Primary and Secondary Source Examination and Analysis Lesson

What Was Written About Lucy Higgs Nichols?

**Objective:** This lesson can be utilized by middle and high school teachers searching for curriculum to enhance their study of the Civil War. The objective of this lesson is to read and report on a variety of primary and secondary sources about the life of Lucy Higgs Nichols. Students will work in groups to read various newspaper and magazine articles regarding Nichols then report back to the class on their findings after completing a primary document evaluation worksheet. The lesson can then be used to create either a poster project or oral presentation covering the life of Nichols. This lesson plan can be used to introduce students to content associated with the Lucy Higgs Nichols exhibit at the Carnegie Center for Art and History in New Albany, Indiana.

**National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Standards for Social Studies:**

II: Time, Continuity, and Change; III: People, Places, and Environments; IV: Individual Development and Identity; X: Civic Ideals and Practices

**Indiana Standards for Education:**

8th Grade: 8.1.10, 8.1.16, 8.1.21, 8.1.25, 8.1.26, 8.3.2
High School: World History and Civilizations, United States History, Government

**Kentucky Core Content Standards:**

8th Grade: SS-08-2.1.1, 2.3.1, 4.1.1, 4.2.3, 4.3.2, 5.1.1, 5.1.2, 5.2.4
High School: World History, United States History, Government

**Materials:**

1.) LHN Primary Source Questions (worksheet)
2.) LHN Denver Post Article (4 pages)
3.) LHN Janesville Gazette Article (1 page)
4.) LHN The Freeman Article (3/4 page)
5.) LHN New York Times Article (1/4 page)
6.) LHN Indiana Historical Society Traces Article (6 pages) This article is used with permission of Indiana Historical Society and appeared in the Winter 2010 issue of the Indiana Historical Society’s publication, Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History.
7.) LHN at Veteran’s Reunion Photograph
8.) LHN Detail Photograph
9.) LHN Crothers Article (optional) (4 pages)

**Introduction:**

Begin class by projecting LHN Image #1 on your board or wall. This is one of only two known images of Lucy Higgs Nichols. The photograph was taken in 1898 at an annual reunion of
the 23rd Indiana Volunteer Regiment. As the students enter the room, have them answer the following questions about the image:

1.) What do you think is represented in this photograph?
2.) List as many details about the photograph that you can.
3.) Who or what stands out in the photograph?

After students have had enough time to answer the questions, begin an open class discussion to try and discover the answers. Fill in any information that the students do not answer on their own. Make sure they discuss the importance and significance of Lucy Nichols being the only female and African American in the picture. Let the students know that this is Lucy Higgs Nichols and that today, in class, they will discover for themselves who she was and why she is important to history.

Procedures:

1. Complete the introductory activity.
2. Divide the class into groups. You should have the same number of groups as documents that you are planning to investigate. There are a variety of primary and secondary sources. Some are at a very high level and some are lower for students who struggle to read on grade level. MAKE SURE TO PREVIEW EACH DOCUMENT BEFORE YOU ASSIGN IT TO A GROUP. Some will take longer than others, so plan your time accordingly.
3. Once the students are in a group, have them assign a role for the group members. Students should select the following: Timekeeper (to watch the clock to follow time allotment), Historian (the person who will answer the questions in writing), Orator (the person who will speak to the class to discuss the finding of the group), and Scribe (the person who will write any unknown words on the board).
4. After the groups are settled, distribute the reading materials and Primary/Secondary source examination worksheets.
5. Provide an ample amount of time for students to read the documents and answer the questions.
6. Once the students have generated a list of unknown vocabulary words, have the Scribe come to the board and write the words.
7. Once finished, begin the class discussion. Students can attempt to define any unknown words before discussion so that the meanings may be applied to the analysis. If any words remain, please answer them with the students.
8. Ask each group to report to the class their findings with their document. Make sure they describe what type of document they read and discuss who Lucy Higgs Nichols was in regard to the document. You can choose to have each group answer each question or select specific questions based upon your plans for upcoming activities.
9. Once the class has reported out, you may want to ask some follow up questions to enhance the discussion. Questions can center around the following issues:
   a. Lucy’s escape and Civil War battle experiences
   b. The racial innuendos and language used to describe Lucy and other African
Americans (such as “Aunt” and “pickaninny”)

c. The eventual granting of a federal pension for Civil War service based on the support of the 23rd Indiana members.

d. The inability of Lucy Nichols to obtain employment in New Albany as a nurse after the war. She refers to herself as a housekeeper in her deposition.

**Evaluation:**

1. One the class discussion has ended, students can complete a variety of projects or activities based on the life and experiences of Lucy Higgs Nichols:
   a. Students can create a visual display of the life of Lucy Nichols based on classroom discussions that would be similar to an exhibit in the Carnegie Center for Art and History in New Albany, IN.
   b. Students could create a poster interpreting the life and accomplishments of Lucy Higgs Nichols.
   c. Students can write and submit an article to a newspaper about the life of Lucy as presented by the various groups.
   d. Students can fill in a blank map of the United States with the journey of Lucy Higgs Nichols as described in the Denver Post Article

2. Students will turn in their Primary/Secondary source worksheets after class discussion.
Name ____________________________________

**What Was Written About Lucy Higgs Nichols?**

Primary/Secondary Source Document Worksheet

1. What type of document did you read (newspaper article, journal, diary)?

2. Why is this document considered as a primary or secondary source?

3. Who was the creator or author of this document?

4. List three things the author said that you think are important:

5. Why do you think this document was written?

6. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

7. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written.
8. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:

9. List any words found in the document that you do not recognize or know the meaning of.

10. According to the document, who was Lucy Higgs Nichols and what role did she play in the history of the United States?

