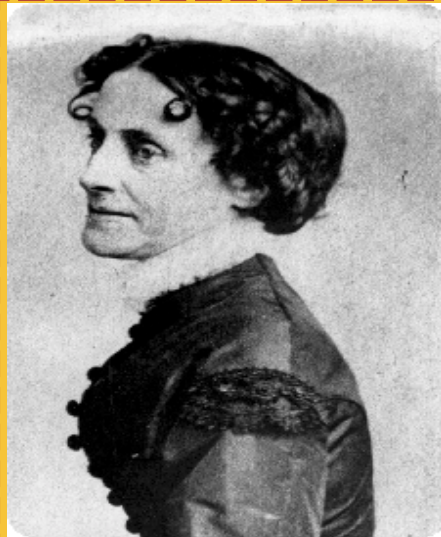


Elizabeth Van Lew

1818-1900

Richmond
Union Spy



Elizabeth Van Lew was one of three children born to John and Elizabeth Van Lew. Her father, a hardware merchant, was a native of Jamaica, New York, and her mother was the daughter of a former Philadelphia mayor. A prominent Richmond family, their home was located on Church Hill. Miss Van Lew was educated in Philadelphia where she developed strong abolitionist views, even though her parents owned slaves. When her father died in 1860, she not only freed his slaves but their children and relatives in the possession of other owners as well. She fearlessly worked to unite slave families, and participated in the Underground Railroad. Van Lew's anti-slavery stance led her to become a dedicated spy and zealous defender of the Union cause. She even cultivated the image of "Crazy Bet," posing as mentally deranged in order to cover her covert activities. Never hiding her Union sympathies, she frequently carried special foods and books to Union prisoners at Libby Prison. Under the guise of providing humanitarian care, she used her contacts in the prison to obtain secret military information. In one of her most notorious adventures, she assisted in the escape of over 100 prisoners and provided refuge for some of them in secret passages throughout her home. The capable Van Lew managed five relay stations between her Richmond home and the Union lines, using clever deceptions to acquire and convey information for General Grant and the Union army. Secret messages were sent using words and letters underlined in books. Her household servants carried baskets of eggs containing encoded messages instead of yokes. She constructed shoes and baskets with false bottoms and composed missives with a colorless liquid that became visible only when milk was applied. She even managed to place a former servant and friend, Mary Elizabeth Bowser, into the household employ of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. None of her couriers were ever caught. When Richmond fell into Union hands, Grant ordered protection for the Van Lews. She had spent most of the family fortune on her wartime efforts on behalf of the Union. Once Grant became president, he named Van Lew the first female postmaster of Richmond as a financial reward for her loyalty. However, her fellow Richmonders shunned and despised her because of her wartime sympathies, and Congress never acted upon Grant's request for a \$15,000 gift for her services. Van Lew never gave in to nineteenth-century society's rigid expectations of female behavior. She was independent and unyielding. Truly daring until the end, she fought vigorously for causes including women's suffrage. She eventually resigned from the post office almost penniless. She lived out her days supported mainly by loyal servants whom she had freed and by donations from Union prisoners whom she had helped. She died in 1900 at the age of 82.