



## The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing

---

Volume 48

Issue 1 *The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly  
Historical Writing*

Article 8

---

2019

# Reconstructed Reputations: The Rise and Ruin of Two Civil War Spies

Abby Ellsworth

Brigham Young University, [abigailmorse96@gmail.com](mailto:abigailmorse96@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ellsworth, Abby (2019) "Reconstructed Reputations: The Rise and Ruin of Two Civil War Spies," *The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing*: Vol. 48 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean/vol48/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



*Belle Boyd (left) and Elizabeth Van Lew (right)*

Paper

## Reconstructed Reputations The Rise and Ruin of Two Civil War Spies

Abby Ellsworth

WHEN THE CIVIL WAR BEGAN IN 1861, A FORTY-THREE-YEAR-old woman and an eighteen-year-old girl both living in Virginia found themselves wondering how they could support the war effort. By contemplation, or by coincidence Elizabeth Van Lew and Belle Boyd both entered into a perilous spy career. One was cautious, the other careless. One worked for the Union, the other for the Confederacy. And in the end, one's reputation plummeted and the other's soared. One would expect that vigilant Van Lew, who labored as a Union spy, would enjoy a radiant reputation. However, in an unexpected reversal of fortunes, society dismantled Van Lew's reputation, while Boyd's reputation ascended. The reputations of these women can be attributed to the political climate after the war. As the nation scrambled to reconcile in favor of the South, radical abolitionists and African Americans were shunned resulting in Van Lew's horrendous reputation, and Boyd's rise to fame.

Belle Boyd and Elizabeth Van Lew are relatively well-known historical figures. Historians such as Donald Markle, who wrote *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*, Elizabeth Varon, author of *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, and Ruth Scarborough, who wrote *Belle Boyd, Siren of the South*, have all focused predominantly on these ladies' careers as spies during the Civil War. However, focusing on the excitement of spying means that historians have overlooked their fate after the war and their reputation. The lives and reputations of Belle Boyd and

Elizabeth Van Lew after the Civil War illuminates the nation's opinions on newly freed African Americans and the political climate of the nation. It also reveals the extent to which the nation turned a blind eye toward atrocities that the South committed in order to reunify the white population of the country.

## Elizabeth Van Lew's Secret Career and Unblemished Reputation

In order to understand how drastically Van Lew's reputation changed after the war, her reputation during the war must be considered. Elizabeth Van Lew was born in 1818 in Richmond, Virginia. Her father founded a prosperous hardware business, which enabled him to own several slaves and live in a mansion on Church Hill. He sent his daughter to a Quaker school in Philadelphia, which contributed to her intense abolitionist tendencies. Van Lew took the opportunity to act on these sentiments when her father passed away in 1843 and freed her family's slaves.<sup>1</sup> She continued to express her abolitionist dispositions after the war as well. She sought to publish an address to the "Federal Army" stating her support for the outcome of the war as well as for African Americans.<sup>2</sup> She also wrote several letters to Congress begging them to rectify the injustices committed against freedmen.<sup>3</sup> While these actions establish Van Lew's political stance and abolitionist inclinations, since they never became public knowledge it had no influence on her reputation after the war.

Although Virginia seceded in 1861, Van Lew's passion for abolition made picking sides easy. Instead of succumbing to Southern influence, Van Lew found ways to support the Union. Van Lew began to visit Union soldiers in Libby prison in Richmond. At first, she brought food and helped tend to soldier's wounds, but as time went on, she started to smuggle intelligence<sup>4</sup> out of enemy territory and into the hands of Union soldiers in various ways. At first, she tore messages into pieces to transport individually.<sup>5</sup> Later, she developed her

---

1. William Gilmore Beymer, "Famous Scouts and Spies of the Civil War," *The Boston Sunday Globe*, 29 December 1912.

2. Elizabeth R. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 199.

3. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 201–4.

4. "The Civil War Fifty Years Ago Today," *Buffalo Evening News*, 5 September 1911.

5. Michael DeMarco, "Elizabeth Van Lew (1818–1900)," Lewis A. Armistead, (1817–1863).

own cipher and used invisible ink.<sup>6</sup> Van Lew built up a network of spies that carried her coded messages in hollow eggs,<sup>7</sup> soles of shoes,<sup>8</sup> or spools of thread.<sup>9</sup> Her extensive network made it possible to send General Ulysses Grant newspapers and fresh flowers from her garden on several occasions.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, she managed to place a spy, Mary Bowser, in the White House of the Confederacy.<sup>11</sup> Thus, of her own volition and without any formal training, Van Lew became a successful spy.<sup>12</sup>

During the war, Van Lew's reputation remained untarnished. Although the Confederacy placed guards in her yard, and searched her house multiple times, they never found evidence of her espionage during the Civil War.<sup>13</sup> Van Lew successfully hid her activities because of her extensive network, and meticulous attention to detail which allowed her to cover her tracks. Additionally, no one suspected that a respectable woman of the Virginian gentry could be involved in such underhanded activities.<sup>14</sup> Had she been unable to obscure her connection to the Union, her reputation would have been ruined. *The Richmond Dispatch* published the only paper that mentioned Van Lew during the Civil War. In 1861, the newspaper mentioned that Van Lew and her mother, Eliza, frequently visited Libby prison to render their assistance to Union soldiers. This secessionist paper understandably berated these women for their strange attention to wounded Yankees. Nevertheless, no one suspected Van Lew's entanglement in spying.<sup>15</sup> Her reputation as a Southern lady and well-hid involvement kept her reputation intact after Richmond fell into the hands of the Union for the last time.

---

6. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 182.

7. "Battle Stories of the Civil War," *Los Angeles Daily Times*, 5 September 1911.

8. "Famous for Her Work as Union Spy in Richmond Death of Miss Van Lew," *The Courier Journal Louisville*, 26 September 1900.

9. "Battle Stories of the Civil War."

10. "Famous for Her Work as Union Spy."

11. "Elizabeth Van Lew, Grant's Woman Spy, at the Confederate Capital," *Honolulu Republican*, 2 December 1900.

12. Donald E. Markle, *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2004), 108.

13. J. Park Alexander, "A Famous Woman," *The Beacon Journal* (Akron), 11 August 1900.

14. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 181.

15. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 205.

## Elizabeth Van Lew's Ruined Reputation

A year after the war, Van Lew continued to preserve her reputation. Ulysses S. Grant, the leader of the Union Army during the war, came to visit Van Lew in full view of her neighbors in 1865.<sup>16</sup> Strangely, this encounter remained unreported in newspapers. In 1866, a Unionist paper called *Harper's Weekly* published a piece on her father's death and briefly mentioned Van Lew and her mother's visits to Libby Prison during the war. However, the paper failed to acknowledge her involvement in spying. Instead, it praised Van Lew and her mother calling them "ministering angels."<sup>17</sup> Up through 1866, since Van Lew's kept her spying secret, her local reputation remained unblemished and she had yet to gain national attention.

