

“MY BOY WAS DEAD”: KENTUCKY, NOVEMBER 1864

*Joseph Miller: Statement  
Regarding His Family*

Located twenty miles south of Lexington, Kentucky, the Union supply depot at Camp Nelson became a major recruitment center for the U.S. Colored Troops in June 1864, and almost 4,000 black soldiers had enlisted there by the end of October. Some of the soldiers were accompanied to the camp by their families, who were either fleeing slavery or had been driven from their homes by whites bitterly opposed to black enlistment. In an effort to conciliate slaveholding Kentucky unionists who objected to the military giving refuge to slaves, Adjutant-General Lorenzo Thomas issued orders in July barring the families of black soldiers from Camp Nelson. Despite his instructions, families continued to live in the camp. On November 22 Brigadier General Speed S. Fry, the Kentucky unionist who commanded Camp Nelson, ordered the expulsion in freezing weather of some 400 women and children and the destruction of their huts and cabins. Captain Theron E. Hall, a quartermaster who had served at the camp, protested Fry's action to Brigadier General Stephen G. Burbridge, the Union commander in Kentucky. Writing as “Humanitas,” Hall published an account of the expulsions in the *New-York Daily Tribune* that was accompanied by Joseph Miller's affidavit. Burbridge countermanded Fry's order, and on November 29 gave Hall authority over the refugees. Hall and the Reverend John G. Fee established a refugee home at Camp Nelson in January 1865, but were unable to save many of those who had been driven out in November. On February 21, 1865, Fee wrote that of the 400 expelled, about 250 had returned to the camp, and that 102 of those who returned had died “in consequence of being exposed to cold & then herded together in Barracks” where “noise, disease & death rage.” Among the dead were the Miller family. Joseph Miller's sons, Joseph Jr. and Calvin; his daughter, Maria; and his wife, Isabella, all died at Camp Nelson between December 17, 1864, and January 2, 1865. They were followed on January 6 by Joseph Miller himself.

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Camp Nelson Ky November 26, 1864  
Personally appered before me E. B W Restieaux Capt. and

Asst. Quartermaster Joseph Miller a man of color who being duly sworn upon oath says

I was a slave of George Miller of Lincoln County Ky. I have always resided in Kentucky and am now a Soldier in the service of the United States. I belong to Company I 124 U.S.C. Inf now Stationed at Camp Nelson Ky. When I came to Camp for the purpose of enlisting about the middle of October 1864 my wife and children came with me because my master said that if I enlisted he would not maintain them and I knew they would be abused by him when I left. I had then four children ages respectively ten nine seven and four years. On my presenting myself as a recruit I was told by the Lieut. in command to take my family into a tent within the limits of the Camp. My wife and family occupied this tent by the express permission of the aforementioned Officer and never received any notice to leave until Tuesday November 22" when a mounted guard gave my wife notice that she and her children must leave Camp before early morning. This was about six O'clock at night. My little boy about seven years of age had been very sick and was slowly recovering My wife had no place to go and so remained until morning. About eight O'clock Wednesday morning November 23" a mounted guard came to my tent and ordered my wife and children out of Camp The morning was bitter cold. It was freezing hard. I was certain that it would kill my sick child to take him out in the cold. I told the man in charge of the guard that it would be the death of my boy I told him that my wife and children had no place to go and I told him that I was a soldier of the United States. He told me that it did not make any difference. he had orders to take all out of Camp. He told my wife and family that if they did not get up into the wagon which he had he would shoot the last one of them. On being thus threatened my wife and children went into the wagon My wife carried her sick child in her arms. When they left the tent the wind was blowing hard and cold and having had to leave much of our clothing when we left our master, my wife with her little one was poorly clad. I followed them as far as the lines. I had no Knowledge where they were taking them. At night I went in search of my family. I found them at Nicholasville about six miles from Camp. They were in an old meeting house belonging to the colored people. The building was

very cold having only one fire. My wife and children could not get near the fire, because of the number of colored people huddled together by the soldiers. I found my wife and children shivering with cold and famished with hunger They had not recieved a morsel of food during the whole day. My boy was dead. He died directly after getting down from the wagon. I Know he was Killed by exposure to the inclement weather I had to return to camp that night so I left my family in the meeting house and walked back. I had walked there. I travelled in all twelve miles Next morning I walked to Nicholasville. I dug a grave myself and buried my own child. I left my family in the Meeting house—where they still remain And further this deponent saith not

his  
(Signed) Joseph Miller  
mark