

## Learning more about 102 slaves and their deaths

### Archaeologists dig to find clues about incident in 1864

Sunday, July 25, 2004

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On a bluegrass-carpeted slope near the richly appointed racehorse farms of Kentucky, archaeologists led by Steve McBride are unearthing evidence of a terrible secret that has largely disappeared from memory and Civil War history books.

The archaeologists think they may have located one of the last stops on the Underground Railroad, the fabled pathway to freedom for enslaved blacks.

The story emerging this summer from charred chunks of bric-a-brac yielded during excavations of Camp Nelson, about 120 miles south of Cincinnati, is not about joyous escape.

The bits of the past, including broken toys and buttons from women's dresses, being uncovered are seen as clues confirming that the calm, sunwashed Jessamine County pasture was once a scene of unfathomable cruelty.

The recovered items are evidence that a stone-hearted Union Army brigadier general expelled desperate freedom-seekers all destitute women and children, forcing many back to their masters and others to freeze to death in the bitter winds of late November 1864.

Until the Civil War broke out, the Underground Railroad headed north into states like Ohio where slavery was banned. About 100,000 slaves escaped, or about 1,200 a year between 1783 and 1865.

After the war started, the Underground Railroad turned south, and slaves streamed into Camp Nelson, a supply depot for the federal Army of Ohio where they hoped to get a gun and fight Southerners. At first the black men were pressed into service as laborers, but late in the war they were allowed to become soldiers.

Their military service left stranded the wives and children who had accompanied the men. The families lived in wretched shelters improvised from stray bits of lumber. Missionaries from Oberlin College, a hotbed of abolitionist sentiment, sent food, clothing and school supplies to the encampment. More than 100 women and children died when the Union Army expelled them from the camp.

This summer, Steve McBride and his wife Kim, who is the co-director of the Kentucky

Archaeological Survey, have worked with volunteers and students, seeking to find out what happened at Camp Nelson. They start early in the day to avoid the torrential afternoon thunderstorms that boil up suddenly, the deadly lightning strikes that accompany the storms, and the searing July heat.

Using trowels and dustpans, their team scrapes the thin soil layer that nurtures the grassy hillsides, delving into the camp's old slave encampment, a site deliberately torched by Abraham Lincoln's Army over three days starting on Nov. 23, 1864.

"It was kind of an island of freedom in a slave state," said Kim McBride. "Before the war, they would cross the Ohio River, and then people would hopefully help them get to Canada. When the fighting started, they thought they were free if they made it here."

Bruce Catton, one of the nation's greatest civil war historians, briefly mentioned such enclaves in his 1961-63 centennial history of the Civil War.

Catton cited U.S. Sanitary Commission reports that many "of the inmates were a good deal worse off than they had been under slavery." Yet, he wrote, "on the whole, what they came to seemed to matter less to them than what they were getting away from."

The McBrides' excavation is going on as a \$110 million museum, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, is about to open on Aug. 3 in Cincinnati.

Like the McBrides', the museum's focus is not on the battlefield clash of arms that ended slavery. Instead, it will try to explain mankind's thirst for freedom, the spirit that led blacks to run and abolitionists to help them.

Although the camp excavation is not connected with the Freedom Center, the museum's goal is to make sure that stories like Camp Nelson's expulsion of the slaves do not remain footnotes or get lost forever.

Ann Cramer, a U.S. Forest Service archaeologist based in the Wayne National Forest that sprawls across several counties in Southeast Ohio, said the opening of the national museum in Cincinnati is likely to spur research efforts into Underground Railroad sites.

Cramer has conducted recent excavations at two locations in the forest, Poke Patch and Paynes Crossing, that had been remote outposts in the woods where slaves were smuggled to freedom. "One of the theories we have is that they were set up purposely because they were clear out in the woods," she said.

"Most of what we know about that era is Civil War battles and battlefields. But with the museum opening, I think the public will become fascinated with the mystique of the Underground Railroad, the romanticism and the secrecy," Cramer said. "I think you'll see historians and archaeologists and researchers taking more interest, and trying to find out how it worked, who the people were, and how they did it."