11. How could you consider Lucy Higgs to be “exceptional?” What actions make her stand out from the rest of society?

12. What can individuals and historians learn from examining her personal history?

13. What can primary or secondary documents such as this tell us about history that textbooks or other written sources cannot?
NEGRESS WHO NURSED SOLDIERS IS A MEMBER OF THE G.A.R.

Colored Woman Who Served in the Union Army Draws a Pension at New Albany

Louisville, Ky., Special—“Aunt Lucy Nichols of New Albany, Ind., is said to be the only negress in the country who is a member of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Sanderson Post, No. 191, of New Albany has “Aunt Lucy” on its rolls and the members are proud to call the old colored woman their comrade, for such she surely proved herself to be during the war when she ministered faithfully to the Twenty-third Indiana regiment. This regiment was mustered chiefly in New Albany, where many of its members now live and form Sanderson Post.

Early in 1863, when the regiment was in camp at Bolivar, Tenn., “Aunt Lucy” joined it as cook and nurse. She remained with it until the war was over and marched in the grand review of the Federal armies in Washington.

When she joined the regiment she was fleeing from her master, who had intended to sell her farther South. Her gratitude to the Federal troops for affording her refuge was unbounded and she proved it by waiting on them with rarely equaled devotion.

She was at the siege of Vicksburg and on the march to the sea. A few years after the war she was elected an honorary member of Sanderson Post and six years ago a special act of Congress granted her a pension. She has attended all state department encampments and several national encampments and has never missed a reunion of the Twenty-third. In marches on Memorial day she always takes her place in the ranks. Whenever any member of the post is ill she insists on nursing him as she did in war times. This affection is returned by the post and when the old woman suffered a slight stroke of paralysis last week she was visited by Sanderson Post in a body. Aunt Lucy owns a home and is among the most respected residents of New Albany.

\[1\] Called “the Harper’s Weekly of the Black Press” the influential Freeman was the first illustrated African American newspaper; 637 issues published between 1895 and 1911.
NEW ALBANY, Ind., Dec. 13.—Aunt Lucy Nichols of this city has just been granted a pension of $12 per month by special act of Congress. She is the only female member of the Grand Army of the Republic post in the United States. She served through the war with the Twenty-third Indiana, participating in twenty-eight battles. She fought, nursed the sick, and cooked and washed for the officers. She joined the regiment at Bolivar, Tenn, having run away from her master. He traced her to the camp of the Twenty-third, but she begged protection, and the soldiers kept her. Her daughter, who was with her, died at Vicksburg. Lucy was with the it was mustered out, and accompanied the men to New Albany.
The Janesville Daily Gazette:
Janesville, Wisconsin, Thursday, March 14, 1889

DAUGHTER OF THE REGIMENT

An Indiana Negress With a Remarkable War History

In a little cottage near the base of Floyd Knobs, two miles from New Albany, Ind., lives a colored woman who is well known among the army veterans. Among her acquaintances are Generals, Colonels, Captains and Majors by the score. No bean-bake or reunion of the Twenty-third Indiana regiment would be complete without her presence, for she is the adopted daughter of the regiment. Her name is Lucy Nichols. She is 48 years old, intelligent and trustworthy. She was a slave in Kentucky, and when the war broke out determined to come North, the order had been given that her master’s slaves were to be confiscated and driven further South.

One midnight she fled, taking her baby and was unable to warn her husband. All night she fought her way through briars and underbrush, but had the reward of reaching the federals early next morning. Bleeding, exhausted, and with the child in her arms, she was taken before Col. W. L. Sanderson, who commanded the Twenty-third Indiana regiment, and by him was referred to Dr. Brooker [Brucker], regimental surgeon, and after that she was a fixture in the regiment, which belonged to Gen. Gresham’s brigade. She was with the regiment at the siege of Vicksburg, and there her child died. With the Twenty-third she was at Thompson Hill, Raymond, Champion Hill, at the capture of Jackson, marched in Sherman’s great raid as far as Meridian, Miss., afterward followed through the Atlantic campaign, during which her regiment was in battle or skirmish every day, and joined in the pursuit of Hood through Georgia and Alabama, helping to fight the regiments’ last battle at Bentonville.

During these days she endeared herself to the soldiers. Her hand often lifted the canteen full of water to the lips of the wounded, her ear received the last message of the dying, and the soldiers looked upon her in the light of a friend. She shared their hardships and never grumbled, and in their triumphs she was among the happiest. During this time she also made the acquaintance of Gen. Gresham, and for a time waited upon the General’s wife, who was with her husband in camp. They became very much attached to each other, and when, some months ago, the General’s daughter was married at Chicago, Aunt Lucy was sent for, and, on her arrival, taken to the Palmer House by Otto Gresham and treated there as a friend of the family.

When the Twenty-third was mustered out at Louisville Aunt Lucy was still with it, and together with the veterans went up to Indianapolis, where a reception was given to the Indiana regiments July 25, 1865, by Gov. Morton. There the regiment finally disbanded, and the men returned to their homes in the river counties. Many of the men being from New Albany, Aunt Lucy naturally went there, and found, as she hoped, many friends, and some years ago a good husband.
WHY AUNT LUCY GOT A PENSION

So Aunt Lucy is at last rewarded—she of the Twenty-third Indiana volunteers! Stranger story than that of Lucy Nichols was never written: no French vivandiere has occupied such a post in all the lurid pages of European warfare. Even as Joan d’Arc loved the sound of battle, this faithful colored woman drew back the wounded and dying and comforted their last hours, unmindful of the hail of bullets and crash of artillery.

