

HOOSIER WOMEN AT WORK

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Unparalleled Helpfulness and Loyalty: An Introduction to the Early Training of African- American Nurses in Indianapolis, 1909-1921

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At the turn of the twentieth century, few occupations were open to women. Even fewer occupations were open to black women. Stories of entrepreneurial successful women evoke thoughts of overcoming great odds, but to most black women, being anything other than a domestic worker or a seamstress was an impossible dream. In 1909, physician-leaders in the black community of Indianapolis recognized that nurse's training would provide a more hopeful situation for young women. The black doctors understood that good nursing care would result in better outcomes for their patients, thus reflecting on their competency as physicians. These same leaders established hospitals in the city, hoping to not only create a better care environment for their patients, but to also provide nursing schools to staff them.

This important step laid down a path for black women to improve their economic and social status. These schools were open to applicants from the entire state, thus also helping women in smaller communities in Indiana. The black physicians of Indianapolis were not alone in their quest for training nurses. Black clubwomen, the Sisters of Charity, also entered into the project, starting their own hospital and nurse training school.

This presentation will describe the healthcare environment for African Americans in Indianapolis at the turn of the twentieth century, social classes within the black community, and will also look at the role of nursing in improving the wellbeing of both the public and individual patient. The experiences of the student nurse, the graduate nurse, and also untrained women who served as nurses will be discussed. The material for this presentation is drawn from research examining three African-American hospitals that opened in the city from 1909 to 1921. This paper was published in the [Indiana Magazine of History](#) 112, no. 4 (December 2016): 370-384.

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