

Camp Nelson National Cemetery  
6890 Danville Road  
Nicholasville, Kentucky 40356

## Description

The Camp Nelson National Cemetery, established in 1866, is located seven miles southeast of Nicholasville in Jessamine County. The original three acres are located in the northeastern corner of the cemetery. The ground was subsequently enlarged to the north and west. Of this tract, about 7¼ acres comprised the cemetery proper, the remaining forming the driveway which extended from the Lexington and Danville Turnpike (now called Danville Road) to the main entrance to the grounds. The cemetery has been expanded over the years by acquisition of land to the



west of the original cemetery, extending as far west as Danville Road. The main entrance to the national cemetery is located at the east side of the grounds and is protected by an iron gate supported by stone columns, constructed in 1969. One must travel approximately .3 mile to the older section of the cemetery where the lodge, now used as an office, and three utility buildings are located. The original entrance gate to the national cemetery, constructed in 1875, has been removed, but the stone posts and iron pedestrian gates on each side remain. When entering these gates, a drive leads to a circle upon which the flag was located. The flagpole has been relocated to near Section P in the newer area of the cemetery. A stone wall, four feet high and two feet wide at the top, with heavy coping set in cement, constructed in 1867, encloses the original eight acres, and the remainder of the cemetery is enclosed by chain link fencing. A gate in the chain link fencing provides equipment access to the maintenance area containing three buildings. A committal service shelter is located between Sections N and O. Graves are marked with upright marble headstones, except for Section I, which is marked with flat granite markers.



The lodge, constructed in 1875, was designed by Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs. In 1995, the lodge was restored based on the original drawings and photographs. The Second Empire style house features a red brick first floor with brick quoins at the windows and corners as well as a mansard roof second floor. A one-story open entry porch with a flat roof nestles in the elbow of the L. The upper story dormer windows are wood casement, with three lights in each casement. The first floor windows are six-over-six lights with massive stone lintels and smaller

sills. In 1929, a one-story brick kitchen was added, and the original frame porch was replaced with a concrete porch and steps. Cemetery superintendents or directors resided in the lodge until the late 1980's. Since then, the lodge has been used for administrative office space.

The maintenance area contains three buildings:

(1) A brick and concrete utility building with an asphalt roof, constructed in 1928. This building was originally a stable for horses used in cemetery maintenance. A brick chimney was constructed on the outside in 1939, and new garage doors were installed in 1968. This building contains public restrooms and the employee break room.

(2) A brick utility building with an asphalt roof, constructed in 1899. This building is used for storage.

(3) A ground face masonry building of brick color with an asphalt shingle roof, constructed in 1997. This building is used as a repair area and for storage.

The committal service shelter, constructed in 1997, is located between Sections N and O. The structure, made of redwood siding with laminated wood columns, is an open pavilion and contains a storage chest. The roof is imitation slate (mineral fiber). The roof area measures 34 feet by 30 feet.

### Civil War Activity in Area

Camp Nelson was an important Union quartermaster and commissary depot, recruitment center, and hospital facility. It was the largest depot and permanent encampment in Kentucky outside of Louisville and served a critical function to the Union war effort by providing supplies, livestock and troops for the Army of the Ohio. Besides its general everyday supply functions, Camp Nelson was also critical in the support of a number of offensive campaigns into Tennessee and Virginia.

The greatest national significance of the camp, however, was as one of the largest recruitment camps for African-American troops. Eight regiments of U. S. Colored Troops, as the African-American regiments were designated, were founded at Camp Nelson, and three others were trained there. A refugee camp for these soldiers' families was also established at Camp Nelson. Construction of Camp Nelson was begun in June 1863, following orders from Major General Ambrose E. Burnside, commander of the newly-formed Army of the Ohio. A site at the southern tip of Jessamine County was chosen because of its location on a major turnpike and river, and because of the natural defenses provided by the limestone palisades of the Kentucky River and Hickman Creed, which extended 400 to 500 feet in height.

The depot/encampment was officially named "Camp Nelson" on June 12, 1863, after the late Major General William "Bull" Nelson, who founded Camp Dick Robinson, the first Union recruitment camp in Kentucky. After completing two years at Norwich University, he was appointed a midshipman in the United States Navy in 1840, and spent 21 years in the naval service, rising to the rank of Lieutenant. In early 1861, Nelson contacted Lincoln (an old family friend) to discuss Nelson's recent trip to Kentucky. Lincoln, ever mindful of the sensitive local issues in Kentucky, was seeking a means to supply the pro-Unionists with arms without funneling the arms through the state government, which was pro-Confederate (supposedly neutral). Nelson volunteered for the job of distributing the weapons. Lincoln ordered 5,000 muskets and had them shipped to Cincinnati. Nelson went to Ohio, and shortly thereafter the guns found their way into the hands of the pro-Union forces. On September 16, 1861, Nelson was promoted to

