

Labourer, Maid, Slave, Spy:

Mary Jane Richards, the Van Lew Spy Ring, and Black Espionage in Richmond

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the role played by Black spies working on behalf of the Union during the American Civil War. It looks specifically at the Richmond-based Van Lew spy ring, and the integral role played by Black spies in many of its intelligence gathering efforts as well as secret operations designed to impede the Confederate war effort. It makes the case that the contribution of these Black spies was essential for the Van Lew spy ring to become the most successful secret service of the latter half of the American Civil War.

KEYWORDS: Black Espionage, Female Spies, Van Lew Spy Ring, American History, American Civil War

In recent years, espionage and intelligence-gathering by both sides in the American Civil War have seen a renewed interest and a flurry of academic activity. There has been a significant amount of research on how women became prominently involved in intelligence-gathering for both the Union and the Confederacy. However, the more difficult subject of Black spies working for the Union has not been subject to the same level of attention. The primary sources on the topic are scant, with no prominent post-war autobiographies or diaries like those that were written by some White spies. Existing sources point to undeniably effective and skilled spies who operated under extremely difficult circumstances to produce impressive results on behalf of the Union Army. Black spies were involved in military reconnaissance, political espionage, and covert actions designed to degrade the Confederate ability to continue the prosecution of the war. One of the most prominent examples of this was the Van Lew spy ring in Richmond, which was composed of free Black and White Unionists, dissenters, as well as enslaved and emancipated people.¹ This spy ring was singled out by Colonel George Sharpe, intelligence officer to Ulysses S. Grant, as responsible for most of the Union intelligence on the disposition of the Confederate army in the latter part of the war.² Elizabeth Van Lew, a White woman, used all of her considerable resources to do work on behalf of the Union, including her family's Black servants or enslaved workers, as well as enlisting many of Richmond's free Black residents to spy for the Union. These Black spies were an integral part of the Van Lew spy ring, penetrating various Confederate institutions and undertaking many of the most difficult and dangerous tasks that were carried out to further the Union's cause.

Elizabeth Van Lew

Elizabeth Van Lew, the "most successful female spy of the mid-nineteenth century," seemed in many ways a prototypical Southern woman, and she maintained this public image over the course of the American Civil War.³ She behaved in the manner of a proper lady, cultivating the respect of many Richmond residents. In public, she performed the role that Southern society

expected of her, protecting herself from scrutiny by taking advantage of Southern views towards upper-class women and the sorts of activities that were permissible to them. Even if many in Richmond disagreed with her unionist views, they respected her extensive charitable work. But behind the cover of this charity work and the façade of being a proper Southern lady, Elizabeth Van Lew ran a large spy ring in the Confederate capital that reported directly to the Union army, conducting reconnaissance, gathering secrets, and rescuing prisoners from right in the heart of the Confederacy, in Richmond, Virginia. The remarkable successes of the Van Lew spy ring must be attributed, at least in part, to the many Black spies who penetrated various Confederate institutions and carried out numerous espionage missions in the Richmond area.

The Van Lew family arrived in Richmond from New York some time in the early 1800s and built-up a sizeable fortune in various business ventures, particularly the city's first hardware store. The family quickly assimilated into the city elite and participated in their practices, including buying numerous slaves.⁴ Some of the people bought by the family would go on to be spies on behalf of the Union, working under the command of Elizabeth Van Lew. The status of the people held in bondage by the Van Lew family leading up to the war is a matter of some contention, however. The Richmond tax and census records would seem to indicate that Eliza Van Lew, the head of the family, had reduced the number of enslaved people held by the family from twenty-one in 1850, to two by 1860; this was done without making any sales, implying that she freed them.⁵ But city officials kept a record of deeds of manumission, and there are none from the Van Lew family over this period. In addition, other records do not indicate that there were any "free negroes and mulattoes" in the county who were formerly enslaved by the Van Lew family.⁶ These contradictory records make it difficult to determine the status of the Van Lew family's Black servants as either enslaved or free employees. What is known, however, is that during the war Elizabeth Van Lew would direct many of them to gather intelligence which would be passed on to the Union army, sometimes by Black couriers as well.

¹ Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 260–61.

² Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*, 22.

³ Andrew, *The Secret World*, 413.

