



CIVIL WAR TRAVELS WITH MS. REBELLE “Crazy Bet” or “Crazy as a Fox” Southern Resident/Northern Sympathizer/Spy Elizabeth Van Lew

By Janet Greentree

This story has been running around in my head since the '90s, due to the amazing story of finding “Crazy Bet’s” grave. I was in Shockhoe Cemetery in Richmond, VA, with a friend, looking for famous graves there. This was even before www.findagrave.com came into being, or my friendship with Joe Ferrell (who had maps of graves all over the country). After finding one general and other famous people, we were unable to find “Crazy Bet.” We walked around and around the cemetery, to no avail. So, I said, “Crazy Bet, give us a sign.” Oh my God, she did, as a huge branch immediately fell off a tree right next her marker. Had we been in that spot, we most likely would have been extremely hurt, or worse. A huge boulder from New England marks her grave, provided by relatives in Boston of Col. Paul J. Revere – yes, that Revere’s grandson. The inscription



Elizabeth “Crazy Bet” Van Lew



Elizabeth Van Lew’s gravestone in Shockhoe Cemetery, Richmond, VA.

Photo by Janet Greentree

states: “She risked everything that is dear to man—friends—fortune—comfort—health—life itself—all for the one absorbing desire of her heart - that slavery might be abolished and the Union preserved.” There was a rumor going around that she was buried vertically, facing north. Shockhoe Cemetery has not

able to verify that bit of speculation.

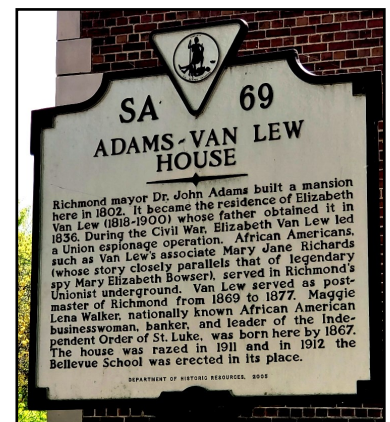
Elizabeth Louise Van Lew was born on October 15, 1818, in New York, the oldest daughter of John Van Lew and Eliza Louise Baker. Her maternal grandfather was abolitionist Hilary Baker. Baker was the mayor of Philadelphia from 1796-1798. Elizabeth was one of three children, including her brother John Newton and sister Anna Paulina. Elizabeth, her parents, and her brother John Newton are all buried in Shockhoe Cemetery in Richmond. Elizabeth is buried in Range 8, Sec. 5, Q.S. 4 – Orin Williams plot. John Van Lew was a prominent and successful businessman in Richmond, owning a hardware store. John died in 1843 and his wife died in 1875. His son, John Newton, ran the business after the death of his father. In 1875, the family was so poor that they could not afford pallbearers for Eliza. She was buried by Reverend Doctors Alexander W. Weddell, Rector of St. John’s Church in Richmond, and Henry S. Kepler.

The Van Lews were a wealthy slaveholding family in Richmond prior to the Civil War. Their house was so large that it encompassed a full city block. The house was located at 2301 East Grace Street. The house



The Van Lew mansion, above, which is no longer standing, and the historical marker (right) that notes the history of the site, now a school building.

Marker photo by Melanie Greentree



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was razed by the City of Richmond in 1911. Belleview Elementary School is now located on part of the site. There is a small plaque in front of the school placed by the Women of Virginia Historic Trail group, and there is a historic sign nearby. An article describing a recent artifacts auction in the Washington Times of November 23, 1900, was entitled "No Sentimental Interest, Effects of Miss Van Lew, the Union Spy, Bring Small Prices: The American flag which was raised by Miss Van Lew directly after Richmond was evacuated by the Confederate troops, and which was the first Union flag that met the eyes of the entering troops under General Grant, was sold to Mrs. Nathaniel Thayer for \$75..... The autograph and a book plate of John Randolph brought \$4, and an autograph of Horace Greeley was sold for half as much. Signed letters from President Garfield and Oliver Wendell Holmes were each sold for \$1.15."

