

Crossing Borders Using Class, Femininity, and Gender: How Northern Women Spies Shortened the American Civil War

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Loyalty is never certain. The Civil War showed how easily humans could be influenced under certain circumstances. As men went off to war women were in charge of the home. This allowed them to make their own choices and some anti-secessionist southerners to even turn against the Confederacy. Spying became one of the major ways women were able to directly help the North, aside from fieldwork like nursing and cooking. A number of women, in the North and South, were able to find out secrets and give them to Union generals. Author Mike Wright wrote, “It was brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor. We may call it a ‘Civil War,’ but there was nothing civil about it.”¹³⁸ This passage can be interpreted in several ways; it showed families that became divided, but also can show how neighbors and families may not be able to trust one another based on beliefs. Spies arguably helped the war end as quickly as it did, since they were able to pass along information. Author Philip Van Doren Stern argued that the North had fewer spies because they had greater numbers in the army, making deaths not as detrimental to regiment quantities; the South had to rely on strategy due to a finite number of soldiers available.¹³⁹ Van Doren Stern suggested spies in favor of the South were more abundant than Union spies. Even if this were accurate, without Union spy information the commanding officers would have had to rely on their uniformed scouts and would not have been able to get as close to military information as women could. Without Union spies, critical information would not have been found, drawing out the war. Overall, Northern spies, specifically women spies, outperformed men because of their ability to fit into a variety of social situations. What follows is an examination of several of these women and how they employed class, femininity, and gender roles to drastically shorten the war.

Allan Pinkerton, who eventually helped start the United States Secret Service, created one of the first “spy agencies.” He “had a special way of determining if a woman had the ability to be a spy. He used phrenology, the ‘science’ of reading the bumps on an individual’s head.”¹⁴⁰ Although there is no proof of success, it was a popular method. There is also no telling how many women went to him for employment, or how many he passed as spy-worthy. His progressive thinking allowed women to realize they had the skills to step out of their gender norms and help with the war effort in a way very few had before.

One of the more prominent spies in historical scholarship was Elizabeth Van Lew. She grew up in Richmond, Virginia after her family relocated to the south from New England. They immediately became part of the elite class due to their wealth, large home on a large property, and ability to entertain other elites at dinner parties. However, “The Van Lews simultaneously held blacks in bondage and lamented the evils of slavery, hoping all the while that through individual acts of kindness, charity, and manumission they could erode slavery gradually.”¹⁴¹ Her maternal grandfather took part in the American Revolution as a Patriot and aided in the creation of

¹³⁸ Mike Wright, *What They Didn't Teach You About the Civil War*. (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1996, 121).

¹³⁹ Philip Van Doren Stern, *Secret Missions of the Civil War*. (Garrett County Press, 2012), 11-12.

¹⁴⁰ Wright, *What They Didn't Teach You About the Civil War*, 187.

¹⁴¹ Elizabeth R. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, A Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9.

Pennsylvania's constitution, where he served as governor and later died in office. Elizabeth idolized Baker and inherited his progressive thinking, which influenced the whole family into becoming "Unionists" and working against the Confederacy. In her journal, Elizabeth Van Lew wrote,

"If I am entitled to the name of 'Spy' because I was in the secret service, I accept it willingly; but it will hereafter have to my mind a high and honorable signification. For my loyalty to my country I have two beautiful names—here I am called, 'Traitor,' farther North a 'spy'—instead of the honored name of 'Faithful.'"¹⁴²

It is clear she was hurt by the way her neighbors, who watched her develop into a then-respected woman, treated her. Van Lew knew she was acting in a moral, patriotic way. She alluded to the desire of having some kind of gratification bestowed on her, if even in a name.

Once the Civil War began Van Lew believed she could help influence her neighbors to end slavery. In a personal narrative, reflecting on Virginia seceding from the Union in 1861, she wrote, "Think of a community rushing gladly, unrestrainedly, eagerly, into a bloody civil war! Imagine how the spirit of evil reigned. . . . One day I could speak of my country, the next was threatened with death. Surely madness was upon the people!"¹⁴³ Van Lew's thinking, if known, put her in a potentially dangerous position. If she openly opposed the Confederacy the Richmond elite could harm her family, physically or socially, and capture the family's slaves, taking away any chances of being freed. She had to choose her words carefully and be cautious of her surrounding company when talking ill of the Confederacy. "In what was now a familiar routine, the Van Lew women deflected such charges by conspicuous acts of Confederate sympathy; they entertained young men from the Richmond Howitzers¹⁴⁴ and other prominent citizens."¹⁴⁵

Only select few knew Van Lew's intentions and aided her in getting others to trust her. Because of her social class and wealth it was hardly considered a possibility she would be a Unionist. "Southern ladies had a natural and unimpeachable devotion to the 'Cause' and that disloyalty was a disease that only afflicted the riffraff."¹⁴⁶ This gave Van Lew an advantage when providing intelligence to the Union and helped to minimize the risk of being caught by the Confederacy.

