far away as Bowling Green, fled to Camp Nelson after the war ended.[38] Those who flocked to Camp Nelson seeking the protection of Federal authorities, however, could not have imagined the haste with which the government would withdraw its support during 1865 and 1866.[39] With no place to go, many blacks remained at Camp Nelson.

Though Federal officials struggled daily to force refugees to leave Camp Nelson, they never completely succeeded. There were still 2,477 women and children within the perimeter in September 1865 and about 1,000 six months later.[40] Those without adequate

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36 Fee, "Kentucky," 85; Fee to Whipple, 21 February 1865, AMA MSS; Fee to Lewis Tappan, 21 February 1865, AMA MSS.

37 E. Davis to M. E. Strieby, 12 April 1865, AMA MSS.

38 Fee to Major General Clinton Fisk, 17 July 1865, Letters Received, Assistant Commissioner's Office, Tennessee, Microcopy 999, Roll 7, frame 0053, BRFAL, RG 105, NA.

39 R. E. Farwell to Fisk, 18 October 1865, Letters Received, Assistant Commissioner's Office, Tennessee, Box 2, BRFAL, RG 105, NA; Fisk to Howard, 3 September 1865, Press Copies, Letters Sent, Assistant Commissioner's Office, Tennessee, Vol. 15, BRFAL, RG 105, NA.

40 Fisk to Howard, 3 September 1865, Press Copies, Letters Sent, Assistant Commissioner's Office, Tennessee, Vol. 15, BRFAL, RG 105, NA.

housing or money occupied huts and cabins as discharged soldiers abandoned them or squatted in government buildings earmarked for sale. A few of the more fortunate managed to rent parts of buildings and three acres of land for a few dollars a month. Some suffered daily for want of food or clothing, and many of the "utterly destitute" turned to begging, stealing, or prostitution to say alive. With disease rampant, an appalling death rate continued. By March 1866 the 1,300 refugee graves at Camp Nelson indicated a death rate of almost fifty percent for the past fifteen months.[41]

Many of the freedmen remaining at Camp Nelson looked to a small band of northern white missionaries for leadership. These missionaries, all dedicated people who believed God had a special purpose for Camp Nelson, hoped to build a strong, permanent black community, using the refugees as the nucleus for their work.[42] Unfortunately, what had been viewed as a "city of refuge" for desperate refugees in 1864 and 1865 became to white "regulators" living in the area a "Niggers [*sic*] nest" in 1866, and they vowed to break up the mostly black community.[43] Early in 1866, before the government closed the base, gangs of whites began beating black soldiers caught outside the perimeter, and as soon as Federal authorities abandoned Camp Nelson in June 1866, regulators began threatening those who remained. Bands of armed ruffians frequently moved through the camp at night, entering cabins and robbing blacks of their money, watches, arms, and ammunition.[44]

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41 Lieutenant W. H. Merrell to Levi F. Burnett, 4 May 1866, Letters Received, Assistant Commissioner's Office, Box 5, BRFAL, RG 105, NA; E. P. Smith to Colonel Maxwell Woodhull, 8 March 1866, Unregistered Letters Received, Louisville, Box 54, BRFAL, RG 105, NA; Abisha Scofield to Strieby, 15 June 1865, AMA MSS; Scofield to Strieby, 22 April 1866, AMA MSS.

42 Merrell to Burnett, 4 May 1866, Letters Received, Assistant Commissioner's Office, Box 5, BRFAL, RG 105, NA.

43 Scofield to Strieby and Whipple, 14 December 1866, AMA MSS.

44 W. G. Rice to Burnett, 6 June 1866, Letters Received, Assistant Commissioner's Office, Box 5, BRFAL, RG 105, NA; Scofield to R. E. Johnston, 10 September 1866, Letters Received, Lexington, Box 49, BRFAL, RG

By late 1866 outlaws regularly harassed the missionaries, apparently believing that if the white leaders left, the blacks would follow. In October a gang of men armed with revolvers and shotguns entered the home of the Reverend Abisha Schofield, threatening him with death if he did not leave. The black community rallied to Schofield's support, organizing pickets to guard the camp at night. But when the regulators did not return in two weeks, the guards, all of whom had to work during the day, ended the vigil. Soldiers promised by the Freedmen's Bureau to assist the Camp Nelson community never arrived.[45]

On 19 November 1866, at about 1:00 a.m., thirty regulators returned, easily capturing the whites. Many of the blacks fled into the night at the appearance of the regulators, but one man, John Burnside, refused to leave his home. Burnside fought the attackers, wounding one severely and another mortally, but the mob eventually stormed his house and beat him mercilessly, leaving him for dead. After threatening the missionaries with death if they did not depart, the attackers left.[46] The next morning the small black community at Camp Nelson again became an armed camp. For eight days and nights the freedmen and their missionary friends stood guard, awaiting the arrival of Bureau troops. The soldiers finally appeared on Saturday night but left in search of the regulators a day later. Upon capturing two suspects, the troops returned to Lexington, leaving Camp Nelson blacks to fend for themselves. The regulators promptly returned and rode up and down the streets swearing revenge if harm came to their friends. The missionaries, with the aid of Gabriel Burdett, a black preacher, fled for their lives. Camp

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105, NA; W. G. Rice to J. H. Rice, 18 September 1866, Letters Received, Lexington, Box 49, BRFAL, RG 105, NA.

45 Scofield to Whipple, 4 October 1866, AMA MSS; Fee to Whipple, 12 December 1866, AMA MSS; Scofield to Strieby and Whipple, 14 December 1866, AMA MSS; Merrell to John Ely, 20 December 1866, Letters Received, Assistant Commissioner's Office, Box 5, BRFAL, RG 105, NA.

46 J. G. Nain to J. H. Rice, 23 November 1866, Letters Sent, Nicholasville, No. 168, BRFAL, RG 105, NA; Scofield to Strieby and Whipple, 14 December 1866, AMA MSS.

Nelson blacks were left to pick up the pieces. Regulators continued to harass and attack Camp Nelson blacks, and their white friends for years.[47]

Camp Nelson symbolized, for many thousands of central Kentucky slave families, the birthplace of freedom. The Union camp offered them their first opportunity to flee slavery successfully, and they willingly chose it. To be sure, neither the recruits nor their families appreciated the hostile reception they received, but having been slaves, few probably expected an easy life at Camp Nelson. Yet none could have anticipated Camp Nelson to be the death camp it was. Responsibility for the deplorable situation falls in a number of directions: the Federal government, the army, the inadequacy of nineteenth century social engineering, and a racism which unabashedly held the lives of blacks in low esteem. Slave refugees who went to Camp Nelson clearly expected to live as free men and women, and not to die. For perhaps one-half of the refugees, however, their flight to freedom ended in death. Sadly, it seems clear that many who died might have lived had they chosen or been allowed to remain in their owners' cabins to await the war's end and eventual freedom. For the thousands who chose to go to Camp Nelson, however, freedom did not wait, whatever the odds.

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47 Scofield to Strieby and Whipple, 14 December 1866, AMA MSS; Fee to Officers of the Bureau in Lexington, 25 March 1868, Letters Received, Lexington, BRFAL, RG 105, NA.