Van Lew only temporarily conserved her unsullied post-war reputation. Van Lew depleted much of her family's wealth in order to maintain her extensive spying. In 1866 financial difficulties forced her to consider her options. Van Lew kept an extensive journal during the war and toyed with the idea of publishing a memoir as a solution to her financial problems. The pro-slavery paper *The Richmond Inquirer* caught wind of her intentions and criticized her, claiming that her memoir would portray Confederate heroes in a terrible light.<sup>18</sup> Fearing public backlash, Van Lew decided not to publish her memoir. This article marked the first time it became public knowledge that Van Lew spied for the Union during the Civil War. At this time, Van Lew experienced minimal consequences confined to the local level in Richmond. However, in the next few years, papers across the nation—especially in the South—used the knowledge that Van Lew spied for the Union as ammunition to tear down her reputation.

Since Van Lew decided not to publish her memoir, she remained in the throes of financial difficulties. She sought to resolve her problem by petitioning the government for the money she believed they owed her for her efforts during the war. Van Lew's prominent Union friends George Sharpe and Ulysses Grant lobbied the government in an attempt to help her. Sadly, they only managed to secure minimal, insufficient funds.<sup>19</sup> As a result, Van Lew languished alone in her house with meager resources for four years.

---

16. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 196.

17. "The Residence of Mrs. Van Lew," *Harper's Weekly*, 7 July 1866.

18. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 207.

19. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 208.

When General Grant assumed the presidency in 1869, the tide turned for Van Lew. Up until then, she hid away in her mansion on Church Hill, where one or two papers mentioned her name. Only locals in Richmond paid attention to Van Lew and her reputation. Since Van Lew still lacked monetary means, when President Grant offered her the prestigious position of Postmaster of Richmond in 1869, she accepted. This office would give Van Lew a considerable amount of political influence as she would have the power to censure which newspapers circulated. If Van Lew wanted, she could prohibit the distribution of papers that did not reflect her political opinions. This post launched Van Lew onto the national stage, and she became renowned across the country. Her appointment became a topic of national debate, and her reputation would suffer immensely.

The majority of Union citizens predictably reacted positively to Van Lew's appointment as reflected in their newspapers. One Unionist paper in Massachusetts exclaimed, "God bless Miss Van Lew! At the risk of her life, and with the prospect of losing her valuable estate, by confiscation, this noble woman aided in every way she could the suffering Union soldiers."<sup>20</sup> Another paper in Massachusetts called *The Congregationalist and Boston Recorder* accepted her appointment exaggerating that "thousands of our soldiers received kindness at [her] hands."<sup>21</sup> Papers in Vermont echoed these sentiments and lauded Van Lew for "rendering inestimable service to our army during its operations."<sup>22</sup> Another Northern paper in Ohio, *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, defended Van Lew's appointment stating that "Northern soldiers are largely indebted to her for their freedom and lives." Overall, Northern citizens found that Van Lew's appointment "reflect[ed] credit on the judgment, good sense, and justice of the President."<sup>23</sup> Van Lew's support originated from the idea that she had been an invaluable Union spy during the war. None of these reviews on her appointment included her qualifications or experience. Instead, Van Lew's career as a spy formed the basis for her outstanding reputation among Union citizens.

Although the Union citizens typically supported Van Lew's appointment, some citizens from Union states opposed her. A handful of papers merely reported the facts, choosing to remain politically neutral on the topic. A paper

---

20. "The New Post Mistress of Richmond," *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* [Lowell, MA], 10 April 1869.

21. "Multiple News Items," *Congregationalist and Boston Recorder* [Boston, MA], 25 March 1869.

22. "Washington Items," *Vermont Chronicle* [Bellows Falls, VT], 27 March 1869.

23. "The Richmond Post-Mistress," *Daily Cleveland Herald* [Cleveland, OH], 1 April 1869.

in Ohio briskly stated, “Mrs. Van Lew . . . is to receive the appointment of post-mistress in Richmond, Virginia.”<sup>24</sup> Other papers outwardly expressed their hostile opinions on her appointment. Multiple papers in The District of Columbia published their antagonistic sentiments on the matter. *The Daily National Intelligencer* angrily quipped that, “General Grant seems to have elected Miss Van Lew without regard either for qualification, party interest, or popular opinion” and “No one in Richmond cared one iota for Miss Van Lew, she never had, before or since the war, any social recognition or admission into any respectable society.”<sup>25</sup> Another paper in Washington declared, “It may be doubted whether anyone could have been appointed who is more offensive to the people of Richmond, or in whose character they would have less confidence than this person.”<sup>26</sup> These Northern paper’s politics and goals should have aligned closely with Van Lew’s. However, by 1869, Democrats had already taken back a significant amount of power in the government. Thus, these papers reflected democratic political outlooks, namely, a distaste for the rights of freedmen and for the abolitionists who supported them. Furthermore, the North wished to reconcile with the South. If the North continued to support outspoken abolitionists such as Van Lew, their goal would be unobtainable. Thus, these papers objected to Van Lew on the foundation of her character and her political orientation, not her capability.

Van Lew’s gender also prompted antagonism against her from both the North and the South. Some newspapers, like this paper in Maine, merely stated Van Lew’s appointment as Postmaster adding at the end that “this is looked upon as a big thing for the women’s rights people.”<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, other papers openly opposed Van Lew based on her gender. The Northern paper *The Vermont Chronicle* commented that “The appointment of Miss. Van Lew, as Postmaster at Richmond, Va., has drawn a huge crowd of hungry applicants of the sex to the doors of the White House.” The paper went on to comment that the effect of women seeking and holding office might “rent our whole social and civil structure” or even result in a woman running for the presidency.<sup>28</sup> Van Lew’s gender had no bearing on her qualifications, but it sparked resentment among multiple states, including Union states. Van Lew’s support of women’s rights exacerbated the problem. Van Lew desperately wished to vote, and each year

---

24. “From Washington,” *Newark Advocate* [Newark, OH], 19 March 1869.

25. “The Baltimore Commercial of Yesterday Has the Following,” *Daily National Intelligencer* [Washington, DC], 20 March 1869.

26. “A Bad Appointment,” *Daily National Intelligencer* [Washington, DC], 18 March 1869.

27. “Political and Personal,” *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* [Bangor, ME], 18 March 1869.

28. “Female Office Seekers,” *Vermont Chronicle* [Bellows Falls, VT], 27 March 1869.



when she paid her taxes, she protested that if she had to pay taxes, she should be allowed to vote.<sup>29</sup> Van Lew's position represented a direct affront to how things had always been—women did not belong in office, they belonged at home. Anyone could rally behind this point whether they hailed from the North or the South. The fact that Van Lew blatantly backed women's rights meant that she became controversial on two political fronts, first for her outspoken support for African Americans both during and after the war, and second, for her public support of women's suffrage.

