

## Soldier, constable, janitor

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Although our soldier began receiving an old age pension for his three years service in the Civil War (Co H, 116th US Colored Volunteer Infantry) he didn't accept the fact that he was old. Thus, he ran for public office – several times. Born near Frankfort, Kentucky, the day after Christmas in 1829, he appeared here after the war with determination to make an impression upon our fair city and that he did.

Hard times often came his way but he always had his head in a forward direction, no matter the obstacle! An example was when he ended-up in "the pest house" which is assumed to be the poor farm. It seems he had an uncanny way with health problems and he bragged of not losing any of his 15 smallpox patients while there in 1874. Doctors for miles around offered him impressive prices for his remedy but he refused to give it up and it is assumed took it to his grave.

However, his wife, Susan Wilson Byers was quite a sought after nurse by the Barnes and Beach families among others in the city. She also did domestic work and took no guff, as was demonstrated when she socked R.B. Smith in the jaw hard enough to knock him senseless after he hurled an insult her way a year before she died. She quit (before being arrested) at that figuring the honors were even at that point.

An outrage at Byers came by a few in 1890 in regards to the cow ordinance of the city. For health purposes, cows were forbidden to wander the streets of Crawfordsville. Byers was quite determined to carry this out, wandering the outskirts of the city and herding any vagrants into the cow pound (yep, the cow pound). However, the farmers felt the colored constable was being too rough with their property, one old cow even dying (his time anyway?) from the proposed mistreatment. When C.M. Travis filed a complain then acted a crazy fool over his cow being taken by Byers, Justice Ramsay found Travis in contempt of court and had him arrested! Byers had tried several times to be a constable but the Republicans always seemed to have a white man they preferred but when the Democrats decided they'd run him on their ticket, he was quickly approved by his original party and finally got his wish, serving the city for about a decade, up into a ripe age. He also served as the janitor at Lincoln, our early colored school for several years.

Always willing to aide his fellow man, he occasionally put up money for bail or food or whatever was needed. In his wife's obituary a son, a daughter and an adopted daughter were the survivors. Two years later a son was not mentioned at the time of his death. Their daughter was Helen and they adopted their niece, Willie May Gates. John Byers lived at his home until shortly before his death when he was taken to the soldier's home at Danville, Illinois. His body was shipped back to Crawfordsville one week later for burial in the Masonic Cemetery next to his beloved Susan. Thanks to Kim Hancock and Suzy Petrey for doing the work to guarantee this interesting soldier is now Etched In Stone.

