



# Teaching Unit: Footsteps to Freedom at the Camp Nelson National Monument

## #2 Fighting for Freedom

**UNIT:** Footsteps to Freedom at the Camp Nelson National Monument

**TARGET LEVEL:** Higher Education (ages 18-22)

**DURATION:** 2 Sessions

**MATERIALS:** computer, internet connection, pen and paper.

**SKILLS PROMOTED:** critical thinking, close reading and interpretation, primary source and visual analysis.

Students learn about Camp Nelson's status as the nation's third largest recruitment centre for African American troops and the role of the USCT in securing Black freedom and advancing civil rights.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

1. Students will learn about the enlistment of African Americans and formation of USCT (United States Colored Troops) regiments at Camp Nelson and explain their importance to the Union Army and advancing the cause of civil rights.
2. Students will learn about white resistance to Black recruitment in Kentucky
3. Students will assess how the USCT have been remembered (or forgotten) in US public memory.

### RESOURCES:

Exhibit: Barracks; Fortifications; The Stables; The Oliver Perry House.

12<sup>th</sup> Regiment! Recruitment Poster.

Frederick Douglass. Why Should a Colored Man Enlist? April 1863.

<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/why-should-a-colored-man-enlist/>

James Brisbin. <https://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Brisbin.html>

Elijah Marrs. / Peter Bruner Extracts.

T.E. Bramlette Address. <https://www.kyhistory.com/digital/collection/RB/id/7422>

### Additional resources:

<https://www.docsteach.org/activities/printactivity/comparing-civil-war-recruitment-posters>

<https://www.masshist.org/learn/history-source-sets/civil-war-recruitment-posters>

<https://www.loc.gov/item/93503146/>

### LESSON STEPS:

1. To open the class, show students the '12<sup>th</sup> Regiment!' recruitment poster. Ask them to identify the goal of the poster, what assumptions does it make, how does it attempt to appeal to and persuade its audience? For a longer activity, you could ask students to compare posters with others aimed at Black recruitment [see additional resources for examples].
2. Introduce students to Frederick's Douglass and his speech 'Why Should a Colored Man Enlist?' Divide the class into pairs and assign each one or two of Douglass's reasons to

- summarise and report back to the class. Encourage discussion about what they think makes his rationale so effective, both in terms of content and rhetoric.
3. Ask students to open the Footsteps to Freedom exhibit and visit the Fortifications, Barracks, Stables, and Oliver Perry House sites. Ask them to:
    - a. Explain the difference between military impressment and enlistment.
    - b. What barriers did Black men face trying to enlist at Camp Nelson? Why were white Kentuckians resistant?
  4. The USCT soldiers Sgt. Elijah Marrs and Sgt. Peter Bruner emerge as key figures at these sites. As a class, read the extracts about Camp Nelson from their respective autobiographies and answer these questions:
    - a. How do these authors describe Camp Nelson?
    - b. What were their motivations for enlisting?
    - c. How do they characterise the purpose of the war?
    - d. What kind of activities did they participate in?
    - e. Was there anything about these texts that surprised you? What and why?  
[You may want to emphasis on the power of telling one's story by linking back to Douglass's more familiar autobiography.]
  5. [Advanced Exercise] Marrs and Bruner are two of the many Black soldiers who were based at Camp Nelson during the war, but Black enlistment was not straightforward in Kentucky, where the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply and therefore did not immediately legalise military service. Ask students to compare Brisbin's commendation of the 5<sup>th</sup> USCC with Kentucky's wartime Governor, T.E. Bramlette's address to the General Assembly of Kentucky in 1863. What insights do these documents provide into the challenges faced by Black soldiers as well as their achievements?

## **ASSESSMENT**

1. Search the Commemorative Cultures database filtering the interactive map according to Emancipation monuments. Alongside the Camp Nelson National Monument, select one other monument honouring USCT soldiers and write a compare and contrast essay.
2. Research the actions of the 5<sup>th</sup> USCC at Saltworks, VA. Using what you learn and James Brisbin's commendation, design a monument to the 5<sup>th</sup> USCC.
3. Using the knowledge gained in this lesson and the documents discussed, write an essay outlining how Black enlistment weakened the system of slavery in Kentucky.

RESOURCES:

**NOW AT CAMP NELSON!**

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**12th REGIMENT!**

VOLUNTEERS, composed of sons of

**AFRICAN DESCENT**

**WELDING HEAVY ARTILLEY**

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 **Colored Men, Rally 'Round the Flag of Freedom!**

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**BOUNTY \$100!**

AT THE EXPIRATION OF THE TERM OF SERVICE.

