

# Armed with Intelligence: Women Spies of the American Civil War

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Prior to the onset of the Civil War, women were molded by traditional ideals. New perceptions of femininity arose during the early 1800's along with the industrial age and the new middle class family. American women dedicated their lives to cultivating the most nurturing family environment as possible, remaining in the home and performing chores such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare rather than venturing into corruptible society. Notions of the female's delicate and fragile constitution resulted in male protection against the unsuitable aspects of life. A woman's virtue was held in high regard and should anything occur that bordered on the inappropriate, her honorable stature would severely suffer. Therefore, women were always conscious of entering into morally compromising situations. When the Civil War began, however, it was clear these now-traditional roles of American females were being challenged. The war would come to test the authority of domesticity that delineated the role of women during the antebellum era. As war waged, hundreds of women left aside ideas of pre-war domesticity and instead donated their lives to support the war effort by gathering supplies, working as leaders in numerous war campaigns, and nursing on battlefields, sufficiently stepping across the threshold between their established roles.<sup>1</sup> For a vast majority, women would come to be accepted into these roles, seeing as the men that would have taken control were engaged in fighting on the battlefield. Though initially women were scorned for their

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Chipley Slavicek, *Women and the Civil War*, ed. Tim McNeese (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2009), 52, 60.

involvement in rough, masculine affairs, after a short time, it was apparent that women were a momentous and vital part in the war effort.<sup>2</sup> And while nursing sick soldiers and rallying for support was indeed an important task, one in which American women had seldom performed before, their most significant assistance came through their contribution to military intelligence as spies.

Military intelligence was profoundly important to both northern and southern sides of the Civil War. In an era before telephones, cars, or computers, gaining intelligence was difficult. But, no task was more harrowing, dangerous, or more essential. Viewed as a necessary evil, men who engaged in espionage early on were often regarded as disreputable and untrustworthy. Once the war continued and very few men could be trusted, women stepped into the challenge. Although male spies were effective, women had better success due to their unsuspecting nature. No one would expect a woman to enter into such a line of work.<sup>3</sup> As to be predicted, men did not initially trust women to show promise for the art of espionage because of traditional ideas of dainty natures and weak anatomy. However, women spies turned out to be quite indispensable and very masterful at what they did, even directly affecting the war's overall outcome.<sup>4</sup>

Spies could be found on both sides of the conflict. On the side of the Confederacy, Rose O'Neal Greenhow and Belle Boyd were two of many fearless women who faced the perils of the country to fight for the rebel cause.<sup>5</sup> For the North, Elizabeth Van Lew, along with countless others, emerged on the side of the Union.<sup>6</sup> Although these women were vastly successful, there were many instances where their feminine wiles were either futile or had

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<sup>2</sup> Richard H. Hall, *Women On the Civil War Battlefield* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Larissa Phillips, *Women Civil War Spies of the Confederacy* (New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2004), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Slavecik, *Women and the Civil War*, 44-45.

<sup>5</sup> Belle Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*. Louisiana. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 20, 25 .

<sup>6</sup> John Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2011), 10-15.

negative repercussions, resulting in the capture of goods, imprisonment, and commandeering of information. However, without these women's selfless acts, Northern and Southern efforts would have greatly suffered.<sup>7</sup> Using their unsuspecting nature, wit, seduction, and bravery these women, along with untold others, procured sensitive information from the hands of their enemies and delivered vital intelligence to the men on the frontlines.

Perhaps one of the most notable Confederate spies was Rose O'Neal, born in Port Tobacco, Maryland. Rose, regarded as a great beauty and remarkably intelligent, spent her teenaged years keeping company with important political and social figures throughout Washington D.C.<sup>8</sup> Her sister, Ellen, married a nephew of former First Lady Dolley Madison. Ellen's daughter Adele, in turn, married U.S. Representative, and later presidential candidate, Stephen A. Douglas. Rose married an influential Washington physician named Robert Greenhow, giving her connections to many powerful people.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Rose O'Neal Greenhow became a well-known and influential member in Washington society. By the time war broke out, Greenhow's husband and five of their eight children had passed away, leaving her widowed with three children. Though born and raised in the North, Greenhow's sympathies rested with the South. And although her sympathies were rumored throughout social circles, it was mostly speculation. It was that her sympathies were supposed idle gossip, however, that people tended to not believe them as truth. Because of this, Greenhow was able to accomplish some of the most substantial and influential intelligence work of the Civil War.<sup>10</sup>

Greenhow mingled with many social circles throughout her life leading up to the Civil War. In those years, her list of acquaintances grew sizably, encountering men and women from

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<sup>7</sup> Slavecik, *Women and the Civil War*, 48.

