



Sgt. James Hunn, a reenactor with the 12th United States Colored Heavy Artillery, poses with a Civil War cannon outside the White House Officers' Quarters at Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park.

CAMP NELSON CIVIL WAR HERITAGE PARK

Preserves the Story of Black Civil War Soldiers

By: Staff Reports

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The temperature was oppressive on a summer day, but James Hunn didn't remove the wool jacket of his sergeant's uniform. A proud reenactor with the 12th United States Colored Heavy Artillery (USCHA), Hunn devotes his time

to preserving the memory of Camp Nelson's African-American soldiers.

"I'm in the USCHA to educate young people about the role, the fight and the struggle of African-Americans during the Civil War," he explains.

"When I started researching Kentucky's Civil War history, I learned many things that weren't taught in school. The story of Elijah Marrs at Camp Nelson is one thing that really opened my eyes. It's a story that needs to be told."

That story and others are told at Camp Nelson Civil War Heritage Park in eastern Kentucky. It's the largest Civil War recruitment center and training camp site remaining in the United States.

Camp Nelson's main mission was to recruit and train soldiers. It was Kentucky's largest recruitment and training center for African-American troops and the third largest in the country. Eight regiments of U.S. Colored Troops, as the African-American regiments were designated at that time, were founded at Camp Nelson. Three additional African-American regiments were trained there. The number of soldiers garrisoned at Camp Nelson varied between 3,000 and 8,000.

As a slave, Marrs learned to read and write. His owner believed everyone should be able read the Bible. Because of his literacy, he became Duty Sergeant three days after arriving in camp.

Marrs wrote in his diary, "I can stand this, said 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 out-spread 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."

After the war, Marrs attended college and became a teacher. His list of achievements include founding Simmons Bible College in Louisville, fighting against the Ku Klux Klan, serving as the first secretary of the Republican Party in Oldham County and founding the Bear Grass Baptist Church.

Kentucky slaves who volunteered for service in the Union Army were automatically granted their freedom. With passage of the Constrictive Act of 1864, a flood of slaves and freed Blacks began arriving at Camp Nelson. Most risked great peril to reach the camp to secure their freedom and fight for freedom of others. By the summer of 1865, nearly all soldiers at Camp Nelson were Black.

The men often brought their families to camp in hopes that they would also be freed.

The families either lived with the soldiers in the barracks or in nearby shanties.

The Army didn't have a policy regarding refugees living in the camp. On a cold day in 1864, the camp commander began expelling refugees and helping slave owners regain their property.

Although the order was soon countermanded, 102 refugees died of exposure and disease after being expelled from the camp.

The incident led to a Congressional Act that freed the families of recruits and established a home for refugees.

The camp contained over 300 wooden structures, many tents and nine forts, along with 20 large warehouses that held rations, uniforms and equipment.

There was a hospital with 10 wards and a bakery that produced 10,000 rations of bread per day.

After the war ended, most of the camp was quickly dismantled. Soon, only the White House Officers' Quarters and the cemetery remained.

Camp Nelson's cemetery has been designated as a National Cemetery.

The graves of over 4,000 Civil War soldiers, including 600 African-Americans from Camp Nelson, can be viewed. Veterans continue to be buried in the cemetery.

In the early 1990's, a group of volunteers initiated efforts to reclaim the historic site of Camp Nelson.

They purchased 408 acres of the original 4,000 acres for the Camp Nelson Heritage Park and began restoration work on the officers' quarters.

Tours of the site begin at the White House Officers' Quarters. Built in 1855, the house was occupied by the Perry family until it was seized by the Union Army to be used as the officers' quarters at Camp Nelson.

The house has been restored to depict the occupancies of both the Perry family and the Union officers. Visitors can tour the house and view a film that documents the history of the camp.

A network of four interpretative trails begins outside the White House Officers' Quarters. The trails range in length from .3 to 1.2 miles. Plans include reconstruction of eight earthen forts and an extension of the interpretive trails.