**Pay, \$13 a Month!**  
**Good Food & Clothing!**  
**State Aid to Families!**

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RECRUITING OFFICE  
**LEXINGTON & DANVILLE TURNPIKE,**  
**KENTUCKY**

Lieut. J. W. M. APPLETON, Recruiting Officer.

SMITH & CO., Manufacturers of Lithographic Plates

12<sup>th</sup> Regiment! Recruitment Poster.

## Superintendent of the Organization of Kentucky Black Troops to the Adjutant General of the Army

Lexington Ky Oct 20 /64

General I have the honor to forward herewith a report of the operations of a detachment of the 5th U.S. Colored Cavalry during the late operations in Western Virginia against the Salt Works.

After the main body of the forces had moved, Gen'l Burbridge Comdg District was informed I had some mounted recruits belonging to the 5th. U.S. Colored Cavalry, then organizing at Camp Nelson and he at once directed me to send them forward.

They were mounted on horses that had been only partly recruited<sup>1</sup> and that had been drawn with the intention of using them only for the purpose of drilling. Six hundred of the best horses were picked out, mounted and Col Jas. F. Wade 6th. U.S.C. Cav'y was ordered to take command of the Detachment.

The Detachment came up with the main body at Prestonburg Ky and was assigned to the Brigade Commanded by Colonel R. W. Ratliff 12th O[hio]. V. Cav.

On the march the Colored Soldiers as well as their white Officers were made the subject of much ridicule and many insulting remarks by the White Troops and in some instances petty outrages such as the pulling off the Caps of Colored Soldiers, stealing their horses etc was practiced by the White Soldiers. These insults as well as the jeers and taunts that they would not fight were borne by the Colored Soldiers patiently or punished with dignity by their Officers but in no instance did I hear Colored soldiers make any reply to insulting language used toward [them] by the White Troops.

On the 2d of October the forces reached the vicinity of the Salt Works and finding the enemy in force preparations were made for battle. Col Ratliffs Brigade was assigned to the left of the line and the Brigade dismounted was disposed as follows. 5th U.S.C. Cav. on the left. 12th O[hio]. V.C. in the centre and 11th Mich. Cav. on the right. The point to be attacked was the side of a high mountain, the Rebels being posted about half way up behind rifle pits made of logs and stones to the height of three feet. All being in readiness the Brigade moved to the attack. The Rebels opened upon them a terrific fire but the line pressed steadily forward up the steep side of the mountain until they found themselves within fifty yards of the Enemy. Here Col. Wade ordered his force to charge and the Negroes rushed upon the works with a yell and after a desperate struggle carried the entire line killing and wounding a large number of the enemy and capturing some prisoners. There were four hundred black soldiers engaged in the battle. one hundred having been left behind sick and with broken down horses on the march, and one hundred having been left in the Valley to hold horses. Out of the four hundred engaged, one hundred and fourteen men and four officers fell killed or wounded. Of this fight I can only say that men could not have behaved more bravely. I have seen white troops fight in twenty-seven battles and I never saw any fight better. At dusk the Colored Troops were withdrawn from the enemies works, which they had held for over two hours, with scarcely a round of ammunition in their Cartridge Boxes.

On the return of the forces those who had scoffed at the Colored Troops on the march out were silent.

Nearly all the wounded were brought off though we had not an Ambulance in the command. The negro soldiers preferred present suffering to being murdered at the hands of a cruel enemy. I saw one man riding with his arm off another shot through the lungs and another shot through both hips.

Such of the Colored Soldiers as fell into the hands of the Enemy during the battle were brutally murdered. The Negroes did not retaliate but treated the Rebel wounded with great kindness, carrying them water in their canteens and doing all they could to alleviate the sufferings of those whom the fortunes of war had placed in their hands.

Col. Wade handled his command with skill bravery and good judgement, evincing his capacity to command a much larger force. I am General Very Respectfully Your Obedt. Servant

James S Brisbin  
<https://www.freedmen.umd.edu/Brisbin.html>

## Frederick Douglass. Why Should a Colored Man Enlist? April 1863. (1/2)

This question has been repeatedly put to us while raising men for the 54th Massachusetts regiment during the past five weeks, and perhaps we cannot at present do a better service to the cause of our people or to the cause of the country than by giving a few of the many reasons why a colored man should enlist.

