



CAMP NELSON NATIONAL MONUMENT KENTUCKY

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In 1895, Sam LaGrande could still be found tending the graves at Camp Nelson. According to one newspaper, *The Courier-Journal*, “[t]o Sam the rows of little mounds have become living, breathing realities and companions, and although he has tried, he cannot content himself in any other field of labor.” LaGrande must have achieved some renown to feature, illustrated, in the local press. A formerly enslaved man from Fayette County, LaGrande was tasked with digging the graves of those who had died at the neighbouring Civil War camp as well as others who fought for the Union cause. Like many of the local enslaved Black population in the state at the beginning of the war, he worked as an impressed labourer and was involved in building the necessary infrastructure for the Federal army in the region to survive, before caring for them once dead.

Those looking for a commemorative landscape in this area of central Kentucky will likely be drawn to LaGrande’s domain. The cemetery, created in 1863-6, is lined with headstones and built for longevity. The motivations behind its establishment, to honour and preserve, were quite different from those that brought the nearby camp into existence. Camp Nelson was a major supply depot and recruitment centre for the United States Colored Troops (USCT). Designed to last the duration of the war rather than beyond, little is left of the original built structures that once stood there. Indeed, the camp’s ties to military expedience seem to defy the title of “National Monument” by which it is now known. Yet the monument’s boundaries define a cultural landscape that is just as historically vital as LaGrande’s burial mounds. Archaeologically rich and politically pertinent, the story of Camp Nelson is one of Black resistance and resilience.

After 1864, the camp became a pivotal site for African American self-emancipation. Enslaved people from across the state and further afield travelled to Camp Nelson to seek their freedom by enlisting in the Union army. As USCT sergeant Elijah Marrs put it: “all they had to do was to get there and they were freed.” Soon Camp Nelson became the third largest recruitment centre for the USCT in the nation and was identified explicitly with freedom. Another USCT sergeant even compared it to Canada, a well-known haven for those fleeing enslavement in the nineteenth century. “It used to be five hundred miles to get to Canada from Lexington,” he claimed, “but now it is only eighteen miles! Camp Nelson is now our Canada.”

These statements draw attention to Camp Nelson’s position within the broader geographies of emancipation that Black Americans forged throughout the war. They also offer an example of the way particular landscapes can be reworked by actions and words. To refer to a Union camp in Kentucky as a foreign country delocalises it and differentiates it from its immediate surroundings. It also gives an insight into how newly free African American men defined themselves in relation to the American nation at large and the Federal army’s role in its representation. What does it mean to claim an alternative sovereignty on US soil? How is freedom reconfigured in the body of the Black soldier and refugee? These questions come to the fore at Camp Nelson, where the refugee experience and wartime sacrifices of Black women and children are central.

CAMP NELSON NATIONAL MONUMENT, KENTUCKY

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When Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, abolishing slavery in the southern Confederate states, the legal status of the enslaved people in Kentucky went unchanged. The state's government was committed to status quo, a stance that included loyalty to the Union but also the system of slavery that it had accommodated for so long. As such, enslavers in Kentucky initially had to grant permission for their "property" to enlist in the army and were also paid compensation for the loss of their workforce if they did so. Even as policy towards Black enlistment changed in 1864, lifting all restrictions, slavery continued to exist in Kentucky according to gender and age. Most White Kentuckians before, during, and even after the war believed that slavery was a "necessary evil"; necessary, that is, for them to retain social and racial control (Ramage & Watkins, 2012).

The Civil War and the creation of Camp Nelson offered an opportunity for freedom, even though it was far from guaranteed. The challenges faced by those connected with these events have elicited attempts to commemorate them over the past 160 years. As Black men travelled to the camp to enlist in the Union army and self-emancipate, their families followed seeking the same. Women entered the encampment and found employment as cooks and laundresses. However, their presence, alongside children, put pressure on the camp's military rationale and forced White Union officials to truly consider what they were fighting for. At least eight times the Black women and children who came to Camp Nelson were expelled. One devastating expulsion occurred in November 1864, during which 102 individuals died as a result, many of exposure. The November Expulsion is notable not just for the terrible loss of life, but because it brought national attention to the plight of wartime refugees and resulted in significant changes in federal policy concerning them. 400 Black women and children were forced from Camp Nelson on November 23 and the makeshift buildings that they had been living in were destroyed. A stone obelisk now stands in Graveyard #1 at Camp Nelson marking their sacrifice for freedom.