Brigadier General. He would serve at Shiloh, Corinth, and Chattanooga before being promoted to Major General in July 1862. He grew to be a very large man. His six-foot, four-inch, 300-pound frame contained a steel-trap mind and a prodigious memory. On September 29, 1862, in a hotel lobby in Louisville, Kentucky, Brigadier General Jefferson C. Davis shot Nelson to death in front of several witnesses. The quarrel between the two had been recent. Davis had been assigned to assist Nelson in recruiting soldiers around Louisville. After two days, Nelson was not satisfied with Davis's performance and told him so. Davis, a West Point graduate, resented this and demanded more respect from Nelson, who thereupon relieved him of his duties. The morning of this day, Davis confronted Nelson in the lobby of the Galt House Hotel, where Nelson had his headquarters, and demanded an apology, which was refused. Davis then threw a wad of paper in Nelson's face, and Nelson slapped him and started upstairs. Davis borrowed a pistol, followed Nelson, and called his name. When Nelson turned, Davis shot him in the chest from about three feet away. Nelson died within the hour. Davis was never tried, the affair being treated as a "matter of honor."

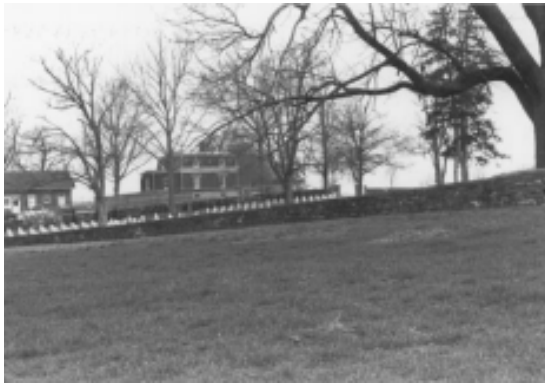
When completed, Camp Nelson contained over 300 wooden buildings, numerous tents, and nine forts. The core of the camp covered over 800 acres on either side of the Lexington-Danville Turnpike (present day U. S. 127). The camp also contained a large hospital facility, which included ten large wards, the soldiers' home, and a prison, and had a staff of supervisory officers and over 2,000 civilian employees. Camp Nelson was generally garrisoned by 3,000 to 8,000 soldiers.



From its establishment, one of the missions of Camp Nelson was to recruit and train soldiers. Its great significance as a recruitment center is most closely tied to African American troops, as it was Kentucky's largest recruitment and training center for these troops. They performed a variety of duties after their training. They did garrison duty at Camp Nelson, and were also involved in a number of larger battles and campaigns. When they entered Camp Nelson, they were often accompanied by their wives and children, who were also looking for freedom and opportunity. These family members lived either with the recruit or in hastily built shanties. There was no clear army policy regarding these family members and in November 1864, Brigadier General Speed S. Fry, the commander of Camp Nelson, ordered these refugees out of camp. The political uproar which followed this incident led directly to the February 1865 Congressional Act which freed the families of the recruits and to the establishment of a home for the refugees. This home was administered jointly by the Army and the American Missionary Association.

Soon after the war ended in April-May 1865, military officials began preparing to close down Camp Nelson. The U. S. Army continued to enlist African-American soldiers until December. By the summer of that year, nearly all soldiers at Camp Nelson were African-Americans. In June 1866, the army finally abandoned Camp Nelson, ending the military occupation of the area. Most buildings were sold for their lumber and quickly dismantled. The buildings in the refugee camp and the cemeteries remained, and the school and administrative buildings were purchased.

The main Camp Nelson cemetery was designated a national cemetery in 1866. The remainder of Camp Nelson returned to its residential and agricultural use. The civilian houses



used by the army were reoccupied, generally by the original owners, and the land returned to pasture or cropland. It remains much the same today.

Although much comfort was provided by the camp and sympathetic organizations, many men fell victim to disease and common illness, especially smallpox. A large hospital was located on the grounds that served the immediate camp and battlefield injured, but other means to separate the smallpox cases from the rest of the area had to be made. Secluded from

the main camp, but within the protected area, a hospital and a graveyard were located on what was then known as the Moss property. Described in records, the location is given as follows: "Smallpox graveyard  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile west of the Lexington-Danville Turnpike at Camp Nelson, Jessamine, Kentucky, in a ravine 100 yards on the North bank of the river on land belonging to John Moss."

Designated in the records as Graveyard #1, there were some 379 men buried there between June 2, 1863, and July 6, 1865. It is evidenced, however, that not all of these deaths can be attributed to smallpox, since no cause of death is listed and also that on one burial, a side note indicated a death resulting from a "falling tree." It is thus suspected that this graveyard was an original with the established camp and that Graveyard #2, also listed in the burial records is the present location of the national cemetery which was a later addition. From old records, it can be established that there were 1,183 men buried in Graveyard #2, whose deaths dated between July 28, 1863, and February 4, 1866. It is suspected that many of these were deaths resulting from battle wounds, and some were later disinterments from battlefields. There were 143 men listed in the old records as having been disinterred from surrounding towns and family plots on farms.