The former Confederacy greeted Van Lew's appointment with either indifference or hatred. *The Charleston Courier* reported the occurrence in one sentence, "The President nominated Mrs. Van Lew Postmistress at Richmond."<sup>30</sup> In another issue, the same paper dedicated, again, one sentence to the new Postmaster when Congress confirmed her nomination, briskly stating "An Executive session confirmed the appointment of Mrs. Van Lew to the Richmond post office."<sup>31</sup> A Southern Georgian paper *The Weekly Georgia Telegraph* demonstrated the highest degree of disapproval related to Van Lew's appointment. They bitterly pointed out that "Mrs. Van Lew . . . was regularly tried and convicted as a spy during the war . . . The people heartily detest her."<sup>32</sup> Multiple papers in Richmond, according to *The Boston Daily Advertiser*, welcomed Van Lew's appointment with "a chorus of detraction and insult." The city viewed her as "a traitor and a spy."<sup>33</sup> The appointment of Van Lew as Postmaster brought a flurry of insults upon her and her reputation founded upon her career as a spy against the Confederacy. Public knowledge of Van Lew's spy career created an environment where her reputation suffered. Both Northern and Southern papers criticized her appointment based on her politics. Van Lew only found support from citizens from the North who admired her occupation as a Union spy.

In the next few years, papers soiled Van Lew's reputation by reporting her poor performance in office. During her first year as Postmaster in 1869, newspapers berated Van Lew for failing to close the post office on Memorial Day. Eventually, the President intervened and closed the post office for the day.<sup>34</sup> In

---

29. "Current Mention," *Independent Statesman* [Concord, NH], 9 August 1877.

30. "By Telegraph," *Charleston Courier*, Tri-Weekly [Charleston, SC], 20 March 1869.

31. "By Telegraph," *Charleston Courier*, Tri-Weekly [Charleston, SC], 23 March 1869.

32. "Multiple News Items," *Weekly Georgia Telegraph* [Macon, GA], 2 April 1869.

33. "The Appointment of Miss Van Lew to Be Postmistress of Richmond Was Hailed by the Newspapers of That City with a Chorus of Detraction and Insult," *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA] 7 April 1869.

34. "In General," *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 15 June 1869.

1870, a paper in Ohio called *The Daily Cleveland Herald* portrayed Van Lew as a “regular martinet and [not showing] proper judgment . . . requiring an unreasonable amount of work.”<sup>35</sup> In 1872, a paper from California and Arkansas reported that Van Lew had a “tyrannical disposition.”<sup>36</sup> As a result of her treatment, several clerks resigned. These accusations were minimal compared to the improvements that Van Lew made, such as increased routes and delivering efficiency. The complaints from both the North and South were unrelated to Van Lew’s politics or spy career. However, since the North and South deeply disliked Van Lew’s political stances, these papers may have been attempting to tear down her reputation in whatever way possible in order to extricate her from a highly political office. Papers looked for any excuse to paint Van Lew in a negative light.

Citizens of the nation also disapproved of Van Lew as Postmaster because of her political leanings. In 1873, the Maine paper *The Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* published a scathing review stating that many “laugh to scorn that she has faithfully and effectively performed her duties” and that Van Lew “rendered no services in the late political campaign that entitle her to this appointment.”<sup>37</sup> As urgency for reconciliation mounted in the nation, Northern support increasingly waned for Van Lew. They could not afford to support a divisive force while trying to reunify.

By 1875, resentment flared up once again against Van Lew. Even though she had two more years left in her appointment, papers proposed replacing her. Republican *Inter Ocean* paper from Illinois explained that an effort to reorganize and strengthen the Republican party meant that Judge Mortan would be a more suitable candidate for Postmaster than Van Lew.<sup>38</sup> *Galveston Daily News* from Texas concurred. Two years before her time for reappointment, the North and South already spread rumors about her successor. The Republican party should have supported African American rights and by extension Van Lew. Instead, they turned their backs on her and discussed cutting off her radical political influence by taking her position away.

---

35. “News of the Day,” *Daily Cleveland Herald* [Cleveland, OH], 28 May 1870.

36. “This Evening’s Dispatches,” *Daily Evening Bulletin* [San Francisco, CA], 13 March 1872. “Latest Dispatches,” *Daily Arkansas Gazette* [Little Rock, AR], 14 March 1872. “MISS VAN LEW, of the Richmond, Va. Post Office, is a Tartar,” *Daily Arkansas Gazette* [Little Rock, AR], 8 May 1877.

37. “Local and Other Items,” *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* [Bangor, ME], 17 March 1873.

38. “Washington,” *Inter Ocean* [Chicago, IL], 15 November 1875.

In 1887, Van Lew's time for reelection rolled around again. This time, papers gunned for her removal and used arguments based on her politics. Missouri, a former slave state, admitted in a paper entitled *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* that while Van Lew possessed high amounts of integrity there was "much fault in her politics."<sup>39</sup> A petition in Richmond, printed in Philadelphia and Maine newspapers begged for Van Lew's removal from office as she was on a "satanic crusade."<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, a paper from New Hampshire explained that Richmonders disliked Van Lew because "she publicly insulted Richmond's aristocracy by asserting her independence to the extent of speaking out her political opinions without fear."<sup>41</sup> The resentment against Van Lew was rooted so deeply in the hearts of Richmonders that they went to Washington to petition the President for her removal.<sup>42</sup> It is not surprising that the former capital of the Confederacy and other Confederate states opposed Van Lew so vehemently. Their interests and politics ran directly opposite of Van Lew, so they focused on her adversarial politics, not her qualifications. The South sought to soil Van Lew's reputation through papers, petitions, and even trips to the White House. Van Lew's politics also ran contrary to the North because they desired to reconcile the country. This did not mesh well with Van Lew's unadjusted, radical politics relating to African American rights especially.

Only Northern citizens who still admired Van Lew's service and commitment to the country continued to support her. *The Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* defended Van Lew against Southern slander exclaiming that her "removal is demanded upon the simple ground that she is a loyal woman!"<sup>43</sup> *The Newark Advocate* reported that people in Ohio hoped that Van Lew would maintain to her position, and predicted that she would keep her appointment.<sup>44</sup> *The Daily Arkansas Gazette* begrudgingly disclosed that people from Michigan also hoped that Van Lew would retain her position.<sup>45</sup> These papers avoided mentioning Van Lew's political leanings, and instead focused on her service to the nation as a Postmaster, and former spy. While she had remained loyal to the nation, these

---

39. "Pour Les Dames," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* [St. Louis, MO], 8 July 1877.