Union General Butler began getting aid from her in 1863 after Union soldiers were broken out of the Libby Prison, which was less than a mile from Van Lew's home, with her aid. Unionists devoted to undermining the Confederacy worked within Richmond, serving as double agents calling themselves "the underground"; they appeared to be loyal southerners while aiming to free Union POWs in the Libby Prison. "The fact that they chose to stay in the South and court danger rather than flee to the North bespeaks their commitment."¹⁴⁷ Their abolitionist thoughts would help transform the South during Reconstruction; they were not only loyal to their nation but also their state.

¹⁴² David D. Ryan, ed., *Yankee in Richmond: The Civil War Diary of "Crazy Bet" Van Lew*. (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2001), 22.

¹⁴³ Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 35.

¹⁴⁴ Richmond Howitzers refers to a Confederate regiment; having them attend dinner parties would have helped others be less suspicious of Van Lew being a traitor.

¹⁴⁵ Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 78.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

Van Lew was not allowed to enter the prison less than a mile from her home, but visited Union soldiers in hospitals. Then she was able to convey their messages, give them food and tend to their wounds. Bribery was common to get past Confederate soldiers and guards as well as children, who were also encouraged to use their assumed innocence to get past prison guards to send food to Union soldiers. They claimed to want souvenirs from Union supplies and even cried as a last resource in order to get inside the prison to pass messages along.

This was the main way Van Lew was able to aid the North. Prisoners would overhear Confederate plans, messengers would inform the underground, and Union generals would be informed in attempts to gain an upper hand. “Van Lew extracted information directly from members of the Confederate bureaucracy itself...she had ‘clerks in the rebel war and navy departments’ in her confidence.”¹⁴⁸ Since she was a lady of status it would not be unusual for her to ask questions about the war under the assumption she wanted to do what she could to aid the Confederacy.

In a letter from Butler to his friend and topographical engineer, Charles O. Boutelle, Butler said, “Miss Van Lieu [sic] is a true union woman as true as steel.”¹⁴⁹ Butler and Van Lew had a deep respect for one another that drove them to work harder for the Union cause. In their correspondence special ink was used to keep their messages secret. What appeared to be regular letters showed Confederate secrets after the paper was soaked in milk or heated. Butler often began letters to her as “My Dear Aunt” and “My Dear Niece” to keep their correspondence unknown.¹⁵⁰ A secret code was also created in case the letters were intercepted. Van Lew’s niece remembers that she “always carried [the key] in the case of her watch.”¹⁵¹ Van Lew sent Butler letters containing information, as she was able to get it from prisoners. He believed “her information too important for him to act on alone and sent [letters] to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton.”¹⁵² Without her aid, hundreds of Union soldiers would have remained in prison and may have died while incarcerated, taking away the chances of a funeral attended by family.

Her work also gave inmates hope of safely escaping. Van Lew accomplished this by providing “only one of many safe houses in the Richmond area.”¹⁵³ Union Colonel D. B. Parker referred to her as, “the ‘guiding spirit’ of the band of brave men and women, white and black, who aided runaway soldiers.”¹⁵⁴ Her aid was for more than just the government; it helped individual soldiers mentally stay strong while being in captivity. Even if this hope was false, the thought of being able to go home and see their families helped keep the incarcerated soldiers to remain optimistic.

After the war was over, and Van Lew was exposed as being a Union spy, she was seen as an outcast. Her inheritance had been largely spent on helping the Union, thus removing her class status. In 1869, President Grant named her Richmond’s “postmistress” giving her a salary from the federal government as a way to thank her help during the war.¹⁵⁵ Her friends recommended she begin fresh in a different area. Leaving Richmond and possibly moving to a northern city would put her around people with similar abolitionist ideas, and they may even admire her for her wartime actions. “In this atmosphere of hostility, Elizabeth [shrank] from every thing like a

¹⁴⁸ Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 93.

¹⁴⁹ Ryan, *Yankee in Richmond*, 51.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵¹ Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 112-113.

¹⁵² Ryan, *Yankee in Richmond*, 14.

¹⁵³ Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 132.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Ryan, *Yankee in Richmond*, 19.

gathering of my fellow beings, church, concerts, everything.”¹⁵⁶ This hatred took a toll on her mentally and physically. She would live the rest of her life hated in the South and largely forgotten in the North. “Because of her moral belief in the necessity of preserving the Union, she, after all, had betrayed her city.”¹⁵⁷ Her grave did not even have a headstone until Boston residents raised money for one, showing how much those in Richmond still resented her.¹⁵⁸

Another spy, Pauline Cushman was also a Union asset. By trade she was an actress and used those skills to acquire information about the Confederacy. Women were seen as being the delicate, fashionable gender. Her up-to-date fashion sense and etiquette skills made her an ideal woman. Men would have wanted to be seen near her and women would have wanted her company at dinners, making her an ideal spy. She “passed on information to [Union] General Rosecrans—the goings and comings of Southern troops in Kentucky and Tennessee.”¹⁵⁹ While not a prostitute, her attractiveness and charming personality made Confederates open up to her and invite her into their private tents.