<sup>8</sup> William Gilmore Beymer, *On Hazardous Service: Scouts and Spies of the North and South* (New York, New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1912), 179-181.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Blackman, *Wild Rose: the True Story of a Civil War Spy*, Random House Trade. (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), 99-101.

<sup>10</sup> Beymer, *On Hazardous Service*, 179, 210.

Northern and Southern states alike. Having become friends with many senators, congressman, and other political figures, her alliances were numerous, varied, and committed.<sup>11</sup> To those with allegiances and sympathies for the Southern cause, Greenhow made sure to make especially strong alliances. It was through these connections and her strong-willed nature that Greenhow was employed as a spy for the confederacy.<sup>12</sup> Under supervision from Captain Thomas Jordan, an officer of the Confederacy, Greenhow took management of the first of three major, and separately operating, Confederate spy rings in 1860. Within in the rings, the mission was simply stated; retrieve Union intelligence. In actuality, however, the tasks were ruthlessly carried out. Armed with her charm and determination, Greenhow began her career as a Confederate secret agent.<sup>13</sup>

Ever the graceful lady, Greenhow continued to do business as usual within her many social spheres. Her beauty and personable attitude attracted many admirers to her, Northern and Southern alike. It was through this advantage that she would gather vital intelligence. Her eyes were fixed upon one ardent admirer in particular, however. His name was Henry Wilson, a senator from Massachusetts.<sup>14</sup> Quite taken by her, Wilson wrote several passionate love letters to Greenhow. Whether this friendship was sexual or not- and the letters written by Senator Wilson suggest the latter to be truth, no one can be for sure- Greenhow's true affections toward the senator are not absolutely clear. But what is undeniable is the closeness that occurred between the two.<sup>15</sup> The senator had close interactions with Union generals as chairman of the Military Affairs Committee. This close connection to the Union military made Greenhow keen on keeping the doting senator around. It was a friendship that Captain Jordan was particularly interested and endorsed as well, advising Greenhow to use this as a means to procure as much information about the

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<sup>11</sup> Slavicek, *Women and the Civil War*, 48-49.

<sup>12</sup> Blackman, *Wild Rose*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 26-27.

<sup>14</sup> Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11.

Union's position as possible.<sup>16</sup> Again, there is no clear evidence exactly how Greenhow was able to obtain this information from the senator, but she did so. Fortunately for Greenhow, the senator rather easily offered up information regarding private White House conversation and military positioning of Union Generals Scott and McClellan, causing much trouble for McClellan in particular<sup>17</sup>. This information, not intended for anyone's ears save War Department staff, was all presented to Greenhow.

Senator Wilson was by far not the only man to succumb to Greenhow's allure. Several senator and political clerks, as well as Union soldiers, were frequent visitors to her residence in Washington.<sup>18</sup> From one of the many admirers that called upon Greenhow, incredibly useful information regarding Union Naval forces was accidentally revealed in her presence. She forwarded this, along with all the intelligence she ever received, to Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard. Over the months in which she had been working as an intelligence agent, Greenhow was able to provide a significant amount of statistical news to the frontlines. She helped the Confederates defeat the Union army at the Battle of Bull Run, Manassas.<sup>19</sup> But like many secretive undercover operations, discovery was always a possibility. In August of 1861, Greenhow was exposed and arrested for her espionage and aiding of Confederate troops. She was sentenced to house arrest in her home in Washington.<sup>20</sup> Able to remain with her youngest daughter, Greenhow, though imprisoned, continued her message delivery. Eventually, Greenhow was deported to the Confederate capitol where she was regarded as a heroine.

Rose O'Neal Greenhow, though incredibly successful as a spy, was not the only rebel female spy eager for a Southern victory. The Confederacy also celebrated another female scout, Belle Boyd. Isabella Boyd was born in Martinsburg, West Virginia. She was the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> Beymer, *On Hazardous Service*, 183-184.

<sup>18</sup> Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Slavicek, *Women and the Civil War*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy*, 14.

oldest child and grew up as a bit of a tomboy.<sup>21</sup> She, like Greenhow, had a very strong personality, was well educated, and bright. Also like Greenhow, she was quite the charming young debutante. At the time of the firing at Fort Sumter, Boyd was a mere eighteen years old. Shortly thereafter, her father joined the Second Virginia infantry and was stationed at Harpers Ferry Camp, which was not too far a distance from the Boyd's' home. Out of her own boredom and want for excitement, Boyd traveled to Harpers Ferry to join in the "goodly company" of soldiers, husbands, sons, wives, daughters, and lovers who had gathered there for 'encouragement and solace.'<sup>22</sup>

