

What Was Camp Nelson?

Camp Nelson was a very large Union Army base which was in operation from 1863 to 1865. It was located about five miles south of the town of Nicholasville, Ky., and served several major functions.

- It was a recruit training camp for newly mustered in regiments.
- It was a major supply head, receiving stores by rail and then sending them to armies in the field by Wagon train
- It was the major supply depot for armies operating in central and southern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee, and western Virginia.
- It was a major medical facility, receiving sick and wounded transported from the field.
- It was a strongly armed fort, and served as both a defensive anchor against potential attack into Kentucky
- (it was, in fact, established as a response to Bragg's invasion of Kentucky in 1862) and as a base of military operations sending troops into the field on military actions.
- It contained a large African-American "refugee" camp consisting mostly of families of black soldiers who came with them when they mustered into the army.

In terms of significance, in addition to the crucial military role it played in western operations from the mid-war to late-war period, Camp Nelson is highly notable for its key involvement with African-American soldiers. It was the third largest recruit and training station for "colored" soldiers in the United States.

Following training, these soldiers were sent to other armies, were used as primary troops manning Camp Nelson's defenses, and were sent into military actions from Camp Nelson into Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CAMP NELSON

INTRODUCTION

Camp Nelson has national significance under the themes of the American Civil War and African-American History. The site was a large quartermaster and commissary depot, recruitment and training center, and hospital facility that covered over 4000 acres in southern Jessamine County, Kentucky. It was a supply center for Union troops operating in Central and Eastern Kentucky, Eastern Tennessee, and Southwestern Virginia and was especially significant as the supply center for Burnside's 1863 Knoxville invasion and Burbridge's and Stoneman's 1864 Southwestern Virginia invasions.

The camp was also significant as a defensive establishment for central and eastern Kentucky. The fortifications and troops of Camp Nelson protected the quartermaster stores and discouraged assaults into central Kentucky. Troops from Camp Nelson were also critical in combating Confederate raiders and guerillas.

Although a number of Union Kentucky and Tennessee regiments were formed and trained at Camp Nelson, the camp is most significant as the largest recruitment and training center for African-American troops in Kentucky, the second largest contributing state for African-American troops in the country, and the third largest such center in the United States. Eight U.S. Colored Infantry, Cavalry, and Artillery regiments were formed and trained at Camp Nelson and three others were trained and stationed there. Many African-American recruits also brought their families with them to Camp Nelson and the army eventually established a refugee (contraband) camp for these individuals. Thousands of family members lived at the camp and eventually attained their freedom there.

The research potential of Camp Nelson as a depot, camp site, and contraband camp is great. Archaeological investigations at the encampment indicate that the site has a high degree of integrity and has artifacts and features which can contribute to the

understanding of army camp life, equipment, clothing, and arms supply; food and beverage consumption; architecture; army social stratification; army light industrial production; and African-American refugee conditions.

HISTORY

In June, 1863, the month of Camp Nelson's founding, the Union held most of Kentucky and had held it for nearly a year and a half. However, after the September-October 1862 invasion of Kentucky by Confederate forces under generals Braxton Bragg and Kirby Smith, which culminated in the Battle of Perryville on October 8, the Union command in Kentucky realized that a number of their positions were still vulnerable. One of these was Camp Dick Robinson, the first Union recruitment and training center established in Kentucky.

Camp Dick Robinson's location on the south side of the Kentucky River in Garrard County was very vulnerable and indeed it had been pillaged and burned by Bragg's Confederates. The Union leaders soon decided that the camp should be moved to the northern side of the river (Bartnik, 1976). It was hoped that this new camp would strengthen their position, better protect the river crossing and main road from the south, and provide a more readily available supply of troops who could be moved into eastern Kentucky or eastern Tennessee in response to the guerrilla raids which were problematic in those areas. In June, 1863 Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside, commander of the Army ordered Lt. Col. J. H. Simpson of the Engineering Department to select a site and begin construction of a new camp (Bartnik, 1976:1). This camp was named Camp Nelson after Maj. Gen. William Nelson, who had established Camp Dick Robinson. It soon became a major quartermaster depot, recruitment and training center, and hospital for the Federal armies operating in Kentucky and eastern Tennessee. The selected site was along the Lexington-Danville Turnpike, about 5 miles south of Nicholasville. The total encampment contained approximately 4000 acres. The larger 19th century land owners of this property included Mary Scott (1275 acres), Joseph Moss (700 acres), John Moss (100 acres), and N. B. Merritt (300 acres). (National Archives RG 92, E225, Box 720) Bounded on its southern and western sides by the deeply entrenched Kentucky

