

Mary Bowser—February 3, 2021

Mary Bowser was born near Richmond, Virginia, and was enslaved from birth by a prominent Richmond family, Eliza Baker Van Lew and John Van Lew. In 1843 John Van Lew passed away and soon after his abolitionist daughter Elizabeth Van Lew took control of their estate and promptly freed all of their slaves. Bowser remained a servant for the Van Lew family after attaining her freedom.

An outspoken abolitionist, Elizabeth arranged for Bowser to be educated in Philadelphia. As tensions increased between the North and South, Bowser returned to work as a household servant for the Van Lew family. When the Civil War broke out Elizabeth Van Lew decided the time was right to put her espionage plan into action and the Richmond Underground was born.

After cooking and cleaning at several family functions of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Van Lew used her family name to secure Mary Bowser position as a full-time servant in the Confederate White House. In that role, Mary Bowser became the most valuable asset in the Richmond Underground. The household members believing in racial stereotypes assumed she was a slave and that Bowser lacked intelligence. Thus, Davis and his cabinet members, as well as military leaders, spoke openly in front of her about troop strategy and movement. There, she also swept and dusted in the nooks and crannies of Davis home. Assuming that Mary Bowser was illiterate, Davis left important documents on his desk so she was able to read war dispatches and other important papers Davis left out. After reading the plans and documents that were laid out or hidden in desks, Bowser reporting her findings to Van Lew.

Mary Bowser would also sew important messages into the dresses of the Confederate first lady and have them laundered at family friend of the Van Lews who worked for a seamstress near the Confederate White House. Those messages would be passed on to Union military leaders. The espionage work of Mary Bowser is believed to have contributed to the fall of Richmond.

After the Civil War ended, the US government destroyed any record of her, Van Lew and others, ostensibly for their protection. Bowser, meanwhile, did not wait long to tell her incredible exploits. In fact, just days after the fall of the Confederacy, Bowser, using her maiden name 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.

Mary Bowser understood that even after the Civil War that freed African Americans still needed their rights protected, were still vulnerable and therefore the work was not yet finished.

