

Nichols, John ^[1]

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John Nichols, printer, labor leader, and congressman, was born near Eagle Rock, Wake County ^[2]. Until he was fifteen, he worked on his widowed mother's farm and acquired what education he could in neighborhood old-field schools ^[3]. He then went to Raleigh to serve an apprenticeship in the printing office of a weekly newspaper. Sleeping alone in the office at night, Nichols started reading the *New York Weekly Tribune*, which arrived as an exchange but was routinely thrown away. He soon became a quiet abolitionist, and at nighttime in the office, in violation of state law, he taught enslaved men and boys to read.

Young Nichols devoted himself seriously to any task at hand and, with a natural aptitude for the business, in time came to be recognized as one of the best printers in the state. After completing his apprenticeship, he entered Lovejoy Academy ^[4], working as a foreman at the newspaper before and after school and on Saturdays to pay his expenses. In 1857 Nichols moved to Beaufort, where he became owner and editor of the independent *Beaufort Journal*. He soon was made superintendent of state printing in Raleigh, a post he filled until 1866, when he entered the business of book and job printing.

During the Civil War ^[5] Nichols, a Freemason ^[6], and other members of the order did what they could to ease the plight of Union prisoners who were fellow Masons, held in the vicinity of Raleigh, by providing food and physical comforts. While Federal troops occupied Raleigh after the war, he printed songs and poems for them and sold them his accumulated Confederate money, which they used in gambling at cards.

Nichols was a member of the Radical Republican ^[7] element that advanced William Woods Holden ^[8] to the governorship in 1868. In 1869 he was named president of the newly organized Raleigh Mechanics Building and Loan Association. In 1872 he was appointed principal of the State Institution for the Deaf and Blind ^[9], perhaps as a political reward, but also because the facility offered training in printing. He served in this position from 1873 to 1877. All the while he was senior member of the firm of Nichols, Gorman, and Neatherly Printing House in Raleigh. (Gorman, however, had died in 1865.) For a brief time Nichols also was revenue stamp agent in Durham. In 1877 he was given the political post of Raleigh postmaster, a position also sought by former governor William W. Holden. Nichols continued as postmaster until 1885.

At various times during his busy life, he found opportunities to serve the Knights of Labor, which boasted a membership of 1,500 in the Raleigh area. With the inauguration of a Democratic ^[10] president, Grover Cleveland ^[11], Nichols's political appointments came to an end, but at about the same time he was elected state master workman of the Knights. On the strength of that organization in his district, Nichols found encouragement to stand for Congress. Running as an independent, because, he said, neither of the established parties really represented the people, he was accused of "negrophilism" and "the vile propaganda of social equality." Nevertheless, he was elected and served one term in the House of Representatives ^[12] (1887–89).

As a member of the Knights of Labor, Nichols publicized the problems of the working class and called for federal and state laws to reduce working hours, to end child labor, and to recognize organized labor. He supported national regulation of railroads and currency, federal bankruptcy laws, and stricter immigration laws. In Congress he favored the Blair Bill, which would have appropriated federal funds to aid education. He also advocated a protective tariff to benefit American labor and industry.

Afterwards, Nichols served as chief of the Division of Files and Records in the Treasury Department in Washington. Returning to Raleigh in 1893, he took a job with the Internal Revenue Office. His holograph will, dated 1913 and devoid of legal jargon, is something of a literary masterpiece. Among other things, Nichols wrote: "That I have made mistakes in life and provoked the enmity of some, no one realizes better than myself. But now entering my 80th year I can truthfully say that I entertain 'Enmity to none but Charity for All.'"

In December 1855 Nichols married Virginia Caroline Gorman, and they became the parents of three daughters—Bettie, Annie, and Grayce—and a son, who apparently predeceased his parents. Nichols was survived by his daughters and a grandson, John Nichols, Jr., living in Pennsylvania in 1913. Among his bequests were several portraits.

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Additional Resources:

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