

Spies

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Bert Dunkerly, park ranger at Richmond National Battlefield Park, and Gregg Kimball, director of public services and outreach at the Library of Virginia, led four groups around the city, including Shockoe Cemetery where Van Lew was buried, Oakwood Cemetery where Dahlgren was exhumed, and the former locations of Libby Prison in Shockoe Bottom and Van Lew's house on Church Hill.

The Confederate government and the Union government tried every means possible to get information from the enemy.

Boyd Belle Boyd's flirtation with Union officers in the Shenandoah Valley gathered valuable military intelligence for the South. Washington socialite Rose Greenhow used charm and connections to ferret out information for the Confederacy in the nation's capital.

Federal efforts in Richmond fumbled at the beginning when the Pinkerton Detective Agency was employed to place operatives in the city. Timothy Webster was discovered and executed in 1862.

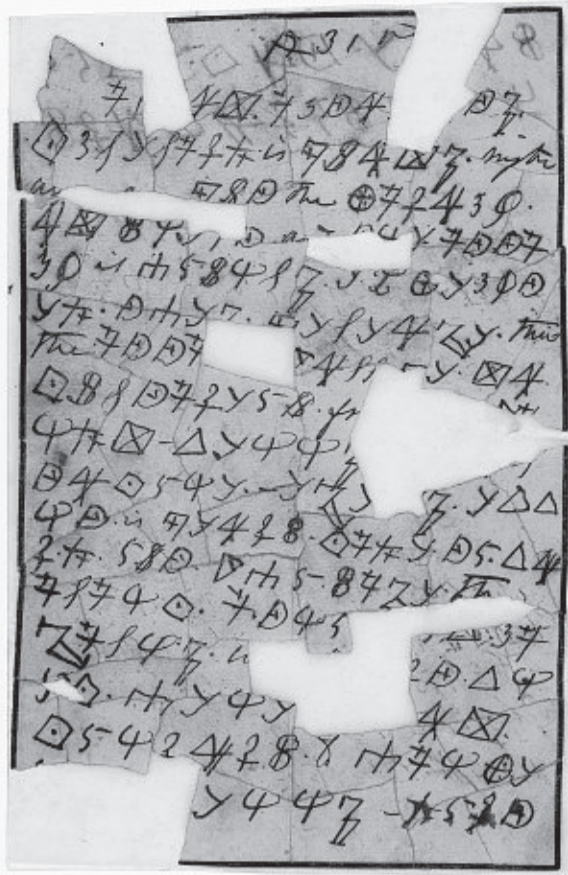
"Early in the war, you've got these guys who were plants, essentially," Kimball explained. "Certainly, they had some success, but nobody had made contact with the natives, shall we say. The big change comes when the feds decide enough of this private detective stuff. We're going to have our own intelligence operation."

Unionists in the city became more aware of one another when the Confederate government declared martial law in 1862 and arrested those suspected of being disloyal.

Outspoken opponents of secession such as John Minor Botts, a former congressman, and Charles Palmer, a commission merchant, were among the imprisoned. Botts was released on condition that he move to his farm in Culpeper. Palmer remained as a money man who could grease palms to help the resistance slip people and information through the lines.

Since Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy, "people assume that the residents all supported the war effort," Dunkerly said.

"The fact is they didn't. Just like on the Union



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Washington socialite Rose Greenhow (left) used charm and connections — and a cipher — to ferret out information for the Confederacy in the nation's capital.

side, there was a peace movement and a lot of anti-war groups. ... In Richmond there were people who opposed secession and actively worked to undermine the Confederate war effort — and it was dangerous."

Van Lew mailed her messages directly to Butler, disguising them as letters from Eliza A. Jones to a supposed uncle, James Ap. Jones, in Norfolk. She used disappearing ink and a cipher to hide the real message behind an innocent-looking missive.

Van Lew also had servants who frequently brought supplies from a farm east of the city, and carried messages hidden in the soles of their shoes.

Frederick Lohmann, a Unionist grocer, also had steady deliveries from outside the city.

Samuel Ruth, superintendent of the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad, had ready access to information and transportation, as well as the ability to slow down the trains when it would help the Union cause.

The big prison escape and Dahlgren's raid were big tests for the network.