40. "The People Who Want to Be 'Conciliated'," *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* [Bangor, ME], 7 April 1877.

41. "Editorial Notes," *Independent Statesman* [Concord, NH], 29 March 1877.

42. "Our Bonds Abroad," *North American* [Philadelphia, PA], 24 April 1877.

43. "We Are Very, Very 10th to Call Attention to These Southern Prejudices Against Northern People," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* [Milwaukee, WI], 11 April 1877.

44. "Miss Van Lew Keeps Her Grip," *Newark Advocate* [Newark, OH], 6 April 1877.

45. "Washington," *Daily Arkansas Gazette* [Little Rock, AR], 17 April 1877.

papers would not go so far as to support Van Lew's political leanings. Unfortunately for Van Lew, her politics were too contradictory to the nation at this time, and she lost her position as Postmaster. *The Boston Daily Advertiser* watched sadly as Van Lew left her position with "forced grace."<sup>46</sup>

Since Van Lew no longer occupied a political position in the government, papers ceased to mention her name and she began to fade into obscurity. In 1881 *The St. Louis Globe-Democrat* smugly commented that calls for Van Lew to return to her Postmaster appointment halted,<sup>47</sup> eliminating the threat of her political influence. In 1883 Van Lew found herself in financial turmoil again. She attempted to apply for a position as a librarian at Congress but they denied her the position,<sup>48</sup> likely due to her political stance. In desperation, she turned to her old friend Ulysses Grant, who scrounged up a lowly clerk job for her. *The St. Louis Globe-Democrat* made sure to point out that Van Lew only received the position through Grant's influence.<sup>49</sup> The only way that Van Lew could obtain a job was through patronage as her reputation was so thoroughly disfigured because of her politics. After harassment from multiple papers,<sup>50</sup> in 1887 Van Lew was removed from her office as she became old<sup>51</sup> and a "troublesome relic of the war."<sup>52</sup>

A sprinkling of Northern papers protested Van Lew's removal from her clerkship as it represented Southern revenge.<sup>53</sup> Another in Maine angrily indicated that the government refused to pay Van Lew, a loyal Union subject, while they simultaneously subsidized a man who helped the secession of Southern states advance.<sup>54</sup> The government declined to support abolitionists like Van Lew, yet supported former Confederates because they longed for a unified nation.

46. "Multiple News Items," *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 4 July 1877.

47. "Each Side in Earnest," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* [St. Louis, MO], 26 March 1881.

48. "Washington Notes," *News and Observer* [Raleigh, NC], 13 May 1882.

49. "National Capital," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* [St. Louis, MO], 9 July 1883.

50. "A Miss Van Lew, of Richmond, Has Been Made an Issue by Certain of the Republican Papers of the North," *News and Observer* [Raleigh, NC], 14 July 1887. Odelia Blinn, "Miss Van Lew," *Daily Inter Ocean* [Chicago, IL], 9 July 1887.

51. "Union soldiers who were in Libby Prison during the war remember with gratitude the service rendered them by Miss Van Lew, a woman of wealth and position," *Morning Oregonian* [Portland, OR], 16 July 1887.

52. "Battle Stories of the Civil War," *Los Angeles Daily Times*, 5 September 1911.

53. "How Is This, Mr. Vilas?" *Daily Inter Ocean* [Chicago, IL], 1 July 1887.

54. "The death of Mr. Hunter calls attention to a peculiar inconsistency of the Administration, and it is an inconsistency which perhaps is not without significance, says a Washington dispatch," *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* [Bangor, ME], 22 July 1887.

Van Lew's ruinous reputation made the last few years of her life extremely difficult. Jobless, Van Lew returned to her stately house on Church Hill in Richmond. Still grappling with financial difficulties, Van Lew attempted to sell her family's home, however, her neighbors hated her so much that she could not obtain a fair mortgage.<sup>55</sup> Parents encouraged their children to avoid her, and soon, nicknames such as hag, crone, and witch surfaced.<sup>56</sup> Locals viewed Van Lew as a traitor and ostracized her. Van Lew lamented that "I live here in the most perfect isolation. No one will walk with [me] on the street, no one will go with [me] anywhere."<sup>57</sup> Even her family's most intimate friends did not visit her for 35 years.<sup>58</sup> Alone, in 1900, Van Lew quietly passed away. Only one local newspaper gave her an obituary, *The African American Richmond Planet*. Only the freedmen that she fought so hard for cared enough to give Van Lew an obituary. Even the North, for a time, forgot her. After her death, Van Lew held a terrible reputation. People reported seeing her ghost around Richmond, and as a result, the government bought and demolished the Van Lew home in 1911. Van Lew's inability to adjust her radical political ideologies after the war and her lingering career as a spy caused her to die alone and disgraced.

## Belle Boyd's Conspicuous Career and Renowned Reputation

Unlike Van Lew, the nation celebrated Belle Boyd after the Civil War. Boyd's spy career during the war is important since the North and South knew about Boyd's activities. After the war, Belle's national reputation was already well-established. Knowing about her war reputation is crucial to understand the substantial changes it underwent after the war. Boyd resided in the same state as Van Lew, in Martinsburg, north of Richmond. Belle Boyd was born in 1844 and at 18 she became involved in spying by coincidence. When Boyd started spying, the Union controlled Martinsburg. According to Boyd, a band of Union spies came to her house to investigate a rumor that she adorned her room with Confederate flags. The soldiers attempted to hang a Union flag outside of her house and cursed Boyd's mother when she refused to let them. Enraged, Boyd

---

55. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 237.

56. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, 246.

57. Beymer, "Famous Scouts and Spies of the Civil War."

58. Alexander, J. Park, "A Famous Woman." *The Beacon Journal* (Akron).

shot and killed the perpetrator.<sup>59</sup> Although the soldier died from the wounds Boyd inflicted, Northern generals acquitted her. However, this incident resulted in soldiers being posted outside of her house. Boyd used this opportunity to become acquainted with the soldiers to obtain information to forward to Confederate forces. Boyd attained information from soldiers and other ladies whom she chatted with. She then promptly wrote it down and sent it to General Jackson through a trusted “colored servant.”

Unfortunately, Boyd did not possess the characteristic of being secretive. Not even a month after the North acquitted her, Union forces intercepted a note Boyd wrote. Boyd used her own handwriting and signed the note. Luckily for her, Union generals let her off with only a warning.<sup>60</sup> This prompted her parents to move her further south to live at her aunt’s hotel. While she stayed with her aunt, Boyd became a courier for the Confederacy smuggling weapons and medicine.<sup>61</sup> During the time that Boyd resided with her aunt, Union forces captured her aunt’s hotel and used it as a headquarters. Soon after, Boyd met Union Captain Keily. Although Captain Keily knew that Boyd spied for the Confederacy, he was enamored and attempted to court her. Boyd mined this relationship to gain knowledge. One day while they spent time together, Keily let it slip that Union forces were about to hold a tactical meeting downstairs. Boyd knew the layout of the hotel well. She snuck upstairs, pressed her ear to a hole in the floor and heard everything the Union soldiers discussed. Afterward, Boyd mounted a horse and relayed the intelligence to Jackson herself.<sup>62</sup> From then on, Boyd helped the Confederacy by passing information to them using fake passes.

