

Testimony for Congressional Natural Resources Committee, February 28, 2018  
Regarding the Camp Nelson Heritage Park Study Act

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### **Camp Nelson, Kentucky: “Birthplace of Liberty to Kentucky”**

Camp Nelson, Kentucky is nationally significant as one of the nation’s largest recruitment and training centers for African American soldiers during the American Civil War, as a large refugee camp for the wives and children of those soldiers, as a large fortified U. S. Army supply depot and hospital, and as a well preserved historic landscape and archeological district. No site in the National Park system tells this important, unique, and diverse story. Listed as a National Historic Landmark for significant events and archeology, Camp Nelson is especially significant as the site of the Civil War struggle for freedom fought by African American men, women and children. As the Rev. John G. Fee, noted abolitionist and founder of Berea College stated:

“Camp Nelson was the rendezvous of soldiery and birthplace of liberty to Kentucky. It is hallowed in the minds of thousands.”

It truly was the “birthplace of liberty to Kentucky” as the enlistment of the African American soldiers began the destruction of slavery there. This story began in April 1864 when the U.S. Army finally began enlisting African Americans in Kentucky. But, this original policy only allowed for the enlistment of free blacks and enslaved men with their owners’ permission. It would take an act of courage by the enslaved men themselves to change this policy and broaden enlistment. In late May 1864 the appearance of 250 escaped African American men at Camp Nelson, which quickly swelled to 400, ready to enlist without their owners’ permission forced the army to change this policy and eventually allowed over 23,000 mostly formerly enslaved African

American men to join the army and gain their freedom (the second greatest number of any state).

What this opportunity meant to these former enslaved men is best communicated in their own words:

One anonymous African American soldier stated about Camp Nelson,

“See how much better off we are now than we were four years ago. It used to be five hundred miles to get to Canada [and freedom] from Lexington, but now it is only eighteen miles!”

Corporal George Thomas, 12<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery stated,

“I enlisted in... the Fall of 1864, and my only sorrow is that I did not enlist sooner...I see, as it were, a nation born in a day-men and women coming forth from slavery’s dark dungeons to the noonday sunshine of the greatest of God’s gifts- Liberty.”

Sergeant Elijah Marrs, also of the 12<sup>th</sup> stated,

“I can stand this says I ... This is better than slavery, though I do march in line at the tap of a drum. I felt freedom in my bones, and when I saw the American eagle with outspread wings, upon the American flag, with the motto *E Pluribus Unum*, the thought came to me, ‘Give me liberty or give me death’. Then all fear banished. I had quit thinking as a child and had commenced to think as a man.”

Sergeant Major William Warfield, 119<sup>th</sup> U.S. Colored Infantry wrote about freedom from Camp Nelson,

“If we would obtain our privileges, we must strive for them. We must be willing to pay the same price that other people have always been

compelled to pay. By laboring for our cause we show; 1) That we understand and appreciate what our rights are; 2) That we have the courage and manhood to ask for them; And 3) that we are determined, sooner or later to have them.”

Eventually over 10,000 men enlisted or were trained at Camp Nelson. Eight U.S. Colored Troop regiments were founded at Camp Nelson and five others were stationed there. These regiments fought for the United States in Kentucky, Southwestern Virginia, and in Eastern Virginia at Petersburg, Richmond, and the pursuit to Appomattox Court House.

Camp Nelson is also nationally significant for its African American refugee story. Here, from the spring to fall of 1864, hundreds of African American women and children escaped slavery to find refuge at Camp Nelson, only to be ejected by the U.S. Army in late November 1864. These women and children were primarily the families of the enlisting soldiers, but they were not emancipated along with the men. The November expulsion led to the death of 102 of the 400 refugees through disease and exposure and caused a national uproar, including many newspaper articles and letters, which led directly to the March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1865 Joint Congressional Act that emancipated all wives and children of the enlisted U.S. Colored Troops.

The March 3, 1865 Act stated,

- “It is hereby enacted that the wife and children... of any person that has been, or may be mustered into the military or naval service of the United States, shall, from and after the passage of this act, be forever free.”

The “Home for Colored Refugees” was established within Camp Nelson after this reversal of U.S. Army policy. The home eventually housed over 3000 newly freed

women and children. Regarding the “Home” after this Joint Congressional Act, Sergeant Elijah Marrs 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.”

This Act continued the destruction of slavery in Kentucky and elsewhere, due specifically to actions at Camp Nelson, where tens of thousands of people earned their freedom. After the Civil War ended the former “Home” became an African American community which still exists today.

Today Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park and National Historic Landmark is owned and operated by the Jessamine County, Kentucky Government and covers just over 600 acres is a well preserved rural landscape that includes well preserved Civil War earthen fortifications, remains of the depot powder magazine and bakery ovens, the White House-Oliver Perry House, which was used as officers’ quarters, and archeological resources at the main camp and at the former “Home for Colored Refugees”. The adjacent Camp Nelson National Cemetery is also included in the NHL. The park has a modern visitor center/museum, curation space, parking facilities, and over five miles of interpretive trails. Collectively, all of the resources of Camp Nelson retain high potential for conveying nationally significant information about this critical period in our nation’s history when the Civil War was fought, the Union was preserved, and slavery was destroyed.

Thank you.