Previous escapes had involved one or two prisoners at a time, sometimes with help from prison guard Erasmus Ross, who avoided suspicion by yelling abuse at prisoners when he wasn't secretly getting them out.

At the beginning of 1864, prisoners had started work on a tunnel out of a

basement storage room in Libby Prison. After several false starts, they finally broke through the floor of a tobacco shed on the other side of the street. By morning on Feb. 10, 109 prisoners managed to slither through the 2-foot-wide tube.

Union supporters in Richmond had known about the tunnel plan, thanks to communication with the prisoners through Robert Ford, a captured black Union soldier who had been assigned to work at the prison.

Van Lew had prepared a room to shelter some of them, but she was not at home when they appeared, and her servants turned them away. Other Union supporters, including blacks who lived in the city, helped hide the prisoners and get many of them out.

"In their escape, the officers were aided by citizens of Richmond — not foreigners of the poor classes only, but by natives and persons of wealth," read an account of the escape in The Washington Star on Feb. 19. "They know their friends there, but very properly withhold any mention of their names."

The effort to rebury Dahlgren reflected the importance Victorians placed on mourning, Dunkerly said.

"Dahlgren's family couldn't mourn for him because they didn't have the body," he explained.

Unionists also were concerned that Dahlgren's

Richmond's Prominent Unionists

Unionist leaders in Richmond during the Civil War:

Elizabeth Van Lew, a wealthy Richmond native whose family had Philadelphia roots. She was recruited by Gen. Benjamin Butler to spy for the Union in January 1864.

Mary Richards a.k.a. Bowser, an educated former slave of Elizabeth Van Lew who, by some accounts, was a spy in the Confederate White House.

Robert Ford, a Northern free black man who served as a teamster for the Union Army. Captured in the Shenandoah Valley in 1862, he was sent to Richmond to work for the warden at Libby Prison, where he helped several prisoners escape. He was



Van Lew

whipped severely after the prison break in 1864.

Frederick Lohmann and brothers, pro-Union German immigrants who helped Richmonders reach Union lines and aided in the reburial of Union officer Ulric Dahlgren in 1864.

John Minor Botts, Richmond lawyer and former member of the U.S. House of Representatives. He was imprisoned for his pro-Union views in 1862 and forced out of town to his farm in Culpeper.

Charles Palmer, a commission and shipping merchant whose wealth helped fund the Union underground. He was arrested in 1862 on charges of disloyalty.

Samuel Ruth, superintendent of the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad. He slowed the trains when needed for movements of Confederate troops or supplies in 1862 and passed critical information to the Union army in 1865.



Informing the enemy

See a collection of historical photos of Union and Confederate spies from the Civil War. Go to TimesDispatch.com and click on this story.

body would be desecrated. Confederates had discovered papers on the dead officer's body that indicated a plot to kidnap or kill Confederate government leaders.

"That would be considered an act of terrorism. It was unheard of to do something like that, even though the nations were at war," Dunkerly said.

A black man who had witnessed the burial pointed out the gravesite in Oakwood Cemetery. Lohmann helped dig up and identify the body, place it in a metal coffin and, after other Unionists had paid their respects, smuggle Dahlgren out of the city hidden under a load of peach trees and rebury him on a farm.

The kicker came when the Confederate government agreed to send Dahlgren's body back to his family, dug up the grave and found nothing there, as if he had been resurrected.

Eventually, the Unionists smuggled his body

back north. In the last year of the war, information from the Richmond spies may have sealed the fate of the Confederates.

Gen. Ulysses S. Grant would know when Confederate troops were shifted between the Shenandoah Valley and Petersburg.

He heard about a Confederate shipment of 400,000 pounds of tobacco to be exchanged for bacon, and he captured almost all of it in a March 5, 1865, raid on Fredericksburg.

Grant also had advance knowledge of Gen. Robert E. Lee's final attempt to

break through Union lines around Petersburg at Fort Stedman on March 25. The Confederates failed again and soon had to abandon the city.

"Obviously, the war is more complex than we usually think it is," Dunkerly said. "As far as life in Richmond in the fourth year of the war, there's an active Union underground movement — a lot of people working to subvert the Confederate war effort. It's fascinating. It's not often looked at, but it's another part of the story."

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