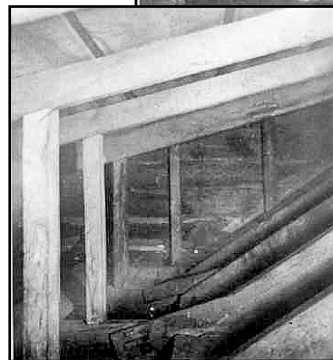
Elizabeth was sent north to a Quaker school in Philadelphia, PA. It is believed she began her abolitionist beliefs at that time. Her grandfather could have influenced her as well. Her family was never fully accepted into Richmond society, as they had originally come from the north. When she returned to Richmond, she was presented to society as a debutante and was quite active in the Richmond social scene. She never married.

When the Civil War began, Elizabeth, at age 43, still lived with her widowed mother. She and her mother abhorred slavery, even though they owned nine slaves. The house was used as part of the Underground Railroad, right under the noses of Richmond society. Elizabeth kept a journal, which she kept buried in her backyard. She only made it public on her deathbed. At some point, Elizabeth came up with the idea to appear crazy to Richmonders, to mask the real intent of her "wanderings." She would mumble, talk crazy, and appear out of it. Even the children of Richmond teased her calling her a witch, or worse. The boys of the town destroyed her fruit trees. She invited all the children to an ice cream party, trying to stop the persecution.

All the while, Elizabeth was gathering information wherever she went, and passing it on Union officers. She would appear at Libby Prison with a basket of eggs. Some of the eggs were empty and had messages inside.

She hid messages in a custard dish with a secret compartment. She also put messages in books for the prisoners at Libby Prison. She bribed the guards to give the prisoners extra food, clothing, and asked that they be transferred to hospitals, so she could gain access to interview them. One of her former slaves used the heel of his shoe to put messages in, while going from the Van Lew home to their farm further out of town. Guards and sentries never checked his shoes.

The prisoners who did escape hid in her home before getting on the road to the north.



Some of the interior spaces in the Van Lew house where escaped prisoners and slaves could hide before starting out on their scary run toward the North. Above, a passage to the secret room (at left).

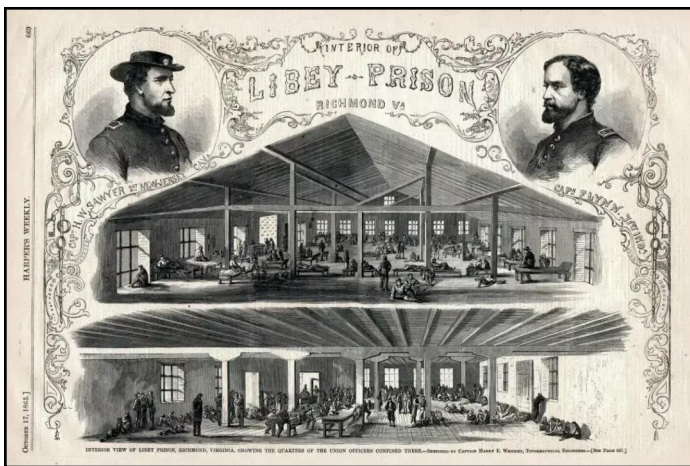
She gave them information on safe houses on the way north. She even was able to get a Union sympathizer appointed to the prison staff. She worked all four years of the War listening to what was going on, while appearing demented. Her mother freed all their slaves and Elizabeth used her inheritance of \$10,000 to help slaves in the area escape. She operated a spy ring called "Richmond Underground" during the War. She protected her agents so well that many of their names have been lost in history. When all this was found out after the War, she lost her place as a member of Richmond's social elite. William Rasmussen, curator of the Virginia Historical Society said: "She is considered the most successful spy of the War."

Elizabeth started this work right after the battle of 1st Bull Run/Manassas, when prison-

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ers taken during the battle arrived in Richmond and were kept in an old tobacco warehouse, soon to be known as Libby Prison.



The infamous Libby Prison in Richmond, VA.

She volunteered to be a nurse there, but was rejected by Lt. David H. Todd, the Confederate half-brother of Mary Todd Lincoln. She was able to convince Gen. John H. Winder to allow her and her mother to bring food, books and medicine to the prisoners. The Richmond Enquirer stated: "Two ladies, a mother and a daughter, living on Church Hill, have lately attracted public notice by their assiduous attentions to the Yankee prisoners...these two women have been expending their opulent means in aiding and giving comfort to the miscreants who have invaded our sacred soil." Another article commented: "that if the Van Lews didn't stop their efforts, they would be exposed and dealt with as alien enemies of the country." Elizabeth said "she had men shake their fingers in my face and say terrible things. We had threats of being driven away, threats of fire, and threats of death." Women of the time were not expected to engage in unladylike behavior, to have the mental capacity to do the things she was doing, or to have the endurance for the plans to be successful. Things have come a long way in our country. Her brother would frequent Richmond's Slave

Market, where he would purchase entire families if they were about to be broken up. He would bring them to his home and then issue manumission papers to them.