In The Post of Wednesday was the following dispatch:

New Albany, Ind. Dec. 14 - Aunt Lucy’ Nichols, an aged negress of this city, has just been granted a pension of $12 a month by a special act of Congress. ‘Aunt Lucy’ is the only female member of a Grand Army of the Republic post in the United States. She served through the War of the Rebellion with the Twenty-third Indiana, participating in twenty-eight battles.

The Twenty-third Indiana was the regiment of Major S. K. Hooper, now general passenger agent of the Denver & Rio Grande railroad. The telegram was handed to him with the question if he had ever heard of Aunt Lucy.

“Heard of Aunt Lucy?” repeated Major Hooper, and the eyes of the soldier of the ‘60s grew tender. “Who that was ever with the Twenty-third hasn’t heard of Aunt Lucy. God bless her!

“She came to us in June of ’62 when we were at Bolivar, Tenn. With her husband and baby girl she had escaped from a plantation some twenty or thirty miles from the town, and had made her way to camp. We had just recognized the negro as contraband of war and were beginning to receive them and form colored regiments. Aunt Lucy came with a party of negroes who were dusty and footsore from the long and hurried journey they had taken. Her baby was between 3 and 4 years of age, a merry-eyed, bright little child with the name of Mona.

She and her husband became attached to our regiment and when the government began recruiting Negroes for the colored troops her husband enlisted. Aunt Lucy, who was then a buxom woman of about 30, remained with the Twenty-third as hospital nurse, cook, laundress and sewing woman. She was black as the ace of spades, but was above the ordinary negro in point of honesty, integrity and intelligence. She would follow in the rear, smiling and cheerful, carrying her baby in her arms and over her shoulder, oftentimes singing to it some old-fashioned lullaby or river song, but never complaining of the weary march.

After the boys became well acquainted with her the wagon train would come long and give her an appreciated lift, by carrying the baby, the men doing the crooning, and the little one kicked and gurgled gleefully on a soft pile of sacks and coats. This was because of Aunt Lucy’s...
kindness, for she was ever ready to sew on a button, patch a coat or trousers’ leg and make little delicacies around the camp fires that would bring thoughts of home and maybe a tear or so to many an eye.

A rattling good forager was Aunt Lucy. She kept herself supplied with clothes, and the necessary cooking utensils never mind where we were. Above all else in importance, she always managed in some way to have a tub and washboard, which treasures were taken in care by the men.

During an engagement—and we had many of them—she would fearlessly get to the front and find out the officers and men, for men and officers were all one to Aunt Lucy. She didn’t go into the battle where it was thickest, but she would hover around giving water to parched lips here, dragging back a wounded man there, and acting like the angel she was by her sympathy and gentleness.

At the siege of Vicksburg she was up at the front continuously. After the city had been captured our regiment was one of the first to go in and receive the surrender and Aunt Lucy followed in our wake. A short time afterward her child died. It almost broke the mother’s heart. The men, too, had grown to be as fond as possible of Mona and it was a sincere pang that went through the entire Twenty-third. We turned out and gave the little pickaninny an elaborate funeral. Covered with flowers the wee body was lowered in a long trench on the hillside above the city, where many a silent figure in blue was stretched out and received the same earth that covered up a portion of Aunt Lucy’s heart.

She was left absolutely alone, but she still clung to the regiment. Later on her husband was killed. At all events, he never returned and the supposition was that he was laid away with the thousands of unknown, both black and white, who had given up their lives for the glorious cause.

This telegram says she was in twenty-eight battles. She was in more than that, for Lucy was never absent when the Twenty-third was in danger.

It was a regiment that saw wonderful service. It had on its rolls during the war, including recruits, 1,525 men, and came out at the close of the war with 880 men. This, briefly, is a sketch of our movements without touching upon our engagements.

We went from New Albany, Ind., to Jeffersonville, and then to Indianapolis by rail, thence to St. Louis, to Cairo by boat, and to Paducah, Ky., by boat; to Grant’s battle of Belmont, near Columbus on foot, returning to Paducah by foot. We had several short marches out of Paducah and then went on a trip of reconnaissance, locating Fort Henry on a two week’s march, returning to Paducah we went to Fort Henry again, this time by boat; thence to Fort Donelson, and back to Fort Henry; thence up the Tennessee River to the battle of Shiloh, to Corinth and to Bolivar, Tenn. Here is where Aunt Lucy joined us, and from our subsequent marches you can judge of the immense amount of territory covered in long and arduous campaigns, during which her good, motherly nature and smile never failed us.
From Bolivar we went through Jackson, Tenn. to Corinth and returned to Bolivar; thence to Iuka, where we had a battle; to the Hatchie River, where another battle was fought and back to Bolivar. We followed Price for fifty-two miles to the southward, covering the distance in forty-eight hours and then returned.

We marched to Holly Springs, Miss., and joined Grant at Granada. Our supplies were cut off at Holly Springs, so we marched back to Collierville, Tenn., and then to Memphis afoot all the way; thence down the river to Lake Providence to Milliken’s Bend, to Port Gibson, to Jackson, Miss., via Thompson’s Hill and Raymond; thence to Champion Hill, and to Vicksburg.

