

I Spy Women Undercover

by Judith E. Harper



- 1 Women and girls of all ages worked as spies during the Civil War. Historians believe that more than 1,000 women in the North and the South may have been involved in espionage. Most became spies because they desperately wanted to help their side win the war.
- 2 Spying during the Civil War was dangerous work, just as it is during any major conflict. If they were captured, spies risked being sent to prison or hanged. Female spies were not hanged, but they were threatened with that punishment. Yet women were often successful in completing their missions.
- 3 Female spies had several advantages over their male counterparts. Early in the war, Union and Confederate soldiers did not expect females to engage in espionage. Consequently, soldiers allowed women and girls to travel across Union and Confederate lines without being searched. At first, female spies benefited from the customary understanding that only a woman's husband and her doctor were permitted to touch her. As soldiers learned about females in this line of work, however, women became subject to searches.
- 4 Women's clothing made it easy to hide information. Hoop skirts and petticoats were the height of fashion during the Civil War. The many yards of fabric were perfect for hiding messages and papers, and small packages and medical supplies easily attached to the frames of the hoop skirts. This smuggling was especially important to the Confederacy, as its army had a shortage of medicine. Female spies who could not afford the expense of hoop skirts sometimes carried notes or supplies hidden in a basket or a bag.
- 5 Belle Boyd, a Confederate spy, was 18 years old when Union troops invaded her hometown in western Virginia. Brave and daring, she spied on Union officers and soldiers and carried information about their activities to Confederate generals. The highlight of her career came in May 1862, when Confederate general Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson was preparing his soldiers to push Union troops out of western Virginia. Belle raced on horseback to their headquarters to deliver news about the location and size of Union forces. This intelligence enabled Stonewall Jackson's soldiers to force the Northerners to retreat.
- 6 One of the most brilliant female spies of the Civil War was Elizabeth Van Lew. Although she lived in Richmond, Virginia, she was pro-Union

and hated slavery. She was the leader of a group of Union spies—both black and white—from the Richmond area. The details Elizabeth and her espionage ring gathered about the Confederate military proved crucial in the victories of Union general Ulysses S. Grant’s troops toward the end of the war.

- 7 Elizabeth and her fellow spies used an invisible ink to write their messages between the lines of ordinary letters. To make the hidden writing turn black, the Union army member receiving the letter only had to add milk to the paper. Elizabeth also created a cipher, or code, to safeguard the facts in her communications.
- 8 One of the most important spies in Elizabeth’s group was African American Mary Elizabeth Bowser, although historians today are unsure if that was her real name. Mary was a free black woman who worked in the Confederate White House in Richmond, where President Jefferson Davis lived with his family.
- 9 As a domestic servant, Mary secretly listened to Jefferson Davis’s conversations with government and military leaders. Sometimes she was even able to find and read important documents. Mary passed on this information to another spy in the ring, who relayed it to the appropriate Union army members.
- 10 Rose O’Neal Greenhow of Washington, DC, strongly believed that the South had a constitutional right to secede from the Union. She vowed to help the Confederacy achieve this goal. Rose was prominent in Washington society and was a friend of Northern politicians and military leaders. She collected information about the Union army during their conversations and passed these facts along to Confederate leaders.
- 11 Rose’s most important triumph occurred in July 1861, before the First Battle of Bull Run (also known as the First Battle of Manassas). Rose persuaded a Northern military official to tell her the strength of the Union troops preparing for this battle. She sent the information to Confederate officers, and the South won a decisive victory, even though it was outnumbered. In 1864, tragedy struck when Rose drowned as she was returning from a mission to England. She was buried with full military honors.
- 12 Harriet Tubman is famous for guiding slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, though, she nursed Union soldiers, helped freed slaves, and spied for the Union. In South Carolina, where Harriet was working, the Union army controlled the coast, while Confederate troops held positions inland. On one trip inland, Harriet guided Union gunboats and 300 Union troops up South Carolina’s Combahee River. She led them to several warehouses full of Confederate rice and cotton, which the Union soldiers seized. They also freed 756 plantation slaves, who returned with Harriet to the coast. Many of the men became Union soldiers.
- 13 The actress Pauline Cushman was a Union spy, though she pretended to be a loyal Confederate. She wore disguises and roamed the countryside on horseback, collecting information about the Confederate military. Pauline also uncovered the names and whereabouts of Confederate spies. After several months, the Confederates arrested Pauline and sentenced her to death. But before she could be executed, the Union army raided the town where she was imprisoned and freed her.
- 14 Historians today are still uncovering facts about female spies of the Civil War. It is likely that we will know much more about these courageous women in the years to come.

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Test Questions

Circle the correct answer.

- 1. How does the author support the idea that women spies were beneficial contributors during the Civil War?**
 - a. She describes individual women and their journeys guiding slaves to freedom.
 - b. She describes various women and how they gained importance in society.
 - c. She describes female actresses and how they assisted in the fight for freedom.
 - d. She describes different women and the heroic acts that helped their side to succeed.

- 2. Why does the author feel that women had an advantage over men in spying during the Civil War?**
 - a. Women spies were not expected to be in this line of work.
 - b. Women spies were also nurses.
 - c. Women spies were younger than their male counterparts.
 - d. Women spies were also actresses.

- 3. What was the effect of Elizabeth Van Lew's invisible ink?**
 - a. She was able to persuade military officials to give her confidential information.
 - b. She was able to secretly listen to the conversations of government and military leaders.
 - c. She was able to keep her messages about the Confederate military secret.
 - d. She was able to guide slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad.

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Test Questions (*continued*)

4. This question has two parts. Answer Part A first, and then answer Part B.

Part A: Which is one main idea for the article “I Spy Women Undercover”?

- a. Men would not allow women to assist in the war effort.
- b. Women used a variety of spy tactics to assist in the war effort.
- c. Spying was an ineffective strategy during the Civil War.
- d. Women were punished for their involvement in the war.

Part B: Which two sentences from the text best support your answer in Part A?

- a. She wore disguises and roamed the countryside on horseback, collecting information about the Confederate military.
- b. If they were captured, spies risked being sent to prison or hanged.
- c. In 1864, tragedy struck when Rose drowned as she was returning from a mission to England.
- d. Early in the war, Union and Confederate soldiers did not expect females to engage in espionage.
- e. Elizabeth also created a cipher, or code, to safeguard the facts in her communications.

5. Which is the best meaning for the word *decisive* as it is used in paragraph 11?

- a. emotional
- b. critical
- c. informal
- d. destructive