



**Black History Month 2021
Mary Richards Bowser**



Much attention has been given to the important role that Black men played in the Civil War and the struggle for the destruction of slavery from 1861-1865, but thousands of Black women persevered and fought in any way they could to end Confederate enslaving power in the United States. One of these women was the remarkable Mary Richards Bowser, who served as a Union spy in the Confederate White House in Richmond during the war.

Ms. Bowser was born in the household of Eliza Van Lew, in Richmond, around the year 1841. Ms. Van Lew, seeking to give Mary an education so that she could later serve as a missionary and contributing citizen in the new colony to be founded in West Africa, sent her north to Pennsylvania to attend school. There were laws against Black Americans attending school in the north and then returning to Virginia, so Ms. Van Lew was right to think about a future for Mary Bowser elsewhere. When she was approximately 15, Mary was sent to Liberia by Ms. Van Lew. Mary lived there, unhappily, for five years, and returned to Virginia in 1860. It is around this time that Mary started to use multiple assumed names and change her life

story—depending upon the audience or people with whom she came in contact. She was, after all, breaking the law by returning to Virginia, and was, legally still considered a “slave.” Around 1861, Mary became employed by Jefferson Davis in the Confederate White House. During the war until 1865, Mary passed information from Davis’ papers and meetings to Ms. Van Lew, who ran a Union espionage ring. It was intelligence and planning from Mary Richards Bowser that helped a group of Union prisoners escape Richmond during the war. At the end of the war, Mary Bowser joined the Freedman’s Bureau, eventually running an entire school by herself in St. Mary’s, Georgia. She continued to speak out against the discrimination that continued after the war—even in the Freedmen’s Bureau itself—and regularly worried and warned that her school and her work would come under attack from White supremacists. She left the school in 1867, and there is no record of her or her life after that.