Elizabeth had a code for her dispatches that she wrote in a colorless liquid. When milk was added to the page, the writing turned to black. In December 1863, two Yankees escaped from Libby Prison. They went back to Gen. Benjamin Butler and told them their story of Elizabeth Van Lew's efforts at spying. Butler immediately sent an officer to Richmond to recruit Elizabeth as a spy. In the beginning, she mailed her information to Federal authorities. She then sent her information directly to Gens. Butler and Ulysses S. Grant. She even sent Grant fresh flowers from her garden that were still fresh when he received them, along with a Richmond newspaper. Intelligence officer for the Army of the Potomac, George H. Sharpe, called her "the greater portion of our intelligence for 1864-65." He also said: "For a long, long time, she represented all that was left of the power of the United States government in Richmond."

She became the head of a spy network of twelve women who helped out with her spying. She recruited Mary Elizabeth Bowser, a Black woman with a photographic memory, and had her placed as a spy in the Confederate White House of Pres. Jefferson Davis. Her main job was dining room service, so she heard all about what was going on in the War. On June 30, 1995, Mary E. Bowser was inducted into the Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame at Fort Huachuca, AZ. Elizabeth had been inducted earlier, in 1993.



Confirmed photo of Mary E. Bowser, circa 1900.

In 1864, after Union Col. Ulric Dahlgren was killed trying to free Union prisoners in Richmond, he was hastily buried where he died. Southerners dug up his body and put it on display at the York River Railroad Depot.

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His wooden leg was taken from his body and displayed in a store window. Dahlgren had been wounded and his leg amputated after the Battle of Gettysburg. His finger was cut off to retrieve a ring from his finger. Orders had been found in his pocket to burn and sack Richmond and kill Pres. Davis and his cabinet. His father, Adm. John Dahlgren, went four times to Fortress Monroe trying to negotiate the release of his son's body. After the public display of his body, he was first reinterred at Oakwood Cemetery. Elizabeth was outraged at the treatment of his body. She was able to have the body dug up and reinterred at a farm about 10 miles from Richmond. It was later disinterred again and moved to its current location in Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia. His father would later be interred next to him.

As a side note, there is a connection here to the Battle of Ox Hill in Chantilly, VA. The farm of Mosby Ranger John Ballard was part of the land of the Ox Hill Battlefield Park. There is a stone monument placed by John Ballard on the site on the left side of the monuments to Gens. Philip Kearny and Isaac Stevens to mark where Stevens fell. Ballard lost his leg at the battle of Ewell's Chapel.



Ballard's white quartz slab marker at the Ox Hill battlefield site in Chantilly, VA.

Photo by Janet Greentree

Guess who received the recycled leg of Dahlgren? None other than John Ballard. He wore it the rest of his life.



Yup - it's Dahlgren's prosthetic leg, worn by Ballard until his death.

The Weekly Republican of October 18, 1900, relates - in part - the incident: "The one incident with which Miss Van Lew's name is most notably linked is that of the removal of the body of Colonel Ulrich Dahlgren, a son of Admiral Dahlgren, who, while in command of a raiding party, was

killed in King and Queen county. The body was brought to Richmond and was buried in Oakwood cemetery in the section set apart for the burial of Federal soldiers. Admiral Dahlgren, upon learning of the fate of his son, wrote to President Davis from Fort Monroe, begging the return of the body, but when the grave was opened it was found the body had been removed. President Davis had to inform Admiral Dahlgren of the disappearance. The admiral and his people, knowing the intense feeling against his son, did not believe the body had ever been buried, but had been cast into the river. A few weeks later Miss Van Lew wrote him a letter and explained the situation and relieved his anxiety. Miss Van Lew planned the enterprise which resulted in the removal of Dahlgren's body, though it was not known till the close of the War."



Col. Ulrich Dahlgren's gravestone in Laurel Hill Cemetery, Philadelphia, PA.