⁴ Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 12.

⁵ Varon, 24.

⁶ Varon, 24–25.

Mary Jane Richards

One of the most successful spies of the Van Lew spy ring was Mary Jane Richards.⁷ She was born to an unnamed enslaved woman owned by the Van Lew family in the mid-1840s, baptized by the Van Lew family at their own church—an unusual practice for the time—and then sent to Princeton, New Jersey to receive an education as a missionary.⁸ The family then sponsored Richards' travel to Liberia, where she worked as a missionary for several years. In 1860, Richards returned to the United States and went back to join the Van Lew household. When she was on her way back to Richmond, Richards was arrested for violating state laws about educated or freed slaves returning to Virginia. While embroiled with the legal system, Richards gave two fake names to her jailors, Mary Jane Henley, and Mary Jones, which reappear in later documents.⁹ The Van Lew family was able to have Richards freed after paying a small fine and attesting that she was in fact enslaved and not free. It was this assumed status as an enslaved person, whether true or not, that would enable her to carry out her later espionage on behalf of the Union, giving her the opportunity to work in sensitive areas while concealing her literacy and true motives from Confederate employers.¹⁰

As with many Civil War spies, and especially those from marginalized groups, there is only a partial and imperfect record of what Black spies did. Officers of the Union army also tried to avoid any discussion of how intelligence from spies in the South influenced their decisions. They understood that most of these people would have to continue living in the South after the war, and therefore those who spied would be vulnerable to retaliation.¹¹ For information on what Mary Richards did during the war, we have to rely mainly on the extant writings of Elizabeth Van Lew and a few newspaper articles that refer to talks given by Richards after the war about her work. Richards passed intelligence to Van Lew, who in turn sent it along to the Union Army. In her diary, written partially during the war and partially supplemented afterwards, Van Lew wrote, "I say to the servant, 'What news, Mary?,' and my caterer never fails! Most generally our reliable news is gathered from negroes, and they certainly show wisdom, discretion, and prudence which is wonderful."¹²



⁷ The issue of Mary Jane Richards' name is quite complicated. She was probably married at least once to a man named Wilson Bowser, which is how she became attached to the name 'Mary Bowser,' and likely married a second time after the war. Various government documents give slight variations on her name, but the other biographical details are so close that we must assume they refer to the same woman. She also went by different fake names at times, to evade the authorities before and during the war and then to protect herself from Confederate reprisal afterwards. I am following the convention used by Elizabeth Varon in this essay because Mary Jane Richards was the name she was baptised with, and we know that she used it regularly at least for the early part of her life, even if we cannot establish for certain what name she would have used in the postwar period.

⁸ Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 28.

⁹ Varon, 31.

¹⁰ Varon, 28–31.

¹¹ Fishel, *The Secret War for the Union*, 6.

¹² Van Lew, *A Yankee Spy in Richmond*, 69.

Here Van Lew acknowledges that Black spies were often able to get information that would have been difficult or suspicious for White spies to acquire, and she singles out Richards as the source of accurate and reliable intelligence.

The question of how Richards came by important and reliable intelligence regularly has been the subject of some debate, with one story coming up several times in the decades after the Civil War: Mary Richards worked in the Confederate White House, and either read, copied, or stole documents from inside. The practice of hiring out enslaved people to do work in businesses or industrial settings was common in 19th century Richmond, so it is plausible that the Davis family hired enslaved people from other affluent Richmond families, like the Van Lews, to do extra work.¹³ In a newspaper article published in July 1900, as Van Lew was on her death bed, she describes how she had a “maid, of more than usual intelligence,” who went to Liberia as a missionary and came back, who could only be Mary Jane Richards.¹⁴ That enslaved person, who was not named in the article, “was planted [...] by Van Lew in the Confederate White House, where in her guise as a domestic servant she gathered intelligence for the Union spy network.”¹⁵ The story was corroborated by a niece of Van Lew’s who was interviewed for a June, 1911 article in *Harper’s Monthly*, which claimed that “Mary Elizabeth Bowser” was “installed as a waitress in the White House of the Confederacy.”¹⁶ Unfortunately, none of this is conclusive evidence of Richards’ spying on Jefferson Davis in the heart of the Confederacy. It is plausible, but even the author of the *Harper’s Magazine* article concedes that this is one of the “questions to which Time has effaced the answer.”¹⁷