By 1862, both the North and the South knew about Boyd’s spying activities. A Northern paper in Massachusetts called Boyd “the celebrated spy.”<sup>63</sup> In 1862, a Northern paper in Ohio complained that after they confiscated letters from Boyd, she still passed on all the information through memory, causing the North to lose a battle.<sup>64</sup> Although she was young and quite conspicuous, Boyd still presented a danger to the Union. The North reported Boyd’s activities and

---

59. Belle Boyd, 1844–1900, *Memoir of Belle Boyd, in Belle Boyd in Camp and in Prison* (New York: Blelock & Co., 1865), 464.

60. Ruth Scarborough, *Belle Boyd, Siren of the South* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 21.

61. Scarborough, *Belle Boyd, Siren of the South*, 27.

62. Scarborough, *Belle Boyd, Siren of the South*, 39.

63. “General Pope’s Movements,” *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* [Lowell, MA], 1 August 1862.

64. H. S. S., “Banks’ Retreat,” *Daily Cleveland Herald* [Cleveland, OH], 31 May 1862.

whereabouts to keep tabs on her. The North understandably detested her for her loyalty to the Confederacy, which earned her a deplorable reputation.

As time went on, Boyd became too confident. Boyd often flirted with and used men to gain information. She thought she did the same thing to a young soldier who claimed to be loyal to the Confederacy, when he was, in fact, a Union spy. Boyd entrusted him with a letter to give to General Jackson. Instead of the letter reaching its intended reader, the young soldier used it as evidence of Boyd's involvement in spying. The Union threw Boyd into Washington Capitol prison in 1862. Northern papers such as *The North American*, *The United States Gazette* from Philadelphia, and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* from New York greeted this news with enthusiasm and celebrated her arrest.<sup>65</sup> A paper in Ohio jubilantly broadcasted the capture of the woman who "[betrayed] our forces" and proceeded to harshly degrade her. The paper denounced descriptions of Boyd as beautiful or educated and replaced them with claims that she was devoid of any brilliant qualities. In fact, they alleged that she was a courier and only fit for an insane asylum. The Union happily locked away this large political threat and thorn in their side.

The Union's joy that resulted from Boyd's capture was short-lived. In 1862, the North released Boyd from custody in a prisoner exchange. Union papers such as *The Boston Daily Advertiser*, *The North American*, and *The United States Gazette*, mournfully announced the news in their papers.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, the South rejoiced. North Carolina condemned the "dirty Yankees" treatment of her<sup>67</sup> but remained happy to have her back, safe and sound. Boyd's reputation flourished in the South as she continued to demonstrate her loyalty.

In 1863 Boyd's name was found again in the papers while she stayed in Tennessee. North Carolina paper *The Fayetteville Observer* smugly commented that throngs of admirers gathered outside of Boyd's window to see her after her release from prison.<sup>68</sup> Northern paper *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* tried to spin the story in a negative light commenting on Boyd's lackluster response to the crowd.<sup>69</sup> Upon Boyd's release, the North forbid Boyd from

---

65. Special Correspondence of the N. Amer. & U. S. Gaz, "By Magnetic Telegraph," *North American and United States Gazette* [Philadelphia, PA], 4 August 1862.

66. "By Telegraph," *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 30 August 1862. "By Magnetic Telegraph," *North American and United States Gazette* [Philadelphia, PA], 30 August 1862.

67. "Multiple News Items," *Weekly Raleigh Register* [Raleigh, NC], 10 September 1862.

68. "Multiple News Items," *Fayetteville Observer* [Fayetteville, NC], 2 March 1863.

69. "Epitome of the Week," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* [New York, NY], 14 March 1863.

traveling north of Richmond. Boyd broke this requirement when she traveled to Martinsburg and allegedly passed information to the Confederacy.<sup>70</sup> Northern papers criticized Boyd when the Union threw her back into Old Capitol Prison.<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, the South tried to portray the story positively. South Carolinian paper *The Camden Confederate* cheerfully reported that Boyd drove her jailors mad by singing Confederate songs throughout the night.<sup>72</sup> These newspaper reports demonstrate how the North and the South used papers to control public opinion concerning Boyd. The North attempted to degrade her and present her in the worst possible light, while the South used Boyd as a symbol of hope and faith in the Confederate cause. Her reputation directly reflected the political chasm between the North and South.

Boyd only resided in prison for a short time. Multiple Northern newspapers announced that the Union had sent Boyd to the South where she was to remain for the duration of the war.<sup>73</sup> Since Boyd could not effectively spy for the Confederacy contained in the South, she decided to travel to Europe. There, she hoped to persuade Britain to support the South in the war. Southern papers caught wind of the news and commented that Boyd's "many admirers will no doubt regret to hear that the South will soon be deprived of the presence of one of the most patriotic and heroic women."<sup>74</sup> The South not only valued Boyd for her information but also for the symbol of rebellion that she represented.

Unfortunately for Boyd, Northern interest conflicted with her plans to travel to Europe. The North refused to risk Boyd continuing her work as an agent for the Confederacy in Europe. As a result, Union soldiers intercepted Boyd on the *Greyhound*.<sup>75</sup> The North could not keep Boyd in custody, and soon, they released her.<sup>76</sup> As a result, Boyd seized the opportunity to escape to Canada.<sup>77</sup> Northern papers continued to report Boyd's whereabouts in Canada,

---

70. "Epitome of the Week," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* [New York, NY], 12 September 1863.

71. "Latest News," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* [Milwaukee, WI], 31 August 1863. "Telegraphic," *Daily Cleveland Herald* [Cleveland, OH], 29 August 1863.

72. "Multiple News Items," *Camden Confederate* [Camden, SC], 6 November 1863.

73. "By Telegraph," *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 4 December 1863. "From Fort Monroe," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* [Milwaukee, WI], 4 December 1863.

74. "Midnight Despatches," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* [Milwaukee, WI], 9 February 1864.

75. "Telegraphic to the Whig & Courier," *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* [Bangor, ME], 14 May 1864.

76. "A young man named George W. Nichols has been swindling the people in Franklin county in a novel way," *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* [Lowell, MA], 3 June 1864.