Even though Camp Nelson was never intended as a "monument" in the way we know it today, a number of structures associated with the site had a clear commemorative purpose: the obelisk, of course, and nearby cemetery, kept by Sam LaGrande, but also buildings such as the Fee Memorial Church. The church was constructed in 1912 as a tribute to the missionary worker and ardent abolitionist John G. Fee, who was based at Camp Nelson during the war. Fee was a well-known advocate of racial equality, particularly in the field of education. The Church named in his honour was built by the descendants of the refugee families and soldiers who had self-emancipated at Camp Nelson in the 1860s. Although no longer in use, the surviving structure calls to mind the activity and presence of the Black community of Ariel (now Hall) that settled there following the war.

For the Black Americans in Kentucky during the post-war period, identification with the



CAMP NELSON NATIONAL MONUMENT, KENTUCKY

Civil War and the use of its memory became a means to campaign for civil rights and citizenship. At the first convention of the Colored Men of Kentucky in Lexington, March 1866, it was resolved that Black efforts during the war had secured their status as part and parcel of the "Great American body politic." "The gallant heroic behavior of the Colored Soldiers of the American Army, in the late Rebellion, is not only worthy of their [America's] noble sires," the proceedings record, "but it challenges the admiration of the civilised world." Far from aligning with Canada, then, it was the United States that the members of the Convention emphasized as "our home." In a further expression of patriotism and statement of national belonging, the delegates also "heartily and fully endorsed the enterprise, inaugurated by our sister, Charlotte Scott, formerly a slave...looking to the erection of a National Colored Men's Monument, to the memory of our Martyr-President Abraham Lincoln" in Washington D.C.

Scott's monument campaign would eventually result in the now controversial "Emancipation Monument" designed by Thomas Ball and erected in Washington, D.C., but the Kentucky Convention's support came at a time when the contributions of Black soldiers to the war effort was being devalued and a public statement of their influence crucial. Just one month before the convening, the *Louisville Daily Journal* reported on a Senate debate in which Senator Hendricks of Indiana "assailed the notion of crediting the colored soldiers with much glory of the war, and advocated the position that this is a white man's government."

Subsequent Conventions in Kentucky turned their focus to the violence of White supremacy in the state, calling, in 1871, for "the enactment of laws for the better protection of life." Sent to the Senate, the document titled "Memorial of a Committee Appointed at a Meeting of Colored Citizens of Frankfort, KY," protested the rise of "organised bands of desperate and lawless men, mainly composed of soldiers of the late rebel armies, armed, disciplined, and disguised." As recorded by the Freedman's Bureau, such violence was evident at Camp Nelson immediately after the war, when a group of White men "surrounded the home of a colored man and commenced an indiscriminate fire of muskets through the windows" and beat one occupant "badly with their guns, [and] leaving him as they supposed dead on the ground."

The uneven development of the Black commemorative landscape in and around Camp Nelson can be explained by the very real threat of white supremacist violence recorded in these documents and the prioritisations it demanded. Indeed, the association between former Confederates and the Ku Klux Klan identified by the authors of the 1871 "Memorial" underscores the limits of wartime emancipation while, at the same time, links Civil War memory to Black demands for civil rights. It is in this context that the designation of the Camp Nelson as a National Monument in 2018 might best be seen.

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CAMP NELSON NATIONAL MONUMENT, KENTUCKY

Over the past two decades, sites associated with the African American freedom struggle in the United States have been increasingly recognised as “national monuments.” Under the Obama Administration, the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad Historical Park in Maryland (est. 25 February 2013), the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument and Freedom Riders National Monument both in Alabama, and the Reconstruction Era National Historical Park in South Carolina (all est. 12 January 2017) were all established, bringing a new visibility to their significance to US history. These new designations corresponded with two further major commemorative events – the 150th anniversary of the Civil War and the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights movement (2011-2015).

The concurrence of these anniversaries was recognised by the National Park Service (NPS) who launched a campaign of commemorative activities exploring their relation (known as “CW2CR”). Unlike during the 1960s, when the correlation between these two events saw an increase in Confederate statues in opposition to Black empowerment, the NPS’s combined commemoration aimed to create more inclusive environments and interpretations, with a notable emphasis on African American perspectives. As such, Camp Nelson was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 2013 during the commemoration and, in 2018, was declared a “national monument” by President Donald J. Trump under the Antiquities Act.