Boyd's career of spying occurred rather by chance. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1861, Union soldiers barged into the Boyd residence, destroying valuables and furniture. Their reasoning for behaving thusly was due in part to the "rebel flags" flying from Boyd's windows.<sup>23</sup> Before leaving the Boyd residence, the soldiers attempted to hoist a Union flag over the roof, which angered Boyd to no end. After confronting the soldiers about the flag, one man in particular became rough with Boyd's mother, causing her great distress. Boyd, both wanting to protect her mother and seeking revenge for her damaged home, shot the soldier with her pistol that had been hidden within the folds of her dress.<sup>24</sup> As expected, Boyd became immediately under investigation for the mortal wound she inflicted on a Yankee soldier. Upon a Union general's review of the situation Boyd was not convicted since she had "done perfectly right."<sup>25</sup> In fact, she was given several Union bodyguards to ensure no Union soldiers would harass her or her family again. Instead of the men doing the harassing, however, Belle Boyd would come to do most of the suspicious behavior.

Using her Southern charm and elegance, Boyd beguiled several of the officers stationed near her.<sup>26</sup> Feigning naiveté, partly

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<sup>21</sup> Hall, *Women On the Civil War Battlefield*, 102-103.

<sup>22</sup> Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy*, 144-146.

<sup>25</sup> Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, 83.

<sup>26</sup> Slavecik, *Women and the Civil War*, 50-51.

out of her own frivolous youthful game and partly from curiosity, Boyd preyed upon one Captain Daniel Keily in particular, a young Yankee officer, who became a faithful suitor. As many young men fell pray to the Southern belle's wiles, Keily was no exception. She sensed his openness and gullibility right off and easily sweet-talked him out of numerous military secrets amid avid flirting and poetry reciting.<sup>27</sup> Realizing the significance of Keily's information, Boyd relayed them to Confederate officers through her slave, Eliza, who delivered them safely to Confederate hands. Her spying efforts and incautious behavior did not go on for long. She was soon discovered delivering messages and brought before a Union officer and sentenced to death, though the charge was not carried out.<sup>28</sup> The officers sent her on her way after a harsh scolding, but this did not deter the strong-willed young lady the least bit. After rethinking her spying strategies, Boyd returned to her intelligence work.

Boyd's father moved the family to their relatives' home in near-by Front Royal shortly after Belle's encounter with Union officials. While there she came to realize that while Keily had been an excellent source of Union information and easy to manipulate he was not the only way for her to acquire knowledge. Her aunt's parlor in Front Royal was occasionally used to accommodate classified late-night Union officer meetings.<sup>29</sup> Seeing these meetings as prime opportunities for spying, Boyd would sneak upstairs and peer through a small crack in the floor and listen in on the Union's plans. During one summer night in 1862, nearly a year after she first began spying for the Confederacy, Boyd discovered her most important intelligence during one of the usual officer meetings.<sup>30</sup> Boyd realized the significance of this particular meeting and waited quietly for hours to ensure she had every detail regarding movement of Northern troops. In perhaps her most daring feat, Boyd delivered this intelligence herself under the cover of night and behind enemy lines. She bypassed sleeping soldiers behind Union lines as she crossed into Southern territory to present her discoveries to

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<sup>27</sup> Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy*, 155

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>29</sup> Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy*, 156-157.

Confederate Colonel Turner Ashby.<sup>31</sup> This information was well received by Ashby and for her contributions Boyd was given special honorary positions within the camp.

Her success did not last for long, however, as her behaviors began to acquire unwanted attention. Time and again, Boyd would be stopped and searched for concealed letters- which she never left home without- at Union sentry posts, narrowly avoiding detection every time.<sup>32</sup> Eventually her luck ran out and Boyd was once again arrested in July of 1862, the second time in one year. She was sent to the Old Capital Prison in Washington a few days later and remained in custody for over a month whereupon she gained freedom after the Confederacy released Union prisoners of war in exchange for Boyd. Not surprisingly, Boyd continued her spying career only to be arrested for a third a final time aboard a ship to England carrying Confederate letters.<sup>33</sup> A Union Naval patrolling officer, who was supposed to deliver her to federal officials, but not surprisingly fell in love with her instead, smuggled her to Canada where they later married.<sup>34</sup> It is unclear whether Boyd's affections for him were absolutely true, for she later would marry two other men. After the war, Boyd traveled the nation retelling her daring stories of espionage.<sup>35</sup>

The Confederacy was not the only side of the war to use women as spies. Elizabeth Van Lew, a Northern spy living in the South, would come to dedicate her life and fortune fighting for the Union cause. Van Lew was born in October 1818 and raised in Richmond, Virginia by a wealthy family and like many Southern families, her father owned several slaves.<sup>36</sup> However, following the death of her father in 1843, Van Lew's brother freed their slaves and the family became abolitionists, especially Elizabeth. Over the course of the next several decades, she would come to spend the entirety of her fortune, some ten thousand dollars, to free the

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<sup>31</sup> Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, 96-97.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 100-102.