Photo by Janet Greentree

When Richmond fell to Union forces on April 3, 1865, Elizabeth was the first person to fly the United States flag in Richmond. Crowds on the street threatened to burn down her house. Elizabeth stood firm on the balcony and stated: "I know you, and you and you. General Grant will be in this city within the hour; if this house is harmed, your houses shall be burned by noon." Gen. Godfrey Weitzel ordered guards to surround her house. Later, Gen. Grant would have tea on her porch to thank her for her service. She kept his calling card until the end of her life. He commented: "You have sent me the most valuable information received from Richmond during the War." In gratitude for her service, Grant appointed her as postmistress of Richmond, paying her \$4,000/yr., a job she held for 12 years. When Pres. Rutherford B. Hayes was elected, he had her replaced in 1877. She was later allowed to return as a postal clerk, where she served from 1883-1887. An article in the Wisconsin State Journal of July 8,

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A very interesting photo of Elizabeth Van Lew (far right), having tea in her garden with brother John and his children. The year of the photo is not identified, but it appears, by style of dress and probable age she might be here, to be near, or just after, the Civil War.



An elderly Elizabeth Van Lew, one of the most remarkable characters in the history of the Civil War.

her taxes were due, she would send a letter of formal protest, along with the payment.

In her journal, she wrote that she did not consider herself a spy and did not wish to be named as such. "A person cannot be called a spy for serving their country within its recognized borders. Am I now to be branded a spy by my own country for which I was willing to lay down my life...God knows there

is no vocation more ennobling, more honorable, and even the disgraceful word cannot stain my record."

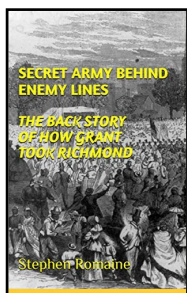
Elizabeth died on September 25, 1900, in Richmond, penniless and a social outcast. Most likely she died of congestive heart failure. In her will, she bequeathed her personal papers (including her account of the War) to John P. Reynolds, a nephew of Col. Revere. Reynolds was able to get an article about her published in Harper's Monthly. She did live long enough to see the Lee Monument erected on Monument Avenue on May 29, 1890. She lived in the Church Hill mansion until the end of her life - with 40 cats. Her grave was unmarked until relatives of Col. Revere donated the stone monument to the cemetery for her marker. The marker below the inscription states: "This boulder from the Capitol Hill in Boston is a tribute from Massachusetts friends."

NOTE: Ms. Rebelle's hobby is traveling the country finding and honoring the graves of our 1,008 Civil War generals. So far, she has located and photographed 426 - 169 Confederate and 257 Union. You may contact her at jlgrtree@erols.com.

1887, entitled "The Case of Miss Van Lew" states as follows: "Washington, July 2—The removal of Miss Elizabeth Van Lew from the position of requisition clerk in the office of the third assistant postmaster general yesterday and her appointment to a \$720 place in the dead letter office has excited as much comment nearly as the president's battle flag episode. Miss Van Lew is a Virginian, who was loyal to the north during the War, and for four years acted as a union spy, furnished Gen. Grant and other union generals information of great value.... Gen. Gresham appointed her to a \$1,200 place in the post office department, which has supported her until the present time. Her record as postmistress was excellent, and as a clerk seemed to be above reproach. The president's attention was called to the matter to-day, and he has promised that it shall be fully investigated." She resigned her position when Pres. Cleveland was inaugurated.

Her finances continually diminished, and Col. Paul J. Revere, who she had helped get released from the Henrico Co. jail in 1862, raised money for her living expenses.

Later in life, she objected to paying taxes without being able to vote. Every year when



As related in this week's "Travels with Ms. Rebelle," not everyone during the occupation of Richmond supported the Confederacy. This unlikely group included Elizabeth Van Lew, a feisty abolitionist; Mary Bowser, a slave housemaid in the Confederate White House; slaves and former slaves; the Underground Railroad conductors; and several members of Richmond aristocracy, as well individuals from the working classes. Former BRCWRT member Steve Romaine has written "Secret Army Behind Enemy Lines: The Back Story of How Grant Took Richmond," featuring the stories of how effective these folks were in helping Gen. U. S. Grant to take Richmond. To order this interesting book, visit: https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07X754TXL/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1.