This ledger contains the muster rolls of African-American troops who enlisted in the army from 38 counties in Kentucky, mostly from the central and eastern portions of the state. The muster rolls have printed columns with the name and rank of an individual, where they were born, their age and occupation, when and where they enlisted, by whom and for how long they were enlisted, physical description, former owner's name, company, and remarks. Individuals' records are handwritten in ink.

Background Information

On May 22, 1863, the United States War Department established the Bureau of Colored Troops to promote the enlistment of African Americans into the Union Army. While there had been several African-American regiments raised in various states, the bureau was intended to coordinate the organization of African-American regiments across the country as a whole. Regiments included infantry, cavalry, and both light and heavy artillery, and over 178,000 free African Americans (who were free prior to the war) and freed slaves (freed during the war) enlisted in the final two years of the conflict. Kentucky alone contributed 23,000 troops—primarily men who had recently been slaves. By 1865, U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) made up approximately 10% of the Union Army.

Many of the men on this muster roll enlisted at Camp Nelson, located near Nicholasville, Kentucky. Established in 1863, it served as a supply depot for the Army of the Ohio, the Department of the Ohio, and the Department of the Kentucky. It was also the staging ground for Union military maneuvers in eastern and central Kentucky, led by Generals Ambrose Burnside and Stephen Burbridge.

Camp Nelson became the largest recruiting, mustering, and training center for African-American troops in Kentucky, and many brought their families along with them. Hoping for better living conditions and freedom, the refugees lived on the camp property while their husbands and fathers trained. Unsure of how to handle a refugee population, Brigadier General Speed S. Fry began to expel refugees and cooperate with slaveholders to return their slaves to them in the summer and fall of 1864. Finally, in November of 1864, he destroyed the shanties belonging to the refugees so they would be unable to return; as a result, hundreds of African-American women, children, and elderly died from exposure and disease. This outraged Northern newspaper writers, the U.S.
Sanitary Commission, abolitionist Reverend John G. Fee, and potential African-American enlistees. Recruitment of African Americans sharply fell off around this time. The federal government ordered Fry to establish an official refugee camp, run by Reverend John G. Fee and Captain Theron Hall. Funding allowed for the construction of cottages, dormitories, a hospital, a school, a dining room, and a laundry facility, which provided for over 3,000 refugees. In February of 1865, a Congressional act gave freedom to all wives and children of the USCT, which led to a new surge in enlistments.

Sergeant Elijah Marrs, Twelfth U.S. Heavy Artillery, was one of many African-American men who trained at Camp Nelson. For former slaves like Marrs, enlistment was a step towards freedom. He once stated, "I can stand this said I...this is better than slavery, though I do march in line at the tap of a drum. I felt freedom in my bones, and when I saw the American eagle with outspread wings, upon the American flag, with the motto E Pluribus Unum, the thought came to me, 'Give me liberty or give me death.' Then all fear banished."

**Significance**

Throughout the Civil War, African-American enlistment was a controversial topic. The federal government didn't want to anger slave-holding border states like Kentucky by authorizing the official enlistment of African Americans and worried the act might send border states into the Confederacy. Whites questioned the ability of African Americans to serve, and Kentucky politicians claimed African-American enlistment was an insult to white soldiers and officers, who they believed were perfectly capable of fighting without the assistance of freemen and former slaves. After the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, official enlistment of African Americans began. However, the proclamation did not apply to Kentucky, as it was part of the Union and only Confederate states were ordered to free their slaves so most African Americans in the Bluegrass State remained slaves. Many could only obtain freedom by enlisting, a practice that continued in Kentucky even after the Civil War had ended. Slavery continued in Kentucky until December 1865, when the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified, officially ending slavery in all of the United States.

African-American soldiers fought for a country that did not consider them citizens, and they were met with hostility from both Confederate soldiers and white Union soldiers who did not believe they were equals. Pay for African-American soldiers was less than that of white soldiers for several years, until Congress finally granted equal pay for all men in June of 1864. African-American soldiers proved their mettle in various battles, such as the Battle of Island Mound in October of 1862, where their brave advance into heavy artillery fire proved they were just as capable as white soldiers. General Nathaniel P. Banks wrote of the African-American soldiers in his official battle report: “They answered every expectation. Their conduct was heroic. No troops could be more determined or more daring. They made during the day three charges upon the batteries of the enemy, suffering very heavy losses, and holding their position at nightfall […] The highest commendation is bestowed upon them by all officers in the command on the right. Whatever doubt may have existed heretofore as to the efficiency of organizations of this character, the history of this day proves conclusively […] that the Government will find in this class of troops effective supporters and defenders. The severe test to which they were subjected, and the determined manner with which they encountered the enemy leave upon my mind no doubt of their ultimate success. They require only good officers, commands of limited numbers, and careful discipline to make them excellent soldiers.”

Of the 180,000 African Americans who fought in the war, over 36,000—or 20.5%—died, at a rate far higher than their white counterparts.
Related Resources


- See a photo gallery of African American and their roles in the Civil War at the LIFE website. http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,2106266,00.html

- Read letters by and about slaves living in Kentucky before and during the Civil War at the Kentucky Education Television website. http://www.ket.org/civilwar/aamerican.html