After the fall of Vicksburg we went on Sherman’s raid to Meridian, Miss., a distance of 100 miles, and then returned to Vicksburg. We went up the Mississippi River sixty miles to Goodrich’s Landing and marched across the state of Louisiana to Monroe on the Watchita River to clean out a large force of rebels. Of course, during these marches and engagements we formed but a part of the various commands engaged in the movements. From Monroe we returned to Vicksburg.

“The three years of service had expired but 80 per cent of the regiment reenlisted. We were returned to New Albany and from there went to Bird’s Point, Mo., and thence on to the Tennessee River again to the old Shiloh battlefield, taking boats up the river to Pittsburg Landing. We marched across country to Huntsville, Ala., and then to Ackworth, Ga., to commence operations in front of Atlanta. After its fall we marched to Lovejoy station and when Hood’s army started north to Nashville we followed them almost back to the Tennessee River. Returning to Atlanta we started on the famous march to the sea from Atlanta to Savannah. We went by vessel to Beaufort, S.C., then through the Carolinas to Columbia and were present at the burning of the town. From Goldsboro we went to Raleigh, then to Richmond and on to Washington, D.C. by rail. At Louisville we were mustered out.

Aunt Lucy became a citizen when the regiment returned to New Albany, and was employed as a servant in the families of several of the officers. She lived in my family for a number of years and went from my house to that of W.Q. Gresham, a near neighbor, and afterward Secretary of State.

So fond were we all of Aunt Lucy that five or six years after the war, when she caught the smallpox, there was no hint of the pesthouse for her. She was living at the time in the family of one of the soldiers of the Twenty-third. They prepared a room and kept her there until she was well, waiting on her and serving her with as much care as if she was a member of the family.

When Gresham’s daughter was married in Chicago—and some of the best people in the United States were present—there was Aunt Lucy, an invited guest. The Gresham family thought so much of her that she was entertained by them at the Palmer house.

Aunt Lucy was made a member of Sanderson post, G. A. R., and has attended every reunion ever given by the regiment. Sanderson post is named after the first colonel of the
Twenty-third and at every meeting she is accorded a post of honor on the speaker’s stand. To meetings and reunions she is escorted by the officers of the regiment as if she was a queen and there is just as much respect and deference shown her. At the last reunion of the regiment but seventy-four were present and among them was Aunt Lucy. One of the few remaining—and she is over 66—she is just as devoted today as she was when she turned away from her child’s grave and followed us into the very jaws of death thirty-five years ago. She is welcome in every house and at every fireside left to the Twenty-third Indiana as an honored friend and guest, and the prayer of us all is that the years may deal gently with the loving old woman!”
LUCY HIGGS NICHOLS
From Slave to Civil War Nurse of the Twenty-third Indiana Regiment

PAMELA R. PETERS, CURTIS H. PETERS, AND VICTOR C. MEGENITY
It is a compelling story, and it is all the more compelling because it grew out of a research quest yielding treasures when one might expect that there was no information available. The story of Lucy Higgs Nichols is an inspiring account of a woman who overcame many odds to move from being shuffled about by several slave owners to becoming a valued participant during the Civil War. After the war, she moved to New Albany, Indiana, the home of many of the soldiers with whom she had served and became an honored citizen. This story is encouraging to anyone who has ever been told that a research project is hopeless and that there are “no reliable sources.”

Before telling Nichols’s story, let us share a few details of our search—information that we have gathered primarily in the last two years. In 1995 while doing research for her book, The Underground Railroad in Floyd County, Indiana, Pam Peters interviewed Pearl Kimbrough, an elderly African American, who told her about Nichols. Kimbrough said that an enslaved Nichols had escaped from her owners near Bolivar, Tennessee, joined up with a Union military regiment, and served as a nurse in the Civil War. After the war, Nichols was invited by the soldiers to settle in their hometown. She was made an honorary member of the Grand Army of the Republic, and she rode at the head of town parades with the mayor. Kimbrough said that her son was living in the house that had formerly belonged to Nichols and her husband, John.

Nichols received a slight mention in Peters’s book. Later at the local public library, Peters discovered an 1898 picture of Nichols in the midst of many men at a reunion of the Twenty-third Indiana Volunteer Infantry Regiment; it is the only known picture of her. Fellow historian Richard Earhardt learned from his grandfather that Nichols annually made the fifty-mile train trip to English, Indiana, for the reunion. Mary Stauble, a local genealogist, corroborated this story.

In 2008 Vic Megenity, a local historian and retired history teacher, found Nichols’s name while doing research to save the historic Floyd County Home. He also unearthed material detailing the successful quest that several veterans pursued to get her a military pension.

Working together, we decided that the interesting story required a trip to Bolivar, Tennessee, in search of details regarding the “Lucy story.” We easily recruited Peters’s husband, Curt, a person who loves adventure and uncovering the unknown, into our team effort. So in May 2009 the three of us headed to Bolivar, an interesting county seat about sixty miles east of Memphis. We stayed in the house that William Tecumseh Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant used as their headquarters in the summer of 1862, the summer Nichols escaped slavery.

At the Bolivar–Hardeman County Library, a librarian, Jannette Tignor, and a researcher, Pat Vincent, were very helpful. The documents they retrieved from the archives amazed all of us. Among these were an 1849 inventory of slaves belonging to Wineford Amanda Higgs, Yalobusha County, Mississippi, and an 1860 petition to divide slaves between Wyly and Prudence Higgs. Nichols was listed by name on both documents.