77. "Epitome of the Week," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* [New York, NY], 18 June 1864.



in order to keep tabs on the notorious spy and to make sure that she did not return to the United States. Just as the North feared, Boyd made her way to England in 1864, and *The Daily Richmond Examiner* proudly reported that Boyd was “making a sensation.”<sup>78</sup> Since Boyd’s name was constantly splashed on both Southern and Northern newspapers, as time went on, she became sensational. She led an exciting life, and people wanted to follow it. Northern newspapers tried to curtail this development by reporting in newspapers that she had “no beauty” and was “a sorry picture of a newspaper heroine.”<sup>79</sup> Despite the North’s efforts, Boyd did not fall from fame.

## Belle Boyd’s Rise to Fame

Interestingly, when Boyd reached England, the nature of her reputation changed. Both the North and the South began to report on the events of her life, rather than how she affected the Civil War. The South continued to print papers about Boyd because of her status as a beloved heroine. Northern papers previously published about Boyd because she was a spy and a hazard. Presently, their articles still held the remnants of their hatred toward Boyd because of the political threat that she represented. However, now these reports centered on occurrences that were unrelated to her status as a spy. As time went on, their reports became nearly identical to Southern newspapers. For example, near the end of 1864, both Northern and Southern papers noted that Boyd got married in England to Samuel G. Hardinge.<sup>80</sup> A Southern newspaper, *The Daily South Carolinian* even called her marriage a “first class romance.”<sup>81</sup>

Boyd remained married to Hardinge for only a short time. He passed away soon after they got married, and left Boyd alone and pregnant without a way to support her child. As a result, Boyd enlisted the help of George Augustus Sala to publish her memoir.<sup>82</sup> He agreed, and Northern papers followed Boyd’s career as an author, announcing that her memoir would be published in England.<sup>83</sup>

---

78. “Jenny Lind’s husband has become a London editor,” *Daily Richmond Examiner* [Richmond, VA], 27 August 1864.

79. “Multiple News Items,” *New Haven Daily Palladium* [New Haven, CT], 18 May 1864.

80. “In General,” *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 8 September 1864.

81. “Northern News,” *Daily South Carolinian* [Columbia, SC], 25 September 1864.

82. Michael DeMarco, “Belle Boyd (1844–1900),” Lewis A. Armistead, (1817–1863).

83. “The adventures of Miss Belle Boyd with the Confederato army will soon be published in England,” *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* [Milwaukee, WI], 26 November 1864.

Soon after, *The Boston Daily Advertiser*<sup>84</sup> announced that the United States had published Boyd's work. The Union received Boyd's book poorly as they were still prejudiced against her even though she no longer a spied for the Confederacy. *The North American and United State Gazette* from Philadelphia boldly claimed that "a greater mass of folly, falsehood, conceit, and malice is rarely put between two covers."<sup>85</sup> Clearly, bias against Boyd persisted even after the last shot of the war was fired, which *The North American and United States Gazette*, *The Congregationalist*,<sup>86</sup> and *The Boston Daily Advertiser*,<sup>87</sup> among others, all promulgated. Boyd possessed a negative reputation immediately after the war because the North had not yet forgotten the services she offered to the Confederacy during the war. Furthermore, directly after the war, the North basked in their success, unable to see the need to reconcile with the South and accept former Confederates back into their ranks.

Perhaps the North began to pity Boyd when she lost her husband and became destitute.<sup>88</sup> When Boyd announced that she was going to try her hand at acting in England, Northern papers actually responded positively. They commented that Boyd attracted "universal sympathy" and that "her appearance on stage will no doubt prove a distinguished success."<sup>89</sup> From then on, the North reported on Boyd quite objectively, and she still held on to her esteemed status in the South. When Boyd began acting, Southern newspaper *The Natchez Daily Courier* quickly reported that Boyd was a raging success, and "brought the house down in thunders of applause."<sup>90</sup> Boyd's reputation shifted to include acting rather than spying and thus reports were devoid of slander or political discussions.

The next year in 1867, Boyd benefited from the benevolent policies of Andrew Johnson and consequently came back to the United States.<sup>91</sup> When Boyd returned to America, she continued to pursue her acting career. She traveled across the

---

84. "In General," *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 21 June 1865.

85. "Literary Notices," *North American and United States Gazette* [Philadelphia, PA], 20 July 1865.

86. "Literature and Art," *Congregationalist* [Boston, MA], 28 July 1865.

87. "In General," *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 12 September 1865.

88. "In General," *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 21 February 1865.

89. "In General," *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 12 September 1865.

90. "Telegraphic," *Natchez Daily Courier* [Natchez, MS], 16 August 1866.

91. Newburyport Herald, "'Belle Boyd,' the notorious rebel spy during the war, passed through town on Friday evening, over the Eastern Road, on her way from St. John to Boston," *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* [Lowell, MA], 23 February 1867.

United States acting in theatres in both the east and the west.<sup>92</sup> Boyd received mixed reviews, Wisconsin called her both a “rising star”<sup>93</sup> and a “failure,”<sup>94</sup> while Wyoming (also in the North) lauded her for her success in St. Louis.<sup>95</sup> Predictably, Southern paper *The Daily Arkansas Gazette* reported Boyd’s success.<sup>96</sup> It is evident from these papers that Boyd had become a sensation. People followed her life as if she were a celebrity in a tabloid. Since Boyd avoided political affiliations and espousing her former hatred of the Union, her reputation soared. Her improved reputation likely stemmed from the fact that the nation had begun the process of reconciliation under Andrew Johnson. The North gradually began to forgive individuals like Boyd who aided the Confederacy during the war.

Since Boyd made the transition from a controversial political figure to a sensational celebrity, when she dipped her toe into political waters she remained surprisingly unscathed. Tired of acting, in 1868 Boyd decided to make a living touring the country and telling stories of her wartime spy career.<sup>97</sup> Northern papers met this development with enthusiasm. The Northern Paper *The Daily National Intelligencer* noted that “Belle is a lady with talents of a high order, and she has beforehand appeared on the “tragic boards” with some success, it is but fair to suppose that the entertainment offered will be satisfactory to all those who attend.”<sup>98</sup> Boyd traveled all over the nation visiting places such as Cincinnati,<sup>99</sup> Galveston,<sup>100</sup> and Sacramento<sup>101</sup> lecturing on her wartime experience. Boyd traveled to 28 states giving her lectures,<sup>102</sup> receiving mostly positive reviews. *The Milwaukee Sentinel* reported that Boyd was “one of the best before the public.”<sup>103</sup> Another newspaper from Wisconsin stated that Boyd “[entertained] hundreds of persons daily with incidents of the exciting events

---

92. “City Items,” *Evening Republican* [Little Rock, AR], 25 July 1867.

93. “Dramatic,” *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* [Milwaukee, WI], 13 September 1867.

94. “Personal Items,” *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* [Milwaukee, WI], 20 September 1867.

95. “Items,” *Cheyenne Leader* [Cheyenne, WY], 26 October 1867.

