

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Preston Sleet". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and somewhat slanted to the right.

The Sleets and Sleettown

Despite the opposition of some Kentucky politicians and military officials, the enlistment of free and enslaved African Americans into the United States Colored Troops (USCT) began in February 1864. Loyal slave owners were to receive \$300 for each slave who volunteered for the army, and fugitive slaves were pressed into the service. Eventually, more than 23,700 African American Kentuckians joined the Union army, with most of them enlisting at Camp Nelson in Jessamine County.

The founding members of Sleettown—the brothers Henry and Preston Sleet—gained their freedom by joining the USCT of the Union army in 1864. Both men were slaves born in Boyle County and probably resided in the Perryville area prior to the Civil War. Henry enlisted in the United States Colored Artillery under the name of Henry Brown (his middle name). He joined the unit in Vicksburg, Mississippi, on August 13, 1864, at age eighteen. Preston, however, went to Camp Nelson and enlisted in Company G of the 123rd United States Colored Infantry on September 29, 1864. Like his brother, he enlisted using the surname Brown.

Preston may have been connected to the Union army as early as 1862, immediately following the battle of Perryville. After the Civil War, when Preston was sixty-two years old, he testified in court that he left Perryville with the 89th Illinois Infantry. Since he could not join the Union army as a soldier, he may have been employed as a cook, teamster, or laborer. Once Union military policy allowed African Americans to enlist, he traveled to Camp Nelson and joined the Union army.

Following their Civil War service, both men returned to the Perryville area and established Sleettown—a freed-slave community—which existed from 1865 until 1931, when the last of the Sleets moved to Perryville.



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