

## **United States Colored Troops: Teaching Tips**

You can find more information, resources and activities related to the United States Colored Troops, as well as primary and secondary sources, at “Historic Archaeology at Camp Nelson: Shedding Light on Undocumented Lives” on PBS Learning Media:

<http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/c1b66afb-b2be-4e86-b821-d7fb1464011b/historic-archaeology-at-camp-nelson-shedding-light-on-undocumented-lives/>

The background essay on that website (reproduced here on pages 3 and 4) was prepared for teachers to give them more understanding of the United State Colored Troops, particularly at Camp Nelson.

### **Activities**

1. Show the United States Colored Troops vignette and provide time for students to apply visual thinking strategies to the vignette. Then ask them to identify which lines imply movement (draw their attention to the flags). What do they think is creating the movement? Do the soldiers appear to be moving or standing still?

2. Discuss/apply the italicized terms in the Background Essay:

disbanded

integrated

regiments

segregated

3. Provide time for students to research the Discussion Questions and to share the results of their research through written reports or oral or multimedia presentations. This could be done individually or as a small group project. Determine learning targets and assessment criteria.

Here are some websites to get your students started in their research:

<http://www.campnelson.org/history/african.htm>

Information about the refugee camp established at Camp Nelson.

<http://www.campnelson.org/colored/colored.htm>

Information about the families of the recruits at Camp Nelson.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp\\_Nelson\\_Civil\\_War\\_Heritage\\_Park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camp_Nelson_Civil_War_Heritage_Park)

Information about the history of Camp Nelson and the heritage park today.

<http://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/afam/2002/campnelson.htm>

Information about Camp Nelson from the National Park Service and the National Register of Historic Places.

<http://heritage.ky.gov/NR/rdonlyres/FBC3849F-37FD-4225-AD7D-7B5EF8008BDF/0/LincolnKAAandtheConstitution.pdf>

Information about Abraham Lincoln, Kentucky's African Americans, and the U.S. Constitution.

<http://heritage.ky.gov/kas/kyarchynew/Camp+Nelson.htm>

Information about archaeological research conducted by the Kentucky Archaeological Survey, including research at Camp Nelson.

## **CAMP NELSON BACKGROUND ESSAY<sup>1</sup>**

Located south of Nicholasville in Jessamine County, Camp Nelson was a huge supply depot for Union troops during the Civil War. It also was the third largest recruitment center for African American troops in the nation.

Recruiting enslaved men for the Union Army was politically complicated. President Lincoln had no Constitutional authority to free slaves in peacetime. In January 1863, President Lincoln used his powers as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared the freedom of all slaves living in states that were in active rebellion against the United States of America. This left out Kentucky and other border states that had not seceded, so the slaves living in these states were not freed.

Enslaved men from the Confederate states were actively recruited by the Union Army, but the federal government was hesitant to recruit enslaved men in the border states because it might push these states to secede. Active enrollment of African Americans in Kentucky did not begin until February 1864, when Congress passed the Enrollment Act, also known as the Civil War Military Draft Act. But, because of opposition from Kentucky whites, only free blacks and slaves with their owners' permission were allowed to actually enlist into the U.S. Army. This policy remained in effect until late May 1864, when literally hundreds of escaped slaves entered Camp Nelson to join the Army. The sheer numbers of men arriving in camp forced the Army to change its policy and allow the enlistment of all able-bodied African American men. This act specified that any enslaved male that enrolled in the U.S. Colored Troops would be granted his freedom. However, it made no provision for the wives and children of these men. They were still legally enslaved. This created an enormous problem.

By the end of 1864, there were over 2,000 black enrollees at Camp Nelson, and the number grew steadily. It was against Army regulations for women and families of soldiers to live at any military camp, but the wives and children of the black recruits had no place to go to escape slavery except with their men. They built shanty towns within Camp Nelson. Some of the women worked as laundresses or cooks. The Union commanders made attempts to drive the refugees away, but they returned. Finally, one commander decided to drive them out for good. Over 400 refugees were loaded into wagons and dumped along the road to Nicholasville. Soldiers were ordered to burn the shanty town, so the families were left with no shelter. Temperatures dipped below freezing, and about 100 people, most of them children, died of exposure.

This tragedy finally forced the United States government to change its policy and grant the families of the soldiers in the U.S. Colored Troops their freedom. Missionaries worked with the Union Army to build decent shelters for the refugee families. Missionaries also provided medical care and opened a school, where freed African Americans of all ages learned to read and

write. Eventually there were over 3,000 living in "The Home for Colored Refugees" at nearby Hall, Kentucky.

It was not until Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment in December 1865 that slavery was finally abolished everywhere "within the United States," including Kentucky. The Civil War ended in April 1865, but Camp Nelson remained open for over a year afterwards in order to enlist and emancipate more enslaved African American men and their families. Finally, by June 1866, most of the buildings at Camp Nelson were dismantled. Today, archaeological research at Camp Nelson is helping us understand how the soldiers and the refugees lived during those times of great change.

<sup>1</sup> Source: "Historic Archaeology at Camp Nelson: Shedding Light on Undocumented Lives" on PBS Learning Media.