Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History
By Richard Sears
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THE STORY

A tired, thirty-nine-year-old Hoosier general, looking well beyond his years, arrived at his new Cincinnati headquarters in the spring of 1863. It had been a long time since anything much had gone right for him, and the fact that he was still in uniform was a small miracle. In less than two years, General Ambrose Everett Burnside had accumulated an army career with more unpredictable twists than any other Union high commander except, perhaps, General George McClellan. After some early war successes in North Carolina, and twice refusing command of the Army of the Potomac, President Lincoln essentially forced Burnside to take control of the largest army in North America in a desperate attempt to find a general capable of defeating Robert E. Lee. Burnside's ill-conceived charge up Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg in December of 1862 proved that he lacked the creativity required to meet the challenge.

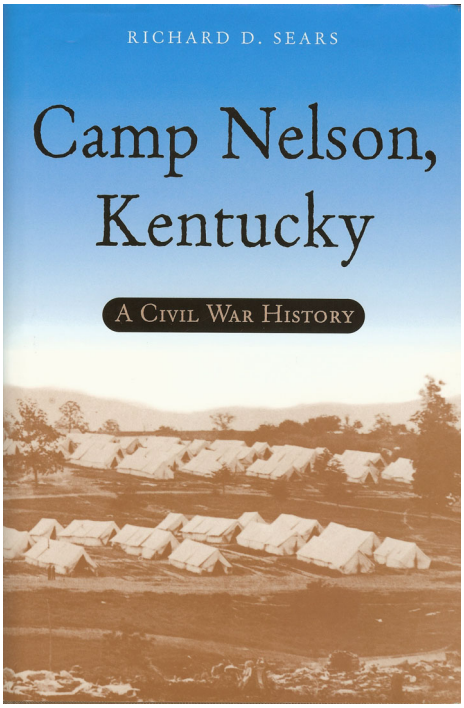
Burnside offered his retirement in the wake of the devastating Union defeat at Fredericksburg, but Lincoln refused. Burnside was fully committed to the Union cause and well experienced as a Corps commander. Instead, Lincoln reassigned him to the Department of the Ohio in March, 1863. His new mission was to defend Kentucky from what many considered to be an imminent assault upon the state. He was advised to protect Kentucky by capturing East Tennessee, effectively depriving Confederate forces of the springboard necessary to attack. It would also satisfy one of the president's long-held objectives—freeing loyalist East Tennessee from the clutches of the Confederacy.

To accomplish this, Burnside needed a secure base where he could collect his men before the Tennessee invasion and from which he could provision them after his troops were in the field. By May, General Burnside was accumulating supplies at a "depot near Hickman Bridge." His base of operations in central Kentucky, named after the late Major General William "Bull" Nelson, would become one of the most storied Union camps in Civil War history.

By summer, Camp Nelson had evolved into a major recruitment and supply hub. Dozens of buildings popped up and soon a medium-sized city had sprouted from the land between Hickman Creek and the Kentucky River. Barracks, hospitals, bakeries, a prison, water stations, quartermaster's warehouses, blacksmith's shops, officer's quarters, roads, and fortifications were erected with the help of local slave labor. The countryside was scoured for food, mules, and horses as the camp became a well-known focal point in the central Bluegrass region of Kentucky. Although perfect in terms of defensive topography, the lack of a good all-weather road connecting the camp to East Tennessee would make it a mixed blessing at best.

In August, 1863, General Burnside took the 9th and 23rd Army Corps out of Camp Nelson toward eastern Tennessee. Shortly thereafter, the camp assumed its next operational phase. Not only would Nelson be a logistics base for Burnside's invasion, but refugees, recruits, and wounded soldiers from the East Tennessee war zone would funnel the 200 miles north to the safe harbor of the central Kentucky fort.

While exhausted Tennessee refugees struggled to stay alive on the way to Camp Nelson, no less an authority than Union General Ulysses S. Grant personally confirmed that the cruel winter season had rendered roads between Nelson and East Tennessee impassible. Thus, Camp Nelson failed to achieve its primary objective. Burnside's army in Tennessee, out of horses and food, would have to fend for itself, cut off from the millions of rations in Camp Nelson's warehouses. His men would have to subsist on a barren countryside with occasional supplement from Chattanooga.