Trump’s association with the establishment of Camp Nelson as a “national monument” may appear a contradiction to some. Just one year before the site was declared, the former President had shown considerable support for Confederate statues at a moment when their racist messaging and identification with White supremacy was undeniable. In the wake of the deadly “Unite the Right” rally at the Robert E. Lee monument in Charlottesville in 2017, Trump did not condemn the racism of the gatherers but lamented the action to remove racist symbols instead: “sad to see the history and culture of our great country being ripped apart with the removal of our beautiful statues and monuments,” he tweeted.

How can someone support both the presence of Confederate statues, representing those who fought for the preservation of slavery, and also be responsible for the creation of a Civil War monument in which Black emancipation is so central? On the one hand, the construction and continued existence of many Confederate statues in the country has long pointed to this paradox, concretising competing interpretations of the war on the landscape and evincing a lack of resolution concerning its outcome. One might even point to monuments such as the Heyward Shepherd monument in West Virginia, dedicated by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1931 to claim Black memory for their cause. Yet, Trump’s attitude to Civil War memory and its role in contemporary US society can hardly be considered in the terms and spirit of reconciliation that has explained the dual presence of Confederate and Union/Emancipation monuments in the past. Nor can it be linked to a modern discourse of multiculturalism that might also lend itself to this kind of accommodation. Rather Trump’s advocacy for monuments with an incompatible emphasis might best be seen as a way of preventing change and introduc-



CAMP NELSON NATIONAL MONUMENT, KENTUCKY

-ing stasis. Entertaining contradictions allows for rhetorical and political expediency and offers a way forward to those looking to maintain control once given it. The preservatory impulse runs deep.

Yet, that is not to say that an undercurrent of destruction might also be traced in these actions. Might the presence of these two types of monuments cancel each other out? And the desire to preserve both constitute another way of denying the centrality of slavery to the war and implying its irrelevancy? Trump's role in the creation of Camp Nelson highlights the complex ways in which Civil War commemoration continues to operate in contemporary America. It begs questions over the mutual exclusivity of monuments and the truth claims that they propagate. The site is Kentucky's first national monument and one that intervenes in a landscape dense with Confederate monuments. Its designation works to historicise space, not to generalise history as recent rhetorical uses of "heritage" have often done. Understood within this larger commemorative context, including earlier efforts linking the Civil War memory and civil rights, Camp Nelson is no less geopolitical as a "national monument" than it was as a strategic location during the Civil War. It lends a specificity to the role of USCT soldiers and the refugee experience at a moment when established national narratives are being challenged and the role of African Americans in US history asserted.

It is the intensely human and interpersonal dimensions of this story that the Camp Nelson National Monument has the potential to illuminate. "Last Seen" advertisements found in newspapers following the end of the war attest to the Camp's enduring significance as a reference point for Black Americans seeking to unite with their families and friends. One such appeal, issued by Mary Miller in the Chicago Appeal in 1892, calls for information about her brothers, William Gardner and Green Cockrell, both of whom "went into the army from Clarke County, Kentucky going to Camp Nelson." Another, this time by a fellow serviceman in The Richmond Planet in 1902, seeks the whereabouts of John Taliaferro, Major Wooldridge, Dennis Minor, who was in Co. B, 119 Regiment, which was made up at Camp Nelson, Kentucky. Now, some years later, as a National Monument, the site's importance has gained an official veneer and a responsibility to tell the stories of connection like these as well as the early commemorative work of others, such as Sam LaGrande.

As Camp Nelson celebrates its 160th anniversary (2023-2026), events and public programming at and surrounding the monument are putting the spotlight on key individuals and contributing to wider national debates about what constitutes a monument in the twentieth-first century. Posing questions about how Americans remember places as well as people, Camp Nelson offers a critical insight into the complex layers of history that contemporary commemorative creations involve.



CAMP NELSON NATIONAL MONUMENT, KENTUCKY

Resources and Further Reading

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CAMP NELSON NATIONAL MONUMENT, KENTUCKY

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CAMP NELSON NATIONAL MONUMENT, KENTUCKY

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