First. You are a man, although a colored man. If you were only a horse or an ox, incapable of deciding whether the rebels are right or wrong, you would have no responsibility, and might like a horse or an ox go on eating your corn or grass, in total indifference, as to which side is victorious or vanquished in this conflict. You are however not horse, and no ox, but a man, and whatever concerns man should interest you. He who looks upon a conflict between right and wrong, and does not help the right against the wrong, despises and insults his own nature, and invites the contempt of mankind. As between the North and South, the North is clearly on the right side and the South is flagrantly in the wrong. You should therefore, simply as a matter of right and wrong, give your utmost aid to the North. In presence of such a contest there is not neutrality for any man. You are either for the Government or against the Government. Manhood requires you to take sides, and you are mean or noble according to how you choose between action and inaction. — If you are sound in body and mind, there is nothing in your *color* to excuse you from enlisting in the service of the republic against its enemies. If *color* should not be a criterion of rights, neither should it be a standard of duty. The whole duty of a man, belongs alike to white and black.

“*A man’s a man for a’ that.*” Second. You are however, not only a man, but an American citizen, so declared by the highest legal advisor of the Government, and you have hitherto expressed in various ways, not only your willingness but your earnest desire to fulfill any and every obligation which the relation of citizenship imposes. Indeed, you have hitherto felt wronged and slighted, because while white men of all other nations have been freely enrolled to serve the country, you are a native born citizen and have been coldly denied the honor of aiding in defense of the land of your birth. The injustice thus done to you is now repented of by the Government and you are welcomed to a place in the army of the nation. Should you refuse to enlist *now*, you will justify the past contempt of the Government towards you and lead it to regret having honored you with a call to take up arms in its defense. You cannot but see that here is a good reason why you should promptly enlist.

Third. A third reason why a colored man should enlist is found in the fact that every Negro-hated and slavery-lover in the land regards the arming of Negroes as a calamity and is doing its best to prevent it. Even now all the weapons of malice, in the shape of slander and ridicule, are used to defeat the filling up of the 54th Massachusetts (colored) regiment. In nine cases out of ten, you will find it safe to do just what your enemy would gladly have you leave undone. What helps you hurts him. Find out what he does not want and give him a plenty of it.

Fourth. You should enlist to learn the use of arms, to become familiar with the means of securing, protecting and defending your own liberty. A day may come when men shall learn war no more, when justice shall be so clearly apprehended, so universally practiced, and humanity shall be so profoundly loved and respected, that war and bloodshed shall be confined only to beasts of prey. Manifestly however, that time has not yet come, and while all men should labor to hasten its coming, by the cultivation of all the elements conducive to peace, it is plain that for the present no race of men can depend wholly upon moral means the maintenance of their rights. Men must either be governed by love or by fear. They must love to do right or fear to do wrong. The only way open to any race to make their rights respected is to learn how to defend them. When it is seen that black men no more than white men can be enslaved with impunity, men will be less inclined to enslave and oppress them. Enlist, therefore, that you may learn the art and assert the ability to defend yourself and your race.

Fifth. You are a member of a long enslaved and despised race. Men have set down your submission to Slavery and insult, to a lack of manly courage. They point to this fact as demonstrating your fitness only to be a servile class. You should enlist and disprove the slander, and wipe out the reproach. When you shall be seen nobly defending the liberties of your own country against rebels and traitors — brass itself will blush to use such arguments imputing cowardice against you.

Sixth. Whether you are or are not, entitled to all the rights of citizenship in this country has long been a matter of dispute to your prejudice. By enlisting in the service of your country at this trial hour, and upholding the National Flag, you stop the mouths of traducers and win applause even from the lips of ingratitude. Enlist and you will make this your country in common with all other men born in the country or out of it.

Seventh. Enlist for your own sake. Decried and decried as you have been and still are, you need an act of this kind by which to recover your own self-respect. You have to some extent rated your value by the estimate of your enemies and hence have counted yourself less than you are. You owe it to yourself and your race to rise from your social debasement and take your place among the soldiers of your country, a man among them. Depend upon it, the subjective effect of this one act of enlisting will be immense and highly beneficial. You will stand more erect, walk more assured, feel more at ease, and be less liable to insult than you ever were before. He who fights and battle of America may claim America as his own country — and have that claim respected. Thus in defending your country now against rebels and traitors you are defending your own liberty, honor, manhood and self-respect.