In the spring of 1864, the future of Camp Nelson was at a turning point. With the eventual success of Burnside's East Tennessee campaign, and Union battle lines as far south as Georgia, both Generals Grant and Sherman questioned the wisdom of keeping a sizeable depot in central Kentucky. As the Union high command considered winding down activities at Nelson, the camp's most significant chapter was dawning. Black men began arriving at the camp to claim freedom by becoming Union army soldiers. It is perhaps the most noteworthy milestone in Kentucky race relations. Although colored soldiers from other states had been part of the Union army for some time, Kentucky had managed to quietly dodge the issue. The near apoplectic reaction on the part of Kentucky officers and politicians throughout the state was telltale. The episodes that followed stand as the most chilling in the camp's history. The barbaric treatment of

African-American families, and the endless hurdles to a hopeful future, are never illustrated with more alarming clarity than by what happened at Camp Nelson in 1864-66.

THE BOOK

Camp Nelson, by Richard Sears, is arranged in an unfamiliar manner. The book is divided into two sections – a 60-page narrative Historical Introduction (with copious footnotes), followed by almost 400 pages of chronologically arranged letters, official communications, telegrams, and reports dealing with every imaginable aspect of camp history. Some assembly is required. Whereby the lengthy Introduction may be enough to build an adequate understanding of the camp's military and social impact, the author follows up by revealing every brick and beam in the story's construction. Because these documents arrive like a shower from a never-ending cast of characters (with their varying styles, ranks, points of view, and educational levels) it requires some concentration to coagulate the mass.

However, the longer you spend with the book the more you appreciate the author's method. To me, Camp Nelson's association with the Union army recruitment of Kentucky African-American slaves is its most important legacy. This portion of the story remains amply powerful by simply pulling the curtain off the sources. I was riveted icy still by the horrific November, 1864, reports detailing the expulsion from camp of all family members of Union colored soldiers while the soldiers themselves were off fighting in the field. Hundreds of women and children, hungry, penniless, and without other destinations, were summarily ejected into the frosty winter night. Congregating on roadsides, fields, and nearby towns, many froze to death while telegrams debated the legal status of colored family members of Union

soldiers. But from the black shadows of human behavior comes a redeeming glimmer of luminosity. Reverend John G. Fee, of the United States Christian Commission, corresponded with blunt truth about Kentucky slavery and acted as a tireless advocate of equality for all God's "humble trusting millions." Fee was instrumental in urging shelter and schools for these disenfranchised families, making Camp Nelson the most important destination for Kentucky African-Americans during the collapse of slavery in the state.

Sears' *Camp Nelson* is the first comprehensive work on the subject; it is likely to remain the foundation for many others. His scrupulous attention to detail and obvious commitment to the subject are awe-inspiring. It is rich with source materials that will fuel researchers for many years to come. In our impatient culture, it should be noted that this book requires a bit more attentiveness than we may be used to in our reading, but yields well more results.

Richard D. Sears is Chair of the Department of English and Theatre at Berea College, Kentucky.

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Following is a short e-interview with the author of *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History*, conducted January 30, 2006:

RM: Reverend John G. Fee was a man way ahead of his time and a kind of connecting thread in your work. How did you come upon Mr. Fee and what was it about him that captured you?

Dr. Sears: I came to know of John G. Fee because I teach at Berea College (which he founded) and I live in Berea, Kentucky (which he also founded). As I have learned about Fee's work as an abolitionist and social reformer, my admiration and respect for him has grown: he *WAS* years ahead of his time, both in his principles and in his actions; he believed in social equality among the races, for example, but he also took drastic steps to put that belief into practice. That was the consistent pattern of his life.

RM: Camp Nelson is undergoing something of a revival recently. What do you think is the most important legacy Camp Nelson has for us today?

Dr. Sears: The most important legacy Camp Nelson has for us today is its history during and immediately after the Civil War, when it was virtually a paradigm of the hardships and opportunities that African Americans had as our social and political system experienced its (arguably) most significant revolution. The transition from slavery to freedom is remarkably well illustrated by the events at Camp Nelson. Now that the geographical Camp has become an interesting sort of theme park with a restored building and a proposed museum, the site offers many educational opportunities for visitors exploring the Civil War in Kentucky and the African American experience.

RM: *Camp Nelson, Kentucky*, is a wonderful example of careful scholarship shaped by an abiding passion for the subject. When did you decide you needed to write this book,

how long did it take, and what unusual obstacles did you face?

Dr. Sears: I decided to write my book about Camp Nelson many years ago. Altogether I spent more than a decade on it, with years of research, then writing and rewriting. I guess the most persistent obstacle throughout the process of working on this book was a very simple matter: deciphering the handwriting of hundreds of different people, many of them quite ill-educated, some in a dreadful hurry, some (like John G. Fee) who always wrote in hen scratches.

My thanks to Dr. Richard D. Sears, author of *Camp Nelson, Kentucky: A Civil War History*.