What little information we have from Mary Richards herself also supports the idea that she was doing important espionage work gathering secret intelligence for the Union, even if she did not provide proof that she infiltrated the Confederate White House. There are several newspaper articles which describe lectures given by a woman fitting Richards’ biographical details using fake names in the North after the war. For one lecture at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York, she gave her name as “Richmonia Richards,” paying homage to her

home city but keeping her last name the same. She was going to talk about her work “connected with the secret service of our government,” and to “give a description of her adventures.” A description of that same lecture written after the fact in another newspaper describes the speaker telling her life story, which aligns well with what we know of Mary Richards, providing more evidence that she must have been ‘Richmonia.’ It somewhat describes her work in the “secret service of the Government,” including specific details which are lacking in other accounts. Richards claimed in her talk that she was able to hide “in the Rebel Senate” while they were “in secret session,” discussing something related to the war which was then passed on to unnamed others who got the information to the Union army. She also claimed to have stolen documents from the “Davis House” after applying for a job there doing the washing, which matches with the other details that were to come up later in the previously mentioned interviews with the Van Lew family. While there is no definitive, documentary proof of Richards stealing documents from the Confederate White House, the fairly consistent oral histories from Richards herself shortly after the war and the Van Lew family several decades later make the story seem entirely plausible.

This espionage in the Confederate White House exemplifies the kind of task for which the Van Lew spy ring had to rely completely on Black spies. Sneaking into the Confederate White House in the guise of some sort of menial employment was something that would have been impossible for the elite and genteel White Unionists who made up much of the Van Lew spy ring. It was, however, possible for a woman like Mary Richards. She would have been used to Southern attitudes toward Black people and would have been able to exploit their assumptions about her level of intelligence and cunning to carry out her mission. If Richards really did carry out espionage inside both the Confederate White House and the Confederate Senate, then the highest levels of deliberation and planning on the part of the Confederacy were known to the Union. This major intelligence coup was made possible only because of the dedication and excellent tradecraft of Mary Jane Richards.

¹³ Varon, *Southern Lady*, *Yankee Spy*, 26.

¹⁴ Varon, 165.

¹⁵ Varon, 165.

¹⁶ Breymer, “Miss Van Lew,” 90.

¹⁷ Breymer, 90.

¹⁸ “Lecture by a Colored Lady,” 8.

¹⁹ “Miss Richmonia Richard’s Lecture,” 4.

²⁰ “Miss Richmonia Richard’s Lecture,” 4.

²¹ “Miss Richmonia Richard’s Lecture,” 4.

Prison Breaks and Robert Ford

Other than gathering intelligence on the Confederacy, the other important task carried out by the Van Lew spy ring was assisting Union prisoners in escaping from Richmond. Many of the prisons in Richmond became notorious over the course of the war for their poor treatment of inmates, with excessive cruelty rampant and food always in short supply.²² These horrific conditions prompted Union prisoners to attempt escape often, even when their plans were extremely dangerous and seemed to have a low chance of success. That so many escapees were able to make it out is due in no small part to the members of the Van Lew spy ring. They aided and abetted the fugitives in procuring false papers, hiding from the authorities, and travelling back to the North where they could rejoin the war effort. The return of escaped prisoners was often greeted with great fanfare and was of significant propaganda value to the Union.

There is evidence that the Van Lew family was involved in helping escaped inmates flee the South as early as August 7, 1862. That day, three Union officers and one Union sympathizer escaped from Talbott prison and managed to return to the North with the help of “a lady of the most thoroughgoing Union sentiments,” who fed and clothed them, hid them for several days, and then aided them to secure the forged documents that were required to escape the city.²³ This kind of activity was made possible by the Van Lew family’s Black servants (whether they were enslaved or employed at this point is unclear, as aforementioned), who actually tended to the needs of the fugitives and kept their presence in the family house a secret. In fact, “much of what Elizabeth and Eliza [Van Lew] ‘did’ for Federal soldiers—providing food, clothing, and contact with the outside world—was in fact done by the [black people] in their service.”²⁴ They also kept the Van Lew family activities on behalf of the Union secret, despite the grave personal danger it placed them in.²⁵ Those four men were eventually able to return to the North, owing to the help of “unidentified black Unionists,” who informed them of the position of the search party sent out from the prison to recapture them, allowing the men to sneak past.²⁶ Black servants of the Van Lew family as well as others in the Richmond area made it possible for these escapees to evade recapture and make it across Northern lines.