We decided we needed to go to Mississippi, so in August we took another trip to Coffeeville, one of two county seats of Yalobusha County. The county historian, Mike Worsham, showed us several documents in the courthouse, one of which from the 1840s still had the wax seal intact. We were again amazed that several of the documents mentioned Nichols by name. One gave the cost of transporting her and other slaves from Bolivar to Coffeeville in 1846. Using the information from the documents, we were able to find and visit the beautiful rolling hills and property where Nichols lived while in Mississippi.

Heading north, we stopped near Bolivar, Tennessee, and with the help of Robert Harrold, a retired teacher and local historian, we visited a farm and saw a building where Nichols might have stayed during the 1850s. Curt went to the Hardeman County Courthouse and discovered records that we had been told were destroyed by the Union army in 1864. He found a deed of the farm purchased in 1839 by Nichols’s early owner, Reuben Higgs, and an 1860 deed dividing the land between his children, Wyly and Prudence. The court records delineated the legal division of slaves in 1861 between the two children. In the document, Nichols and child were valued at $1,400.

Opposite: Lucy Higgs Nichols (standing, center of second row) poses with veterans of the Civil War and Spanish-American War during an annual reunion in English, Indiana, in 1898.
Using the information from the deeds, we were able to visit the property along Gray's Creek that had been Nichols's home between 1839 and 1862. We were struck by the property's beauty. The splendor was no doubt a stark contrast to the condition of her daily life before she ran about three miles to the camp of the Twenty-third Regiment in the summer of 1862.

We have the testimony of Jacob Higgs, Reuben's father, that Nichols was born in Halifax County, North Carolina, on April 10, 1838, but possibly this had never been communicated to her, for in a later deposition she estimated her age. Before she was one year old, she was transported along with other slaves and goods when Reuben and his second wife, Elizabeth nee Higgs, a first cousin, crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains and moved to southwest Tennessee. On April 1, 1839, they bought property along Gray's Creek, located three miles northeast of Bolivar. In the next five years they established their farm and had four children, one of whom died in infancy.

Several tragedies struck the family. In 1844 both the infant and Elizabeth died. In order to help with the children, Elizabeth's widowed mother, Mary E. Brantly Higgs, moved to the area from North Carolina. The following year, after a brief third marriage, Reuben died, leaving Nichols and the other slaves to his surviving children.

In 1845 there were four surviving children, three by Elizabeth (Wyly, Marcus, and Prudence), and one by Reuben's first wife, Eliza (Wineford Amanda). Nichols was one of three young slaves that Wineford Amanda inherited. Here is where the treasure trove we found in Coffeeville becomes important. We learned from the documents that Eliza had moved with her daughter from North Carolina to Mississippi after her divorce from Reuben and that she had died there in the early 1840s, leaving Wineford an orphan under the guardianship of a neighbor, Samuel G. Wheless.

We discovered in the court files that on February 10, 1846, Wheless hired G. W. Hill to transport Nichols and the two other slaves from Bolivar to Coffeeville (a
of the guardianship. A total of ten slaves were divided between Wyly and Prudence. Nichols and her child went to Prudence, and their value was listed at $1,400—more than any of the other individual slaves. Two of Lucy’s siblings, Aaron and Angeline, were allotted to Wyly, so Nichols was again separated from family members. The old Reuben Higgs farm was also divided between Wyly and Prudence. Soon thereafter Prudence married Albert L. Cheairs, and they bought Wyly’s portion of the land along Gray’s Creek. Thus, Nichols spent the last part of her slavery where she had lived as a child.

It is at this point that the legal records in Tennessee related to Nichols end, but for the rest of the story we can look to her own words as well as other letters and newspaper articles. Here is what she dictated for a deposition more than thirty years after she ran to the Union forces. It is dated April 12, 1894, and was part of her appeal for a government pension:

(Left to right) Megentry, Robert Harroson, and Peters pose by the family cemetery on the Higgs farm in Hardeman County. Mary Higgs is buried here.
I am about 51 or 52 years old; I am a housekeeper, and my post office address is New Albany Floyd Co., Ind. I am the identical Lucy Nichols who claims pension as nurse during the War of the Rebellion. I claim pension under the Act of August 5, 1892. Dr. Brucker employed me as nurse at Bolivar, Tenn. I went to the regiment-23 Indiana in 1862, and was employed by Dr. Brucker to nurse the sick and wounded soldiers of that regiment-the 23 Regiment of Ind. Vols. of the United States Army. Dr. Brucker was the regimental surgeon. Dr. Byrn was also a surgeon; he left us after the surrender at Vicksburg, Miss. He now lives at Marengo, Ind.

Dr. Brucker is now dead; he lived at Tell City, Ind. We went from Bolivar, Tenn. to Corinth, Miss. and the regiment got into a skirmish there and then fell back, and we took our old camp again at Bolivar, Tenn. Then we said [sic] there awhile, and then we went to Grenada and Holly Springs, Miss. Then we went to different places in Mississippi, and across to Atlanta, Ga. and to the Sea—at Beaufort, S.C. Then through Virginia to Washington City, D.C. We camped there awhile, and from there we went to Indianapolis, Ind. and we were mustered out at Indianapolis.

After Vicksburg surrendered, the regiment was furloughed for 60 days, and I came home with them, and went back with them. I was with the regiment during the whole time from Bolivar, Tenn. to Indianapolis, Ind. I served as nurse about 3 years. I cooked for the soldiers, dressed their wounds, gave them medicine, and washed for them, and did anything I was called on to do. I served in the hospital at Bolivar, Tenn. I served under the name of Lucy Higgs and since the war I have married John Nichols—hence the name of Lucy Nichols. I have no documents showing that I was employed or discharged.