96. “It is rumored that Mrs. Lincoln is going to write a book, assisted by Miss. Olive Logan, who is now in Chicago,” *Daily Arkansas Gazette* [Little Rock, AR], 13 November 1867.

97. “In General,” *New Hampshire Statesman* [Concord, NH], 20 March 1868.

98. “City News,” *Daily National Intelligencer* [Washington, DC], 5 March 1868.

99. “News of the Day,” *Daily Cleveland Herald* [Cleveland, OH], 25 November 1868.

100. “In General,” *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 19 December 1868.

101. “Personal and General,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* [New York, NY], 16 October 1869.

102. “Rebel Spy on Deck,” *Boston Daily Advertiser* [Boston, MA], 23 August 1895.

103. “Amusements,” *Milwaukee Sentinel* [Milwaukee, WI], 15 March 1886.

in her life during the war,”<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, in the South, North Carolina paper *News and Observer* noted, “Belle Boyd’s lecture here last night has been highly spoken of. A good size crowd was present, and all went away greatly pleased.”<sup>105</sup> Boyd received some negative reviews from both the North and the South, but in general, she received positive reviews across the board, and the halls she lectured in were typically full.<sup>106</sup> Even when Boyd associated herself with the Civil War again, she maintained a positive reputation in both the North and the South. She achieved this by revising her own political beliefs to be neutral instead of extreme. Furthermore, the North aspired to reconcile with the South, which caused acceptance of former Confederates like Boyd back into society.

While the nation closely followed Boyd’s career, papers simultaneously tracked her personal life. *The Daily News and Herald* in Georgia reported her divorce<sup>107</sup> along with papers in Massachusetts,<sup>108</sup> Maine,<sup>109</sup> and California,<sup>110</sup> among others. Papers also commented on another one of her marriages,<sup>111</sup> the birth of a child,<sup>112</sup> her brief retirement in St. Louis,<sup>113</sup> and her separation from her last husband, Hammond,<sup>114</sup> among other events in her life. Boyd became famous for political reasons when she spied for the Confederacy, but she continued to be a celebrity after the war in both the North and the South because she

---

104. “‘The Mikado’ Tonight,” *Milwaukee Daily Journal* [Milwaukee, WI], 18 March 1886.

105. “Belle Boyd at Wilson,” *News and Observer* [Raleigh, NC], 2 September 1894.

106. “Scalpers Being Scalped,” *Macon Telegraph* [Macon, GA], 2 October 1895.

107. “By Telegraph,” *Daily News and Herald* [Savannah, GA], 18 January 1868.

108. “The action of the British authorities in arresting George Francis Train and other supposed terrible Fenians from America, furnished another illustration, entirely unnecessary, of the tendency John Bull has to write himself down an ass,” *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* [Lowell, MA], 21 January 1868.

109. “Multiple News Items,” *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* [Bangor, ME], 23 January 1868.

110. “Details of Eastern News,” *Daily Evening Bulletin* [San Francisco, CA], 10 February 1868.

111. “All Sorts of Items,” *Daily Evening Bulletin* [San Francisco, CA], 16 June 1869.

112. “The Mormons are said to be growing hostile towards the Gentiles, and to have formed a camp of fifteen thousand men, and the United States Government is said to have organized movement of military toward Utah in consequence,” *Georgia Weekly Telegraph and Georgia Journal & Messenger* [Macon, GA], 14 December 1869.

113. “Belle Boyd, who during the civil war gained reputation as a Union spy, is living a retired and quiet life in St. Louis,” *Daily Evening Bulletin* [San Francisco, CA], 23 February 1876.

114. “Sparks from Dallas,” *Galveston Daily News* [Houston, TX], 5 August 1884.

detached herself from politics and became politically neutral. The nation ate up news items that occurred in her life on a month-by-month basis throughout her lifetime. Yet, Boyd was not a sweetheart, she was sensational. Boyd became so popular, in fact, that impostors plagued her throughout her life.<sup>115</sup> Newspapers often reported false deaths when one of Boyd's impersonators passed away.<sup>116</sup> However, the reports of her death became real when she toured the country delivering her lectures. Papers mourned Boyd's unexpected death from a heart attack when she was only fifty years old, in Wisconsin.<sup>117</sup>

## Fundamental Divisions and Resulting Reputations

Why the discrepancy between Belle Boyd and Elizabeth Van Lew? Peering into the state of the nation directly after the Civil War sheds an immense amount of light on the subject. Immediately after the war, the North and the South were still fundamentally divided. The North attempted to do create a united nation and to establish rights for freedmen. In 1866 when Congress reconvened, they began Radical Reconstruction which would include "black suffrage, a full declaration of citizenship for the freedmen, temporary disenfranchisement for ex-confederates, and a short-term military occupation of the South."<sup>118</sup> Even though initially the South seemed ready and willing to accept anything the North proposed,<sup>119</sup> the South still held radically different views than the North. First off, the South was reeling from the economic consequences that the Civil War imposed. Southerners lamented that they saw no future for blacks as free laborers.<sup>120</sup> Their profitable plantations would be difficult to restore to their former glory without slaves.

Economic consequences were not the only difference between the North and the South. The South viewed themselves as the victims, calling themselves

---

115. "Who wouldn't be a woman in Atlanta, Georgia?" *Cleveland Daily Herald* [Cleveland, OH], 14 November 1874.

116. "Belle Boyd, the Confederate spy, who died recently at Plymouth, Eng., is living at Corsicana, Texas, in easy circumstances," *News and Observer* [Raleigh, NC], 26 March 1882.

117. DeMarco, "Belle Boyd (1844–1900)."

118. David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 47.

119. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 44.

120. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 36.

“slaves of the Yankees.”<sup>121</sup> As a result, the South combatted Northern goals which included Radical Reconstruction, and black rights.<sup>122</sup> Southerners asked those who supported these aims if they either “loved the negro or hated the white man of the south?”<sup>123</sup> Even though the war ended, and the South lost, they were unprepared to accept their status or the status of freed African Americans. Their bubbling resentment resulted in mob violence against Unionists.<sup>124</sup> They viewed Radical Reconstruction as an imposed regime. Instead, Southerners favored their immediate admittance back into the Union without any changes of policy or behavior.<sup>125</sup> They wanted the easy way out.