River and on the east by Hickman Creek, the Camp Nelson location was much more easily defended than Camp Dick Robinson. The only exposed area of the camp was its northern edge. Along this edge a line of eight forts or batters, rifle entrenchments, and abatis were constructed by the Engineer Corps of the Army of the Ohio. (Bartnik, 1976:6; Simpson, 1864a)

These forts, from west to east, were named Forts Hatch, Nelson, Jackson, Putnam, Pope, Taylor, McKee, and Jones. All trees were cleared to the north of this line to a distance of 1500 yards except on the slope between the two eastern forts. (McKee and Jones) (Official Records, Series I, Vol. 39, Part III:772-774) The northern fortification line extended one and one quarter miles from Forts Hatch to Jones. Additional fortifications were also placed to the south along Hickman Creek (Battery Studdiford) and above the bridge and ford across the Kentucky River (Fort Bramlette).

The forts along the northern line were all of earthen and rock or timber construction, and all were battery (redan) fortifications except Fort Jones, which was a redoubt. The forts had six to twelve cannon platforms and all had powder magazines except Fort Pope. The forts were built in order from east to west and Battery Putnam, which is set back from the other forts, was constructed on a high point to cover the eastern line before Forts Pope, Taylor, McKee, and Jones were completed. (Official Records, Series I, Vol. 39, Part III:772- 774). Fort Bramlette was also a redoubt with a powder magazine, bomb proof and cistern.

Within the camp, over 300 buildings were constructed which were associated with the functions of a quartermaster depot, recruitment center, and hospital. These buildings included dozens of warehouses to store rations, clothing, and equipment; stables, cribs, and sheds to house horses and mules and their feed; blacksmith shops; wagon shops; offices; mess halls; and barracks. The warehouses were placed in a sunken area in the center of the camp so they would not be visible from the road or other observation points outside the camp (Hall 1865). Other buildings and structures included the ornate camp headquarters, the large quartermaster offices, the bakery (which baked 10000 rations of bread daily), the saw mill, the Adam's Express Post Office, the woodworking machine shop, the magazines, and a prison with its provost office.

The Nelson Hospital consisted of ten large hospital wards, a laundry, offices, nurses quarters, dead houses, and a convalescent camp of tents. The hospital received running water from a 500 000 gallon reservoir on the hill west of the hospital. Water was pumped up to the reservoir from the Kentucky River 470 feet below. Water from the U.S. Sanitary Commission run Soldiers' Home. The Soldiers' Home was used "...for the accommodation of soldiers temporarily sojourning the Camp en route to join their Regiments at the front." (Hall, 1865) The camp employed over 1000 civilians in the occupations of laborers, carpenters, blacksmiths, wagon makers, teamsters, and clerks, among others. Many of these civilians lived in barracks or tents in the camp (National Archives, RG 92, E225, Box 270).

Period photographs indicated that most Camp Nelson buildings were of board and batten construction, had wooden shingle roofs, and were up on wooden piers. The camp headquarters was a more substantial building with horizontal weather boarding. The photographs and the map entitled "Camp Nelson and its Defenses" (Simpson 1864b) also illustrate numerous tents over the camp which were likely used for storage or housing. The photographs and maps indicate that the interior camp ground surface was in grass or dirt, with few trees left.

THE SITE IS UNDER CONSTRUCTION AND MORE MATERIAL IS STILL TO BE ADDED. IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN CAMP NELSON YOU CAN VISIT THE SITE PERIODICALLY TO SEE WHEN THE FINAL MATERIAL IS ADDED.

<http://www.users.kih.net/~dparker/nelson/nelsig.htm>