Captain William Lounsbury of the Union army also escaped from Libby prison with the help of the Black servants of the Van Lew family. Lounsbury was given a Confederate uniform by a Union-sympathizing prison clerk. Leaving the prison, he was approached by a Black man who was waiting to bring him to the Van Lew family house, where he was prepared for his perilous but ultimately successful journey back to the North. In fact, according to the memoirs of one Union officer, “Miss Van Lew kept two or three bright, sharp colored men on the watch near Libby prison, who were always ready to conduct an escaped prisoner to safety.”²⁷ While this may be a slight exaggeration, as well as reducing the active role that Van Lew played in planning and executing prison breaks to that of a passive assistant to the Union soldiers, it still gives a sense of how critical Black spies were to this aspect of the Van Lew spy ring and in helping escaped prisoners. While they were important in helping these early small-time prison escapees, one Black spy in particular, Robert Ford, was instrumental in the largest prison break of the war.

Robert Ford was a free Black man from the North who was captured by the Confederate army and then put to work in Libby prison as a hostler, tending to the horses of the guards.²⁸ He got into contact with the Van Lew spy ring via the Black servant of a White Unionist who worked with Van Lew and was a vital link for a largescale plot for a mass prison break at Libby Prison. Union officers at that prison began digging a series of tunnels out of the prison in order to effect an escape, beginning in late 1863.²⁹ After several false starts and close calls, the officers managed to dig a tunnel under the street and into a vacant lot across from the prison. Robert Ford became aware of this plan and communicated the details to Van Lew and her spy ring, presumably by means of some of the other Black workers at the prison who knew Van Lew as a Union sympathizer who had helped other escapees. Because the Van Lew spy ring was prepared to hide the escapees and bring them across Confederate lines, most of them were able to get home safely. Van Lew was able to prepare her house and her spy network to hide the escapees because they knew about the plan ahead of time.³⁰ Van Lew also sent a message to General Butler, her correspondent in the Union army in early 1864, encouraging him to launch a raid on Richmond at the same time as the prison break to make it easier for the escapees to cross the Confederate lines.

²² Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 57, 133.

²³ Varon, 88.

²⁴ Varon, 64.

²⁵ Varon, 64.

²⁶ Varon, 88.

²⁷ Varon, 90.

²⁸ Varon, 92.

²⁹ Varon, 118–19.

³⁰ Van Lew, *A Yankee Spy in Richmond*, 35–36.

While that raid would end disastrously for the Union, many prisoners still successfully escaped thanks to the help of the Van Lew spy ring, both its Black and White members. The consequences for Robert Ford were extreme, however. The commandant of the prison suspected that Ford might have been involved somehow and had him whipped. Robert Ford was subject to five hundred lashes, and yet even that extreme torture could not induce him to divulge anything he knew about this escape plot or the Van Lew spy ring in Richmond; this proves just how skilled, loyal, and tenacious he was in pursuing Union victory in whatever way he could.

Conclusion

Black spies were integral to the functioning of the Van Lew spy ring. They played important roles in collecting intelligence, stealing documents, rescuing escaped prisoners, and helping defectors, escapees, and couriers cross Confederate lines. Like many women of her station, Elizabeth Van Lew relied on her Black servants to do a great deal of work for her, and once she became involved in espionage they took to that work with enthusiasm as well. A few individuals, like Robert Ford and Mary Jane Richards, are named specifically in the records of the spy ring, and their fearless contributions to the war effort are recognized today, although not nearly enough compared to their White contemporaries. However, there are still many unnamed Black spies who worked for the Van Lew spy ring, to whom a great many Union soldiers owe their survival. Although many of their names will likely never be known, their outstanding contribution to the war effort should nevertheless be recognized. If the Van Lew spy ring was the most important source for Union military intelligence, then these Black spies should be considered the most important secret agents of the Civil War.

³¹ Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 125.

³² Andrew, *For the President's Eyes Only*, 22.



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