

# ELIZABETH VAN LEW

Civil War Spy, Born 1818, Died 1900

## Virginia Born

Elizabeth was born in Richmond, so she always considered herself a loyal Virginian. But she did not join her fellow Richmond citizens in applauding secession on April 17, 1861, when Virginia voted to join the Confederate States of America.

## Turning Points

Elizabeth went to a Quaker School in Philadelphia, where she developed abolitionist views. Her grandfather, Hilary Baker, also was an abolitionist who had served as mayor of Philadelphia for three terms.

One key turning point for Elizabeth was hearing the story of a slave mother violently separated from her baby in a slave sale. The baby was sold to one master, and the mother to another. According to stories, the mother fell dead right there on the slave block.

Elizabeth never forgot that story. She and her mother freed their family slaves.



## They Called Her ‘Crazy Bet’

They also called her a spy—although not immediately. In the beginning, they simply called her a Yankee sympathizer because she opposed slavery and secession.

When the first major battle of the Civil War, the First Battle of Manassas (known as “Bull Run” in the North) erupted on July 21, 1861, Elizabeth Van Lew tended to Yankee prisoners being housed in Richmond’s Libby Prison. Her neighbors were outraged.

Little did they know that her Union sympathies would lead this southern belle to become head of a spy network in Richmond, Virginia—the very heart of the Confederacy. General Ulysses S. Grant said she sent him “the most valuable information” from Richmond during the war.



## Spy vs. Spy

Elizabeth found many ways to spy for the North during the Civil War.

**Invisible Ink.** She mixed up invisible ink in her kitchen.

**Hollow Eggs.** She sent secret messages north by taking eggs to a vegetable garden outside of Richmond. One egg in each batch was hollow and contained secret messages.

**Mary Bowser.** One of the most famous spies to work for Elizabeth was a former family slave, Mary Bowser (pictured above). Some claimed that Mary spied as a maid in the home of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy.

**The Secret Room.** Elizabeth had a secret room (pictured above right) in her stately home on Church Hill in Richmond. She hid escaped Yankee prisoners in the room, supplying them with disguises and forged papers.

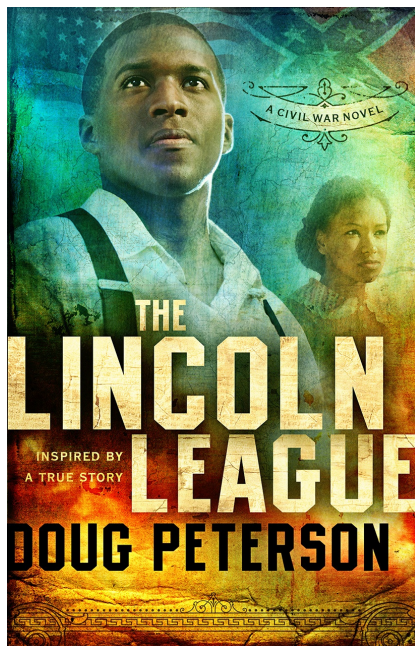
**Other Methods.** She sent coded messages through pinpricks in book pages, and she sewed dispatches into clothing patterns. She also sneaked messages in and out of Libby Prison using a dish with a false bottom.



## After the War

Elizabeth Van Lew remained in her home in Richmond after the war, but she was ostracized, and neighbors called her a traitor. However, Union General Ulysses S. Grant was grateful for her work during the War, and he made her postmaster of Richmond.

She died on September 25, 1900, an impoverished woman. Some say she was buried vertically, standing up and facing north.



## The Lincoln League

Elizabeth is a minor character in Doug Peterson's novel, *The Lincoln League*. The novel, inspired by true events, features many real-life Richmond spies. The main characters are John Scobell and his wife, who is called Peg in the novel. John was the first African American spy for the U.S. Intelligence Service, working during the first year of the Civil War. You can find *The Lincoln League* on Amazon and Barnes & Noble.