Buildings at the 4,000-acre supply depot for the Union forces that battled into Confederate territory in Tennessee and western Virginia were torn down in 1866. The camp soon slipped into obscurity as a military backwater far from the front-line action.

Steve McBride, whose work has been financed by Kentucky and county officials, found the

refugee camp where runaway slaves built their shantytown.

He said that apparently northern soldiers expelled slaves from the camp because Kentucky, a slave state that did not secede, was exempted from the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln's emancipation applied only to states that were in rebellion.

Slavery remained legal in Kentucky until 1866, when the Constitution was amended to abolish it in all states.

The incident at Camp Nelson has hardly been mentioned in most histories of the Civil War and the Underground Railroad, and many scholars of the period are unaware of what took place there.

"This is completely fascinating and completely new to me," said Carol Lasser, a professor of history at Oberlin College and an expert on the struggle to end slavery, when she was told by a reporter about the Camp Nelson expulsion.

"To resurrect it, to find out what happened down there it's a great addition to our knowledge of that period. We often forget the life-and-death nature of the struggle, and this tells a powerful story."

The November 1864 expulsion is mentioned in Army records, but the reports, which have been cited by Berea College Professor Richard Sears and historian Richard Gutman in material they have published about the incident, do not pinpoint the location of the destroyed refugee encampment.

McBride said he found the site by boring numerous holes into the ground at various sites on the old depot.

"When we got some things that looked like they came from civilians rather than soldiers, I was pretty sure we found it," McBride said.

"A lot of the items we have found are charred, which goes with the accounts that the refugees were expelled by soldiers who set their shanties on fire."

This summer, women's beads, pieces of porcelain dolls, charred building materials objects that don't fit with the routine of Army life have been found by the diggers.

McBride said the slaves who took shelter at Camp Nelson thought the Union army would protect them and, for a few months, they were right.

In Oberlin and Cincinnati, sympathetic Ohioans collected supplies and clothing for the refugees. Oberlin sent teachers and preachers as well.

But the camp commandant, Brig. Gen. Speed Smith Fry, was a hard-hearted soldier.

He accepted black men into new federal regiments being formed to fight the rebels, but their dependents were not welcome at Camp Nelson.

On Nov. 23, 1864, Fry gave orders to expel all women and children in the refugee camp. The shantytown was torched.

Documents located by historians in Army records, and in records kept by the American Missionary

Association, an Oberlin-affiliated group that had workers at the camp, show that the women and children were loaded into wagons and dumped along remote roads in Kentucky.

The Rev. Abisha Scofield, a minister who witnessed the expulsion, filed an affidavit about it with the Army on Dec. 16, 1864.

"The weather at the time was the coldest of the season," Scofield said. "The wind was blowing quite sharp and the women and children were thinly clad and most without shoes."

He reported slaveholders were waiting to reclaim the refugees as they were driven out. He said they had "been thick around the camp for a few days" and suspected they had been tipped off.

Fry's action triggered protests within the Army. Camp Nelson's quartermaster, Capt. Theron E. Hall, complained to Gen. Stephen Burnside, the commanding general, who eventually reopened the camp to refugees after removing Fry as camp commander.

Of the approximately 400 women and children who were expelled, Scofield said in his affidavit that 250 survived and escaped back to Camp Nelson as the war's end neared.

He set the death toll at 102, mostly from exposure and starvation. About 50 expelled slaves were taken away by their masters and never came back.

Last week, Brittany Hazelwood, a 17-year-old high school senior from Louisville, grubbed through the dirt at the archaeological dig. "It's a lot of work," she said. "It's not like the movies where you walk up and find King Tut's tomb.

"Here we're finding rusty nails, bullets, big pieces of glass. You look at this stuff, though, and you can kind of imagine the people who were here, though I can't imagine what they went through."

Daniela Johnston, another 17-year-old volunteer, said she has found broken bits of dishes in the six-foot-square spot she has been poking into.

"I guess it's all a treasure if it helps them figure out what happened here," Johnston said. "A broken dish, a puzzle. What makes people do awful things to one another?"

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