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CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS: CAMP NELSON, MILITARY & REFUGEE CAMP



Photograph courtesy of Camp Nelson Civil War National Park.

JESSAMINE COUNTY — Camp Nelson, located in Jessamine County, was established in 1863 as a recruiting station and quartermaster supply base for military operations into East Tennessee. In the spring of 1864, when African American soldiers finally were allowed to be recruited and trained in Kentucky, it became the largest center for United States Colored Troops in the state.

Thousands of slaves and free men of color flocked to Camp Nelson to enlist and train; many

of their families came, too. The army was not prepared for the large number of refugees. More than once, post commanders ordered people not working or serving with the army to immediately leave the camp. These commands had little permanent effect until November 1864 when camp commander Speed S. Fry ordered the refugees to be forcibly expelled and their makeshift shelters were leveled. The expulsion coincided with an extreme cold weather snap. Many refugees suffered from the freezing temperatures and more than 100 died from exposure. Consequently, the order was countermanded and refugee family housing was built adjacent to the soldiers' camp. The fallout from the expulsion also prompted Congress to pass a bill that freed the families of slaves who enlisted in the Union army.

After the war the refugee camp became the community of Ariel. Eventually renamed Hall, it continued to be a vibrant African American community well into the 20th century.

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