



Lucy Higgs Nichols

(1838 - 1915)

by Casey Pfeiffer, Indiana
Historical Bureau

Sources:

- "Lucy Higgs Nichols," Indiana State Historical Marker, Indiana Historical Bureau, 2011, accessed <https://www.in.gov/history/markers/4121.htm>.
- Peters, Pam R., Curtis H. Peters, and Victor C. Megenity, "Lucy Higgs Nichols: From Slave to Civil War Nurse of the Twenty-third Indiana Regiment," *Black History News and Notes*, in *Traces* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, Winter 2010): 34-39.

Lucy Higgs Nichols escaped from enslavement and became a nurse with the 23rd Regiment, Indiana Volunteers during the Civil War. Congress awarded her a pension for her service in 1898. Born into slavery sixty years earlier, she and her siblings were made the subject of legal disputes over their ownership, and she was shuffled between members of the Higgs family in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Mississippi into her twenties.

Nichols secured her freedom in the summer of 1862, when she escaped and sought refuge with the 23rd Regiment, camped nearby in Bolivar, Tennessee.

On July 17, 1862, Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act, which mandated "that all slaves . . . escaping . . . and taking refuge within the lines of the army . . . shall be deemed captives of war, and shall be forever free of their servitude, and not again held as slaves." Nichols joined thousands of enslaved African Americans who emancipated themselves during this period when they went to work in service of the Union.

She served as a nurse for the regiment throughout several major battles and for the duration of the war, tending to wounds, administering medicine, and cooking and washing for the soldiers and officers. She received no pay for this work. Nichols mustered out in 1865 and went to New Albany with other veterans from the 23rd. She married John Nichols there in 1870.

In 1892, Congress passed an act that granted pensions for Civil War nurses. Nichols applied, but was denied when the Pension Office claimed they found no records of her employment. She submitted additional information and reapplied, but her claims were again rejected. Working alongside fifty-five veterans of the 23rd Regiment, she petitioned Congress in 1895, and in 1898, Congress passed a special act that awarded her a pension for her contributions.



Lucy Higgs Nichols is standing in the center of the group. Photo Courtesy: Carnegie Center for Art and History