<sup>33</sup> Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy*, 170.

<sup>34</sup> Slavecek, *Women and the Civil War*, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Bakeless, *Spies of the Confederacy*, 170-172.

<sup>36</sup> Beymer, *On Hazardous Service*, 64, 65-66.



relatives of former slaves. She and her brother visited slave markets often, buying entire families before they could be sold separately and taking them home, where they issued manumission papers.<sup>37</sup>

At the breakout of the Civil War there was no hesitation about where Van Lew's loyalties rested. Though born a Southern lady, Van Lew was loyal to her country, the North, and supported anti-slavery causes. She came to be employed on the Union's behalf, gathering supplies to bring to Union soldiers imprisoned in Confederate prisons surrounding Richmond.<sup>38</sup> Confederate officers she came into contact with thought her nothing more than a harmless woman providing food and clothing to bedraggled prisoners and at the time she was indeed no threat to the rebel cause. Shortly thereafter, however, Van Lew discovered that this trust would become considerably useful. She educated herself on Northerner safe houses and, while visiting the imprisoned Union soldiers, helped smuggle them from jail and lead them to safety.<sup>39</sup> In exchange for her help the prisoners gave her vital intelligence on Confederate army movements, where she then passed on to Union generals.<sup>40</sup>

Her continual presence in the prisons did eventually stir concern from the Confederate Assistant Secretary of War A. Bledsoe. Although she was able to avoid detection, Van Lew ensured her spying efforts were never discovered by using new techniques to pass notes to the imprisoned men.<sup>41</sup> By splitting the spines of books she was able to insert small slips of paper inside. The most amazing way she hid her intentions was not within concealed compartments, but through her entire demeanor. Van Lew began wearing simple clothing full holes made of homespun material and walking about town mumbling to her self. To any onlookers, Van Lew was nothing more than a slightly loony middle-aged woman,

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<sup>37</sup> David D. Ryan, *A Yankee Spy in Richmond* (Mechanicsburg Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 2001), 5.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth R. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: the True Story of Elizabeth van Lew, a Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2005), 56-58.

<sup>39</sup> Ryan, *A Yankee Spy in Richmond*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 83.

<sup>41</sup> Slavicek, *Women and the Civil War*, 52.

which was all part of her brilliant cover, and gained her the nickname "Crazy Bet."<sup>42</sup>

In the winter of 1863, word reached Union General Benjamin Butler of Van Lew's benevolent assistance and superb spying skills.<sup>43</sup> Impressed by the lady's abilities, Butler immediately contacted Van Lew and made her the head of a Union spy ring. From then on, Van Lew came in command of several Union spies, many of which were male, and her true genius as an intelligence agent became even more apparent. While striving to find more effective ways of gaining Confederate secrets, Van Lew comprised her one of her riskiest yet most powerful plans. Contacting a former slave that worked for the Van Lew's father, a miss Mary Bowser, Van Lew drew up a scheme to have the woman placed into the Confederate White House as a servant.<sup>44</sup> After weeks of training and coaching Bowser as a spy, she convinced Varina Davis, wife of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, to let Bowser enter into service at their residence, claiming the black woman to have the utmost moral standing and work ethics.<sup>45</sup> This plan worked better than could be imagined. Black servants and slaves working in Southern society were taught to seem and act invisible; many went about their business relatively unnoticed. They were also widely believed to be slower and incapable of understanding concepts that their white employers discussed. This, in Bowser's situation, made it easy for her to gain information merely by doing her job, for she, unlike many Southern whites believed, understood and comprehended every word they said and reported what she learned back to Van Lew.<sup>46</sup> Van Lew's contributions to the Northern war effort were so great that many believe her to have been the most influential of all Union spies, even meriting her praise from former Union general turned president, Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Hall, *Women On the Civil War Battlefield*, 205-206.

<sup>43</sup> Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 107-108.

<sup>44</sup> Ryan, *A Yankee Spy in Richmond*, 10-11.

<sup>45</sup> Beymer, *On Hazardous Service*, 75.

<sup>46</sup> Ryan, *A Yankee Spy in Richmond*, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Slavicek, *Women and the Civil War*, 52.

The job of a spy is not easy and, Greenhow, Boyd, and Van Lew prove, not without its risks. Through their courage and commitment, these three women illustrated the capabilities of their gender and helped begin revolutionizing the female's role within American society. During a time when the United States became ripped at its seams, their determination, fearless, and strength helped bring the nation back together. As the inscription that marks the site where Elizabeth Van Lew is laid to rest reads, "She risked everything that is dear to man – friends, fortune, comfort, health and life itself," it tells a brief story not just of Van Lew, but of all women who devoted their lives to the service of their nation, Confederate and Union alike.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Slavicek, *Women and the Civil War*, 52.