

MS. ELIZABETH VAN LEW (Deceased)



A prominent and wealthy Richmond citizen who staunchly supported the Union cause, Elizabeth Van Lew was one of the Civil War's most effective spies. GEN. U.S. Grant declared that her information had been the best available to him during his campaign through Virginia. Other generals attested that her valiant service equated to the value of 25,000 fighting troops.

Even before the Battle of Manassas, she began her intelligence operations. She wrote letters to the War Department reporting on events in the rebel capital, and used her high social standings to bring food and medicine to captured Union soldiers in Libby Prison. In exchange, she received information from the soldiers. She feigned madness and cultivated an eccentric reputation to protect herself from the Richmond authorities. She became known as "Crazy Van Lew" or Crazy Bet."

Ms. Van Lew became more efficient and sophisticated as the war progressed. She established an extensive espionage network. All of her messages were written in cipher using invisible ink. In the course of her espionage, she often donned farmer's clothes and rode at night to deliver messages to Union agents on the outskirts of Richmond. Her horse was essential to the preservation of her network, but the Confederate government ordered that all livestock be confiscated for use by the Army. She was warned of the confiscation party and led the horse into the mansion and up the steps to the library. With the exception of the night rides, the horse lived in her mansion for the remainder of the war.

Elizabeth Van Lew protected the identity of her agents so well that most of them are lost to history. Details of her own service have been lost as a consequence of her wish that it be concealed from her Richmond



neighbors after the war. She destroyed all War Department documents relating to her secret service.

By the end of the war she had spent almost all of the Van Lew fortune on pro-Union projects. She ended her life poor, unnoticed, and ostracized by the Richmond community.

Ms. Elizabeth Van Lew died in 1900 and was inducted posthumously into the Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame in 1993.