Harriet Tubman, Union Spymaster
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The former slave known for leading more than 300 people—including her elderly parents—to freedom as a conductor on the Underground Railroad was also a Union spy. Born in Maryland around 1820, Tubman volunteered for the Union as a cook and a nurse before she was recruited by Union officers to establish a network of spies in South Carolina made up of former slaves.

Tubman became the first woman in the country’s history to lead a military expedition when she helped Col. James Montgomery plan a night raid to free slaves from rice plantations along the Combahee River. On June 1, 1863, Montgomery, Tubman and several hundred black soldiers traveled up the river in gunboats, avoiding remotely-detoned mines that had been placed along the waterway. When they reached the shore, they destroyed a Confederate supply depot and freed more than 750 slaves.

After the war, Tubman tried to collect $1,800 for her service but was unsuccessful. Due to the service of her late husband, she did receive a widow’s pension of $8 per month beginning in June 1890. The government authorized a payment of $25 a month to Tubman beginning in January 1899, but Tubman only received $20 per month until her death in 1913, when she was buried with military honors at Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn, New York.

In 2003, after students at the Albany Free School brought the issue of Tubman’s remaining pension to the attention of New York Senator Hilary Rodham Clinton, Congress authorized a payment of $11,750 to the Harriet Tubman Home in Auburn.

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How a Black Spy Infiltrated the Confederate White House
By Thad Morgan Updated: JAN 21, 2020, Original: APR 23, 2018, History.com

Spies were common during the American Civil War. Elizabeth Van Lew and Mary Jane Richards (Mary Bowser) were two of them.

Spying on the most elite members of the Confederacy required the deception of more than just the enemy. In order to keep from exposing themselves, the women needed to fool society around them.

They opted to be labeled as senseless and stupid instead of revealing themselves as the canny operators that they were.

Elizabeth Van Lew organized a spy ring in the heart of the Confederacy, in which Mary Bowser was an invaluable member. With her possible photographic memory and incredible acting skills, Bowser was able to relay critical intelligence to Van Lew, which would then make its way to the Union.

Van Lew was born in 1818 into an affluent family in Richmond. After receiving her education as a teenager in Philadelphia, she began to see the injustice of slavery throughout the country. Following her father’s death in 1843, Van Lew and her widowed mother freed the slaves that the family owned.
Among the many freed slaves was young Mary Bowser, born Mary Jane Richards. Believed to have been born between 1839 and 1841, Richards remained a servant for the Van Lew family after attaining her freedom. She travelled North, possibly to Philadelphia, to receive a formal education. At the end of Richards’ education, Van Lew dispatched her as a missionary to the West African nation of Liberia in 1855.

Richards stayed in Liberia, which was founded by freed American slaves, until 1860. When she came back to America, she was promptly arrested, likely because of a law that prohibited black Virginians who had lived in a free state or gotten an education from returning. She spent 10 days in jail.

Mary Jane Richards was able to spy for the Union in an entirely different way: from the vantage point of a domestic servant. After cleaning and cooking at several functions for the family of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, she was hired as a full-time servant in the Confederate White House. There, she swept and dusted in the nooks and crannies of Davis’ home, reading the plans and documents that were laid out or hidden in desks, and reporting her findings to Van Lew. Equipped with a photographic memory, she was an invaluable spy to have behind enemy lines.

Mary Jane was briefly married to a man named Wilson Bowser, although only his surname, not hers, appears in the 1861 church annals listing their nuptials. Researchers seeking “Mary Bowser” could find no other trace of her. She also used the surname Richards, before and after the war Newly discovered documents reveal that around August 1867, she took another husband and began using the name “Mrs. John T. Denman”; she continued to identify herself as Mary Jane Denman after their relationship ended. She also travelled after the war under the “stage name,” Richmonia Richards.

Just days after the fall of the Confederacy, Mary Jane Richards, began to teach former slaves in the area. In 1865, she traveled throughout the country, giving lectures about her experiences at war under the name Richmonia Richards. Fittingly for a former double agent, Richards’ speeches often contradicted one another, leaving historians befuddled as to her actual story. One thing that remained consistent, however, were reports of her sarcastic and humorous speaking style. As Richards traveled the country, records of her whereabouts begin to fade, in true spy fashion. She was last seen meeting abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe in Georgia in 1867, sharing the riveting story of her life as a spy yet again.