Dr. McPheeters of Hardinsburg, Ind. and Dr. Byrn of Marengo, Ind. had charge of the hospital at Bolivar, Tenn. They will remember my services. Lorenzo D. Emory, Charlie Villiard and B. F. Welker were members of the regiment and know of my service. Col. Wm. Davis was Col. of the 23rd Ind. and he will remember me. John Hoffman, Hendersonville, Clark Co., Ind. also knows of my serving as nurse. I am not able to earn a support on account of having bronchitis and quinsy [sic] most all the time, and I have been sick and under treatment of a physician all the winter. Dr. Burney has been my physician. I work some but I cannot work much; I am compelled to work to make something to live. My husband served in the army, but he does not receive a pension and has never applied for one. I have no children that served in the army.

I never received a nickel for my services as nurse; Dr. Brucker told me I would get paid, and I worked on in the hope of getting pay after awhile. I was not under Miss Dorothea L. Dix. I was never in any hospital, but that of the 23 Ind. Vols., and was with them till I was relieved at Indianapolis.

Lucy Nichols (X, her mark)

Primarily using newspaper articles, we are able to add a few details to support Nichols's account of her work during the Civil War. In the late summer of 1862, the Twenty-third Regiment from New Albany, Indiana, and surrounding counties, was camped on the north side of Bolivar, as Grant marched south with several regiments attacking Confederate forces east of the Mississippi River. This thrust, along with the Union's victory at Gettysburg, was a major turning point in the war, and it helped catapult Grant into prominence.

Nichols and her child, and possibly her child's father, escaped from their owners and went to the camp seeking refuge and protection. Newspaper articles reveal that her owner traced her to the camp of the Twenty-third Indiana, but she begged protection, and the soldiers kept her with them. By November the army had moved south to Coffeeville, where Nichols had lived earlier as a young slave, and we can only imagine her deep feelings as she saw that area now as a free person.

Several accounts report that Nichols was very helpful during the time she was with the Twenty-third Regiment. The New Albany Ledger claimed that "she fought, nursed the sick, and cooked and washed for the officers." A Louisville Courier article included the statement that at the Battle of Vicksburg her husband, who had escaped with her, was killed and that Nichols "took up his rifle and marched in his stead.

Some of this may be exaggeration, but this much seems certain: Nichols used her considerable skills to nurse, cook, and wash for the Hoosier soldiers.

Nichols stayed with the Twenty-third throughout the war. She saw more than her share of wounded and dying soldiers, as well as all of the illness, filth, inclement weather, and destruction that went with army life in the field during the Civil War. Her daughter died at Vicksburg and was buried there.
Above: Nichols is buried in an unmarked grave, exact location unknown, in this cemetery in New Albany, Indiana. Right: Megenity, Pamela Peters, and Curtis Peters pose while conducting research on Nichols’ life and times.

major battles in Mississippi including Port Gibson, Raymond, and Champion’s Hill; at battles in Georgia including Kennesaw Mountain and Jonesboro; at the battle in Bentonville, South Carolina; and at the sieges of Atlanta and Savannah.

At the end of the war, Nichols joined her unit at the Washington, D.C., review of troops. The men of the Twenty-third invited her to settle in New Albany, although the community had a history of not being welcoming to blacks. She accepted the invitation and moved there. In 1870 she married John Nichols, and they lived on Naghel Street in the West Union area of the city.

“Aunt Lucy,” as she came to be called, was made an honorary member of the GAR. In 1892 Congress passed a special act allowing nurses to apply for pensions, and the following year the men of the Twenty-third Regiment requested a pension for Nichols. It took several years of application and reapplication, but in December 1898 she received a pension of twelve dollars per month from the U.S. government as a result of her work as a nurse from September 1862 to the end of the Civil War. It was approved in a “Special Act” under the Army Nurses Pension.

Nichols was described by members of the regiment as a “good, true and faithful nurse, rendering great aid and comfort to sick and disabled soldiers in the camp hospital.” Doctor Magnus Brucker said that he could not have gotten along without Nichols’ assistance, and that she always knew what to do and was attentive and ready to assist.

John Nichols died on November 12, 1910. With no one to care for her and being in poor health, Lucy entered the Floyd County Poor Farm on January 5, 1915, and died there a few weeks later on January 29. She was buried with military honors next to her husband in the “colored cemetery.” With neither written records nor tombstones to mark the site, the exact location of their graves is unknown.

Nichols’ story had been virtually forgotten and some details had never been known. But it is an account that needs to be preserved. She was a remarkable woman who lived an important and productive life overcoming unbelievable difficulties.

The Carnegie Center for Art and History in New Albany is developing a permanent exhibit on Nichols in connection with its award-winning exhibition Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage: Men and Women of the Underground Railroad. The exhibition about Nichols will be dedicated sometime this year.

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IN 1892 CONGRESS PASSED A SPECIAL ACT ALLOWING NURSES TO APPLY FOR PENSIONS, AND THE FOLLOWING YEAR THE MEN OF THE TWENTY-THIRD REGIMENT REQUESTED A PENSION FOR NICHOLS.
Lucy Higgs Nichols and the Memory of the Civil War
Presented at the Carnegie Center for Art and History, February 2011

Dr. A. Glenn Crothers
University of Louisville/ The Filson Historical Society

The fighting did not end when Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant in April 1865. Certainly, both sides laid down their arms and the unprecedented bloodshed of the war came to end. But the meaning and significance of the war remained unsettled—and Americans would fight this contest for many years to come (indeed, in some ways we still fight it today). Even at war’s end, white southerners viewed the civil war as a noble and righteous fight to protect their rights—of property and the states—as enshrined in the Constitution. For white northerners, the war represented a patriotic and honorable conflict to defend the Union against radicals’ intent on destroying a nation that stood as the front of liberty in the world (or as Lincoln had it, “The last, best hope of mankind”). But for American Africans and some white northerners the war had a different meaning. For them, it was a glorious and sacred struggle that ended their bondage and brought a new birth of freedom.