## Frederick Douglass. Why Should a Colored Man Enlist? April 1863. (2/2)

Eighth. You should enlist because your doing so will be one of the most certain means of preventing the country from drifting back into the whirlpool of Pro-Slavery Compromise at the end of the war, which is now our greatest danger. He who shall witness another Compromise with Slavery in this country will see the free colored man of the North more than ever a victim of the pride, lust, scorn and violence of all classes of white men. The whole North will be but another Detroit, where every white fiend may with impunity revel in unrestrained beastliness towards people of color; they may burn their houses, insult their wives and daughters, and kill indiscriminately. If you mean to live in this country now is the time for you to do your full share in making it a country where you can your children after you can live in comparative safety. Prevent a compromise with the traitors, compel them to come back to the Union whipped and humbled into obedience and all will be well. But let them come back as masters and all their hate and hellish ingenuity will be exerted to stir up the ignorant masses of the North to hate, hinder and persecute the free colored people of the North. That most inhuman of all modern enactments, with its bribed judges, and summary process, the Fugitive Slave Law, with all its infernal train of canting divines, preaching the gospel of kidnapping, as twelve years ago, will be revived against the free colored people of the North. One or two black brigades will do much to prevent all this.

Ninth. You should enlist because the war for the Union, whether men so call it or not, is a war for Emancipation. The salvation of the country, by the inexorable relation of cause and effect, can be secured only by the complete abolition of Slavery. The President has already proclaimed emancipation to the Slaves in rebel States which is tantamount to declaring Emancipation in all the States, for Slavery must exist everywhere in the South in order to exist anywhere in the South. Can you ask for a more inviting, ennobling and soul enlarging work, than that of making one of the glorious Band who shall carry Liberty to your enslaved people? Remember that identified with the Slave in color, you will have a power that white soldiers have not, to attract them to your lines and induce them to take up arms in a common cause. One black Brigade will, for this work, be worth more than two white ones. Enlist, therefore, enlist without delay, enlist now, and forever put an end to the human barter and butchery which have stained the whole South with the warm blood of your people, and loaded its air with their groans. Enlist, and deserve not only well of your country, and win for yourselves, a name and a place among men, but secure to yourself what is infinitely more precious, the fast dropping tears of gratitude of your kith and kind marked out for destruction, and who are but now ready to perish.

When time's ample curtain shall fall upon our national tragedy, and our hillsides and valleys shall neither redden with the blood nor whiten with the bones of kinsmen and countrymen who have fallen in the sanguinary and wicked strife; when grim visaged war has smoothed his wrinkled front and our country shall have regained its normal condition as a leader of nations in the occupation and blessings of peace — and history shall record the names of heroes and martyrs — who bravely answered the call of patriotism and Liberty — against traitors, thieves and assassins — let it not be said that in the long list of glory, composed of men of all nations — there appears the name of no colored man.

## **Extracts from Elijah Marrs. Life and History of the Rev. Elijah P. Marrs, First Pastor of Beargrass Baptist Church, and Author. 1885.**

[Page 25-6]

The fourth day I was ordered by the commanding officer to take a squad of men and go to Tenth and Broadway streets, and clear off ground for the erection of barracks. While I felt myself a free man and an U. S. soldier, still must I move at the command of a white man, and I said to myself is my condition any better now than before I entered the army? But the idea would come to me that I was a soldier fighting for my freedom, and this thought filled my heart with joy. I thought, too, that the time will come when no man can say to me come and go, and I be forced to obey.

We were in camp at Taylor Barracks three weeks, when we received orders to report at Camp Nelson. Some rejoiced, whilst others wept, the latter thinking we were going on a fighting tour. We went by the way of Lexington, and arrived at Camp Nelson without the loss of a man. The barracks being crowded, we were assigned to tents, mine being pitched beside the bullpen.

Whilst passing through Lexington I became acquainted with a young lady named Emma--. Our love was mutual. She followed me to Camp Nelson, in the neighborhood of which she found employment. She invited me to see her; but it should be at night, after her daily duties were done. One night I called, and not seeing her, presumed her to be in some other portion of the house, and walked in without announcement. My entrance alarmed some one in the adjacent room, whose cries of "murder" hurried me back to camp, with the resolution of never seeing Emma again. The last I heard of poor Emma was that she was dead. Her last thoughts were of me, and her last request was to her kind lady employer to send me her only portrait. She was my first love, and was too early called away. Sweet spirit, which nothing can banish from an unforgetful heart--who never looked upon sin and seldom on sorrow--why should thy memory be so precious to me now? Never again has come to my heart that gladness that seemed to brighten thine--never more has beamed upon me the soft glory which seemed to shine from thy blessed eyes! Often coming up from the struggles of passion and from the midst of the world's temptations, the remembrance of thee and thy virtues burst upon me as a vision, and I feel purified, sanctified, and strengthened by thy presence, and with an increased vigor renew my labors in the upholding of the Cross of Christ. Emma, farewell! Thy name may not be written on a tombstone, but thy memory is enshrined within a heart!