Unlike Van Lew, Cushman was found to be a spy during the war. General John Bell Hood sentenced her to death by hanging when he discovered the deceit. Thankfully for her, the information given to the Union led them to where she was held captive and she was able to escape death. Even though she openly lied by saying she was a southern sympathizer, “no one doubted for a moment that she was the most virulent secessionist.”¹⁶⁰ Her biography is often discredited, according to Van Doren Stern, because the author was known to embellish and therefore create false stories in a grammatically “lush” style.¹⁶¹

A third spy, Sarah Emma Edmonds, employed different tactics to get information. Where Van Lew had used her role as an elite woman to bring food to prisoners and Cushman used her femininity and beauty. Edmonds engaged in a more drastic approach by changing her identity. It was unheard of to imagine a woman wearing men’s clothing, let alone take on the persona of one. While we know today there were dozens of women who changed their appearances in order to fight, few knew at the time. It was an assumption that men wore pants and women wore dresses; questioning differently would have gone against society’s constructed gender roles of what men and women were supposed to look like.

Sarah Emma Edmonds enlisted in the Union army after coming to America from Canada. In a book she published in 1864, she wrote,

“An insatiable thirst for education led me to [come to America], for I believed then, as now, that the ‘Foreign Missionary’ field was the one in which I must labor, sooner or later...I thank God that I am permitted in this hour of my adopted country’s need to express a tithe of the gratitude which I feel towards the people of the Northern States.”¹⁶²

Working in hospitals was not fulfilling enough for her. She disguised herself as a runaway male slave, forcing her to shave her head and color her skin and went by the name “Frank Thompson.” While in the Second Michigan Infantry, Thompson/Edmonds was a male nurse as well as a private

¹⁵⁶ Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 244.

¹⁵⁷ Ryan, *Yankee in Richmond*, 20.

¹⁵⁸ Wright, *What They Didn’t Teach You About the Civil War*, 189.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁶⁰ Linus Pierpont Brockett, *Scouts, Spies, and Heroes of the Great Civil War*. (Star Publishing Company, 1892), 106.

¹⁶¹ Van Doren Stern, *Secret Missions of the Civil War*, 12.

¹⁶² Sarah Emma Evelyn Edmonds, *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*. (Bedford, Massachusetts: Applewood Books, 1864), 18-19.

on the battlefield. It can be argued she used both “masculine” and “feminine” skills; serving as a nurse she would be around other women, doing stereotypical woman’s duties, like sewing, cooking and washing linens, all while being extremely masculine when actively fighting in skirmishes.

As a spy, she acquired information about the Rebel strategies, “was even given a gun and put on picket duty. She slipped back to the Federal side, taking all the information *she* had gained while pretending to be a *he*.”¹⁶³ In her book, Edmonds recalls what should have been a routine supply trip and described how a woman who provided food to the troops shot at Edmonds as she was getting on her horse to leave. Naturally, it began a firefight. “I did not wish to kill the wretch,” she wrote, “but did intend to wound her.”¹⁶⁴ Eventually, Edmonds gave up the male persona, even though Frank was not known to be Sara until several decades later. An African American named Bob became her companion, rarely leaving her side. Edmonds claimed even he did not know she was a woman.

Edmonds also went by the alias of Bridget, an Irish baker. Under this alias, she was able to cross freely between Union and Confederate lines. By using food sales as a front, Edmonds was able to get into camps and learn about troop movements. Once she had accurate information she was able to go back to Union lines and report her findings, giving them an advantage. While she did not have the “honor” of being killed in battle, “she did fight valiantly and received a serious wound.”¹⁶⁵ Some historians credit Edmonds with being the first woman to receive a military pension; since some female soldiers never revealed their true identities there is no way to be certain.

Each of these women who were considered to be spies risked their lives every day. Some were threatened with death; others socially shunned. At the time they were “These strong, independent women [who] took the prohibited step of ‘unsexing’ themselves to gain access to male space and authority.”¹⁶⁶ Their strengths of having an elite social status, femininity and gender changing gave them the skills needed to aid the North. They used very different strategies to work towards one goal: preserving the Union by ending the war. By “fighting battles and carrying information across enemy lines offered proof enough of their right to believe as they chose and to act as they believed right,” which gave them a new form of empowerment.¹⁶⁷ Their daily actions showed not only how important preserving the Union was, but also that women could go beyond society’s constructed image of what a woman could do. Van Lew, Cushman and Edmonds helped the Union achieve victory; without their actions the war could have continued for several more years.

¹⁶³ Wright, *What They Didn’t Teach You About the Civil War*, 189.

¹⁶⁴ Edmonds, *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, 93.

¹⁶⁵ Matthew Teorey, “Unmasking the Gentlemen Soldier in the Memoirs of Two Cross-dressing Female US Civil War Soldiers,” *International Journal of the Humanities*, 78.

¹⁶⁶ Teorey, “Unmasking the Gentlemen Soldier in the Memoirs of Two Cross-dressing Female US Civil War Soldiers,” 74.

¹⁶⁷ Wright, *What They Didn’t Teach You About the Civil War*, 191.