In the war’s aftermath, these three interpretations of the war’s meaning gave rise to three distinct memories of the conflict. Confronted by the massive loss of life—over six hundred thousand died between 1861 and 1865—all Americans sought ways to make sense of the carnage. Americans could never forget—as Lincoln noted in the Gettysburg address—what their soldiers had done on the battlefield, but the meaning they accorded those actions differed profoundly. White southerners embraced what historian David Blight has called “the white supremacist vision,” encapsulated in the Lost Cause ideology that celebrated the racial and social hierarchies of the antebellum South and decried “Negro emancipation” as “the great crime of the century.” For white southerners, the antebellum South represented a golden age, its people “ambitious, intellectual and brave, such as led Athens in her brightest epoch and controlled Rome in her most glorious days.” The war, this version of history insisted, took place because avaricious northerners sought to impose their industrial society on the agricultural and traditional South. Southerners did not fight to defend slavery, which they claimed was only an incidental cause of war, but the institution served an important function: it was “the apprenticeship by which savage races had been educated and trained into civilization by their superiors.” Thus, ending slavery was a crime because it turned “the Negro…loose in America…against his will…to do the best he can in the contest with the strongest race that ever lived.” [I quote here from the former Confederate general Bradley T. Johnson, speaking in 1896 at the dedication of the White House of the Confederacy as a museum.]

In contrast, many white northerners embraced a “reconciliationist vision” of the war, one that arose out of the process of confronting the extent of the war’s carnage. In the wake of the war, the celebration of the fallen dead—in decoration days, memorial celebrations, and veterans’ reunions—became a collective ritual shared by combatants North and South. Soldiers in gray and blue shared the same experience with death, they demonstrated the same courage
in the face of battle, and they suffered through similar sacrifices. Their actions in war also brought them recognition for their valor and they enjoyed a shared sense of honor for doing their duty when asked by their respective nations. As Civil War veteran and jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes noted in 1884, “The soldiers faced death with feelings not different in kind, whether he fell toward them or by their side.” Both sides, in Holmes’s view, were morally in the right because they shared a common devotion and courage to their respective causes. But the reconciliationist perspective divorced the shared heroism of the soldiers from the causes and the goals of the combatants. It divorced, in short, soldiers’ valor from the reasons they fought. In time, this celebration of motiveless heroism became linked to the failure of Reconstruction and the celebration of white supremacy in the North and South. Honoring the fallen dead while ignoring the cause of the war in which they died—namely, the blight of slavery and racism in a democratic nation—enabled southerners and northerners to bridge the divide that separated them. But this reconciliation took place at the cost of the racial justice which had seemed within reach at war’s end. To achieve sectional peace and mollify white southerners, northerners embraced black racial oppression.

This reconciliationist vision—while the dominant perspective by the 1870s—did not go uncontested. For black Americans and many former abolitionists, the war remained a battle to end slavery and achieve racial justice—even if the latter remained far from reach. Men such as Frederick Douglass voiced this emancipationist vision throughout the late nineteenth century, insisting that the war and radical Reconstruction represented an attempt to reinvent the republic and raise newly liberated African Americans to citizenship and constitutional equality. Many white northerners also embraced this view of the war as a struggle for racial justice. Ohio scholar Wilbur Siebert discovered the depth of this Civil War memory when he traveled the North in the 1890s and 1900s collecting stories about the Underground Railroad. He quickly found a large number of white northerners eager to tell stories of their or their parents’ heroism in the battle against slavery. However, the stories of Siebert’s white correspondents usually ignored the central—indeed essential—role of black Americans in the Underground Railroad and often employed offensive racial stereotypes to describe runaways. Equally important, they treated the issue of slavery and racial justice as a story now ended successfully, ignoring the racial injustices that continued to plague the land, both North and South. African Americans who embraced the emancipationist memory of the war knew better, but their voices were overwhelmed—though never erased—as most white Americans accepted a vision of the past that by the 1880s embraced the white supremacy of the Lost Cause. Indeed, as Siebert’s correspondents revealed, the racial vision of the South even influenced those who still viewed the war as a battle to end slavery.

So where does Lucy Higgs Nichols fit into this contested memory of the Civil War? I believe Nichols is more than the intriguing tale of one black woman’s efforts to survive in Civil War America. Her story—which we know because of the dogged research efforts of Pam and Curt Peters—shines light on many aspects of nineteenth century African-American and (more broadly) American history. Her history as a slave—from her birth in slavery in North Carolina, through her forced migration to Tennessee as her white owners moved west, to the constant instability and geographic mobility of her life—reveals the tribulations faced by enslaved African Americans subject to the will of their masters. Nichols’s Civil War experience reveals how the war brought the prospect of freedom and opportunity, even while it caused personal tragedy...
and suffering in the loss of her child and husband. Nichols’s actions before 1865 demonstrate the centrality of black agency—that is, the efforts of black Americans to define and shape their lives even within the context of slavery and white oppression. Nichols’s tenacity, intelligence, and determination to survive and protect those she loved stand as the central components of her character through these years, as she moved from slave to runaway to camp follower to skilled nurse for the 23rd Indiana. More important, Nichols’s journey—while unique in its trajectory—reveals how African Americans did everything they could to shape their own lives, even while they faced often-insurmountable difficulties.

