

Ms. MARY ELIZABETH BOWSER (Deceased)

Ms. Bowser was born a slave and worked on the John Van Lew plantation outside Richmond, Virginia. After her father's death in 1851, Elizabeth Van Lew (HOF 1993) freed Ms. Bowser and other Van Lew family slaves. Recognizing Mary's potential and intelligence, Elizabeth sent her north to attend school in Philadelphia.

During the Civil War, Union sympathizer Van Lew, organized an intricate spy ring. She sent for Ms. Bowser after deciding to plant a spy in the home of Jefferson Davis, the Confederate president. Ms. Bowser gained employment in the Davis mansion in Richmond as a servant because of Ms. Van Lew's recommendation.

Legend has it that Bowser pretended to be a bit "dull and unconcerned," but she listened to and memorized conversations between Davis and his visitors as she served them dinner. She read war dispatches as she dusted furniture and, each night after she finished her duties, she traveled to the Van Lew mansion to recite from memory the private conversations and documents. After Ms. Van Lew coded the information, it was passed directly to Union GEN US Grant. Jefferson Davis knew the Union somehow kept discovering Confederate plans but never discovered the leak in his own household. Specific details of Ms. Bowser's activities and precise knowledge of the information passed to GEN Grant are unknown. In the interest of their protection, all records of Ms. Van Lew and her agents were destroyed after the war.

While Bowser's exploits are relatively unknown and somewhat controversial, new information about her has been uncovered by historian and author Lois Leveen (see www.loisleveen.com, click on the history tab.) Through extensive research, Ms. Leveen was able to determine a photo long identified as the female spy was in fact of a different Mary Bowser altogether. The author has also written a novel based on Bowser's life: *The Secrets of Mary Bowser* (2012).

Ms. Mary E. Bowser was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1995. Her great grand-daughter McEva Bowser (right) attended the ceremony and accepted the awards for her Civil War ancestor.