[Page 27-8]

Our stay at Camp Nelson was not altogether devoid of excitement, and this event being my first actual experience in the science of war, is now more vivid to my memory, as I presume it is to my comrades who were with me, than subsequent events of the war. One night the news reached the camp that the rebels were in Danville, Ky., and in about forty minutes afterwards Gen. S. S. Fry, accompanied by about fifty men, came galloping into camp with all speed. The alarm was at once given, the long roll of the drum was beaten, and every man roused and ordered to prepare for battle. We were at once marched to the various forts surrounding the camp, and though up to that time we had only been drilled in infantry tactics, we were commanded to man the cannons. It is true we belonged to the Heavy Artillery, but had never been drilled in the tactics thereof. Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 5, however, soon learned their positions at the cannon, and while apparently paying attention to their work, could not keep their eyes from peering into the darkness beyond the river, from which direction they thought they heard the clang of swords and the clattering of horses coming upon us. Day broke, however, and no enemy was in sight, so we marched back to camp in great glee, as much so as if we had met the enemy and gained a great victory.

In connection with our stay at Camp Nelson I must mention the name of Sergeant Major Geo. Thomas, who was and is yet an intimate friend of mine. He was a genial companion and a good officer. His many acts of kindness to his men will long be remembered by them as his friendship is by me. He was the only man in the regiment, white or colored, who understood vocal music sufficiently well to teach it, and he and myself, by permission, formed regular classes among the men, which we would teach at designated times in vocal music and in the rudiments of English during our entire stay at Camp Nelson.

After a stay of some weeks at Camp Nelson, we were ordered to Russellville, Ky. It was thought now that we were on our way to the front. Many of us would have preferred remaining at Camp Nelson, but the command was to march. We began to pack up on the morning of November 24, 1864, and we were marched on foot to Lexington, there being no railroad. I shall never forget that day. It was my first long march, and I had to carry my knapsack, my gun, my sword, and army equipments.

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Camp Nelson was overrun with troops at that time, and the place looked gay. Thousands of people were coming in from all directions, seeking their freedom. It was equal to the forum at Rome. All they had to do was to get there and they were free. Col. Bridgewater was commander of the Post, and a brave one he was. As I said, Captain Palmer had left me without instructions. I remained here contented for three days, and then applied to Col. Bridgewater for transportation. He told me to go back to the Soldier's Home and eat good victuals; that I should not be hurt; that Captain Palmer should suffer for the way he had treated me.

**Extracts from Peter Bruner. A Slave's Adventures Toward Freedom Not a Fiction, but the True Story of a Struggle. [date?]**

[Page 33-4]

Burnside was at Camp Nelson just preparing to start out and I thought if I could only make it to that place I would be all right. Previous to this I had overtaken some more men and they were going along with me. Just as we were putting our shoes on after we had been wading the river, some five or six men came and captured them all but me and I escaped by taking refuge under some bushes. I do not know who these men were. After they had been gone about a half hour I thought I would proceed so I went on until I had gone about a half mile, then I climbed over a fence and laid down in some tall weeds. When I awoke some men were cutting the weeds over me and some of them said kill the d---n nigger. Then they took me up to an old blacksmith's shop where they had the remaining part of the crowd. Then they took us from there to Nickleville which was about eighteen miles below Lexington. There they took us before the Magistrate and swore that we were runaway slaves. They then took us to jail. In the room I occupied were twenty-four more slaves all running off trying their very best to get free. Oh, how hard some of us poor slaves labored to gain our freedom.

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The next morning about five o'clock I got up and started for Camp Nelson, which was forty-one miles from Irvin. And at eleven o'clock I had gone twenty-one miles and had arrived at Richmond. After I had left Richmond I came upon sixteen colored fellows who were on their way to Camp Nelson and of course I did not get lonesome. I had plenty of company. Just a half hour before sun down we arrived at Camp Nelson and had come forty-one miles in that day. The officers asked me what I wanted there and I told them that I came there to fight the rebels and that I wanted a gun. When I had run off before and wanted to go in the army and fight they said that they did not want any darkies, that this was a white man's war. After I had been there about a week they made up a regiment and called it the Twelfth U. S. Heavy Artillery. I was enrolled on the twenty-fifth day of July in 1864 to serve three years or during the war, but I only remained two years and a half.



