

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Lucy "Aunt Lucy" Higgs Nichols

(April 10, 1838 – January 29, 1915)

"Celebrated Nurse for the Union Army during the Civil War"

Lucy Higgs Nichols was born into slavery on April 10, 1838 in Halifax County, North Carolina. Lucy, along with her family, was held in chattel slavery by the Higgs family. Lucy and her siblings were shuffled back and forth between Higgs family members fighting for ownership after the patriarch died. She was moved to Mississippi, and then to Tennessee. In 1862, just after the start of the Civil War, she learned that she would be moved further South. Lucy, then 24 years old, seized the opportunity to escape to the North with her young daughter, Mona, and several others. They moved North and eventually crossed the Hatchie River, almost 30 miles from their start location. There they found the Union Army's 23rd Volunteer Indiana Regiment, who were camped near Bolivar, Tennessee. The soldiers embraced Lucy and promised she and her daughter would not be returned to her former circumstances. Here she met her first husband.

Lucy began working tirelessly for the Union soldiers as a nurse, seamstress, cook, and laundress. With her daughter by her side, Lucy travelled with the Regiment and was present at such critical battles as the Siege of Vicksburg and the Siege of Atlanta. She also followed the Regiment through General William Tecumseh Sherman's March to the Sea. She was known to be devoted to her daughter, as well as the soldiers that lovingly named her "Aunt Lucy."

The harsh conditions of war proved to be too much for Lucy's young daughter, and Mona, no older than five, died just after the surrender of Vicksburg.

The soldiers saw Lucy and Mona as family and gave an elaborate funeral and burial for Mona. She was buried in a grave, next to other Union soldiers. Although Lucy was devastated, she continued on with the Regiment, following the soldiers to the end of the war, to Washington, D.C. Lucy marched with the soldiers as part of the Grand Review of the Federal Armies.

Lucy worked as a family caretaker for some of the officers of the 23rd Regiment. In 1870, she married John Nichols, and they lived together in New Albany, Indiana.

While living in New Albany, Lucy maintained contact with her fellow members of the 23rd Regiment. She attended every regimental reunion and marched in each Memorial Day parade. Lucy became a member of the New Albany chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic, a fraternal organization of veterans of the Union forces.

In 1892, Congress passed an act that granted pensions for Civil War nurses. Lucy applied for pension, citing medical issues which impacted her ability to work, but was rejected twice because there was no official record of her service. Fifty-five of the veterans that she served during the war, wrote letters of support for Lucy and in December 1898, a special act of Congress was passed and Lucy was approved for a \$12 per month pension for the rest of her life.

After the death of her husband John, Lucy was admitted to the Floyd County Poor Farm on January 5, 1915. Just weeks later, on January 29, 1915, Lucy Higgs Nichols died at the age of 77. She was buried with military honors in an unmarked grave in West Haven Cemetery in New Albany.

In 2011, a state historical marker was placed outside the Second Baptist Church, where Lucy had been a member of the congregation.

On July 3, 2019, a stone statue of Lucy Higgs Nichols and her daughter Mona was erected in New Albany, Indiana.