After the war, Nichols enjoyed freedom if not full equality. She moved to southern Indiana with the regiment she served and from whom she received accolades and respect. Indeed, a significant number of the men in the 23rd supported her application for a federal military pension, one she eventually received. She also attended veterans’ reunions in New Albany; indeed, the only photographs we have of Nichols were taken at one of those celebrations. The men of the 23rd seem to have accepted and respected Nichols for her wartime service, even if they did not accord her full membership in the GAR. Nichols appears to have been—for some of the men of the 23rd at least—a concrete example of what the Union war effort and their sacrifices had been all about: The end of slavery as a means to restore the Union. For veterans who had before the war embraced the emancipationist message of the Republican Party and who after the war accepted the goals of Reconstruction, Nichols stood as an embodiment of their successful war effort. In short, Lucy fit well into the emancipationist memory of the war.

But like Siebert’s white correspondents who accepted without the questioning many of the racial assumptions of the era, many of the veterans of the 23rd—even those who celebrated black liberty—did not view Nichols as an equal. They referred to her as “Aunt” Lucy—a term of endearment certainly, but also a label that white slaveholders used to address their older female house servants. Many slaveholders had deep affection for their house servants, but this did not prompt them to question slavery. In the nineteenth century—and as used by white speakers—“aunt” was a term of racial paternalism, the female version of the “Uncle Tom” stereotype that presented slaves as contented, obsequiously servile, and protective of whites. Nichols was a runaway when she came to the 23rd. Veterans of the unit nonetheless addressed her in language that revealed the influence of the postwar era’s romanticized view of antebellum plantation life. But the problem went still deeper. One of Nichols’s strongest supporters, Major S.K. Hooper, described her as “black as the ace of spades, but...above the ordinary negro in point of honesty, integrity, and intelligence,” revealing in his praise for Nichols his own racial assumptions. And when Lucy’s child of three years of age died at Vicksburg, Hooper noted that the “entire 23rd” turned out for the funeral of “the little pickaninny,” again exposing the racism that even those who praised Nichols shared.

This is not to question the esteem of the men of the 23rd for Nichols. As Hooper noted, officers of the 23rd escorted Nichols to meetings of the local GAR post “as if she was a queen” and they accorded her “much respect and deference.” But they did so in a broader political environment that denigrated black achievement and suppressed black political aspirations through physical intimidation and legislative coercion. As many scholars have noted, the late nineteenth century represented the “nadir of American race relations.” And southern Indiana
and New Albany did not escape the racism of the era. Here as elsewhere in the United States, white Americans celebrated white supremacy, questioned the intellectual and moral competency of African Americans, denied them full legal and economic equality, and embraced segregation. In this environment, Nichols found her employment options limited. While she worked as a nurse during the war, in New Albany she worked in service occupations and like most African Americans lived in relative poverty.

Equally important, most whites within this Democratic-leaning region welcomed sectional reconciliation. The soldiers of the 23rd and the broader public shared in the national rites of military commemoration that veiled the antislavery origins and emancipationist results of the war. Moreover, they embraced key aspects of the Lost Cause rhetoric. Throughout the postwar South and nation, white supremacists celebrated the image of the faithful slave, primarily in an outpouring of loyal slave narratives. These narratives portrayed slaves—or “old-time darkies” as one 1905 magazine had it—as happy and well cared for by their white protectors. The former slaves stood as lessons to “young negroes,” who should learn that their “aspirations for social equality will ever be their calamity.” “The only solution of” the race problem in America, noted one Old South defender, “is for negroes to accept the situation and treat whites with deference.” Only then will they “realize the best they need ever hope to exist between the races.” Most white northerners came to accept these southern prescriptions to racial problems, embracing segregation and black inequality as necessary for the wellbeing of the nation and for African Americans. Despite the respect she earned for her wartime service, Nichols every day faced the reality of white supremacy.

But Nichols did more. In her postwar life, Nichols negotiated between these two poles—emancipation and white supremacy—in order to provide for herself and her family. She no doubt enjoyed the respect she earned for her wartime service (and certainly took great pride in it), but she also accepted her second-class status without protest. In fact, she used her status as “Aunt” Lucy—the loyal black servant—to generate support for her application for a military pension. She could count on the support of the white officers who viewed the war as a struggle for liberty, but she also needed the support of soldiers who embraced white supremacy. By maintaining her role as the loyal and dedicated “Aunt” Lucy, Nichols earned the affection of this wider group of white veterans. Her actions reveal a determined and savvy woman, but they also demonstrate the importance of black agency, even when circumscribed, in shaping the contours of African American life. Nichols appears to have adopted the personas—both determined former slave and devoted and faithful black mammy—necessary to obtain support for her federal pension application among the veterans of the 23rd. By accepting and manipulating to her advantage the racial stereotypes of the era, Nichols carved out a place for herself in a largely hostile world.

And this, ultimately, is why Nichols’s life remains important and should be remembered today. Her determination and grit, her service and loyalty, all speak to the personal qualities of the woman. But her story tells us much more about the history of race relations in nineteenth century America, from slavery to emancipation and postwar inequality. And that is something that we all need to understand if America—even in the age of Barack Obama—is ever to confront its checkered racial past and forge a future that lives up to the proposition upon which Lincoln argued the nation was founded: That all men (and I would add women) are created equal.