In light of these circumstances, the Radical Reconstruction that the North hoped would be a quick solution after the war, fell flat. This created a divided North. Some, like Republican Senator Henry Wilson, preached a policy of kindness and urged Northerners to forget the feelings of the war that pitted the North against the South.<sup>126</sup> Others hadn’t quite bought into this idea, and instead proclaimed that “The murderers must answer to the suffering race.”<sup>127</sup> Getting off easy, as the Southerners hoped, seemed to be an option that the North could not fully embrace. Nonetheless, since the North accepted that they bore the burden of “forgetting and forgiving”<sup>128</sup> the South, the North began to implement policies that would mend the rift between them. President Grant readmitted most of the Confederate states into the Union.<sup>129</sup> The country began to remember the Civil War through the valor of soldiers on both sides and through generals.<sup>130</sup> It was better that the war was remembered as “Blue and Gray” rather than “Black and White.”<sup>131</sup> Soon, Southern policies once again found a place in the government, when in 1872 Democrats won several Congressional elections.<sup>132</sup>

---

121. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 40.

122. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 42.

123. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 48.

124. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 49.

125. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 100.

126. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 50.

127. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 51.

128. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 53.

129. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 107.

130. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 103.

131. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 313.

132. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 130.

The North obtained some small victories. Congress passed the fifteenth amendment in 1869, however, it allowed for the South to treat Blacks poorly. The amendment allowed qualification tests and poll taxes to continue to exist. Many African Americans could not pass these tests or pay the tax, restricting their right to vote.<sup>133</sup> Additionally, many Northerners viewed the ratification of the fifteenth amendment as the end of Reconstruction. By 1877, many thought that Reconstruction had achieved its purpose.<sup>134</sup> Now, the North focused on reconciling the nation rather than achieving equality and rights for blacks. This meant the North turned a blind eye toward several atrocities that occurred in the South. Discrimination ran rampant, and the South laid Jim Crow laws in place to segregate blacks from white society.<sup>135</sup> Poll taxes, qualification tests, and black codes<sup>136</sup> that the South established all limited black voting. Additionally, the Ku Klux Klan led mob violence against blacks.<sup>137</sup> Finally, to solve their economic problems, the South implemented sharecropping, which “employed” blacks at extremely low wages, resulting in large amounts of debt that kept African Americans tied to the land, even though they were technically free.<sup>138</sup> Increasingly, African Americans were sacrificed on the altar of reunion.<sup>139</sup>

These conditions set the stage as to why Elizabeth Van Lew became so widely hated, and how Belle Boyd slipped by, unscathed. Both of these women resided in the South, and thus Southern opinions and values reigned king. The South hated Van Lew because of her politics. She identified herself as an abolitionist and wanted equality for blacks. The South could not allow these types of political ideas to flourish. The South had established and successfully admitted a new method of discrimination against African Americans into law. They would bury any of the threats that stood in their path. As a result, the South sought to tear down individuals such as Van Lew. They were so effective at this, in fact, that the harmful laws towards African Americans that they had set in place would not be abolished until 1964 in the Civil Rights Act. Furthermore, while the

---

133. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 107.

134. Joshua Horwitz, and Casey Anderson, “The Civil War and Reconstruction,” In *Guns, Democracy, and the Insurrectionist Idea* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 124.

135. Leon F. Litwack, “Jim Crow Blues,” *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 2 (2004): 7–58, 8.

136. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 61.

137. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 111.

138. Martin A. Garrett and Zhenhui Xu, “The Efficiency of Sharecropping: Evidence from the Postbellum South,” *Southern Economic Journal* 69, no. 3 (2003): 578–95.

139. Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 139.

North may have been reconciling, forgiving and forgetting, the South was not. They felt as though they were the victims. To them, Van Lew was a traitor. One of their own who had turned against them. They would not so easily forget the damage that she inflicted upon them. Van Lew stuck to her beliefs even in the face of opposition. She expected the nation follow her in her quest for the equality of blacks after the war. The reality of the situation meant that this endeavor would take much longer than her lifetime, and her inability to adapt to these circumstances led to her declining reputation.

However, this did not explain why Van Lew faced opposition in the North as well. Her politics undoubtedly aligned with the North better than the South. Yet, Van Lew's extreme abolitionist politics were too much even for the North while they attempted to mend the tear between the two halves of the nation. Her abolitionist ideas were not harmonious with the nation that the North was constructing. The North and South additionally disliked Van Lew because of her poor management of her employees as Postmaster. Although, this may have been a cover for their true hatred of her politics. Furthermore, Van Lew adamantly supported women's rights, which, at this time, was not widely accepted within society contributing further to the North's distaste for her.

Boyd, meanwhile, adapted to circumstances very well. During the war, Boyd was irrevocably dedicated to the South. She even claimed that she would rather die than be under the Union.<sup>140</sup> However, her tune quickly changed after the war ended. Even though Boyd's lectures consisted of talking about her experience in the Civil War, *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* reported that Boyd "does not enter into sectional issues or politics."<sup>141</sup> This made her lectures friendly to both the North and the South. Additionally, she often ended her lectures with the phrase, "One God, One Flag, One People Forever."<sup>142</sup> This political sentiment exactly reflected Northern goals of reconciling the nation. It also echoed Southern beliefs as when Boyd shouted this phrase to a clapping audience, she spoke of white unity—not unity between white people and black people. Thus, the entire nation easily accepted her message.

Boyd merely dipped her toe into political waters, unlike Van Lew who dove straight in without testing the waters. Besides her lectures, which were largely devoid of politics, Boyd remained detached from politics. As a result, although

---

140. Scarborough, *Belle Boyd, Siren of the South*, 74.

141. "Nobody can object to the weather which has been dealt out to September thus far," *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier* [Bangor, ME], 9 September 1892: n.p.

142. Scarborough, *Belle Boyd, Siren of the South*, 181.



her fame may have originated from being a Confederate spy and political pawn, the nature of her fame changed over time. Boyd became reconciliatory. She attempted to survive in a nation with charged political feelings by becoming neutral. The papers had already developed the habit of reporting on Boyd during the war, so it was effortless to continue to do so after the war. Except now, the content of the papers reflected that of a sensational celebrity rather than a controversial political figure. Also, unlike Van Lew, Boyd did not outwardly support women's rights. Rather, she personified what a woman should be during this time—uninvolved in politics and not seeking more power than society allocated to her. Boyd's politics and outward actions resonated well with the status of the nation, and her reputation improved after the war.

Winners, losers, heroes, and villains are common outcomes of wars. At the conclusion of any war, the rules seem simple: the victors punish the defeated. Easier said than done. On paper, the South lost the Civil War. However, Northern winners bowed to Southern demands and appeased them in order to hold a fragmented nation together. The South did not endure the consequences of the war, but African Americans and radical abolitionists did. African Americans did not gain their equal rights or complete enfranchisement. The nation discarded abolitionists' political agenda for the benefit of the South because their politics did not coincide with the nation's goal of reunion. The losers—not the winners—dictated the results of the Civil War. Elizabeth Van Lew got caught in the crosshairs, resulting in her ruinous reputation. Meanwhile, Belle Boyd adapted to the situation to gain her radiant reputation.

---

*Abby Ellsworth is a senior studying at Brigham Young University and is graduating in April 2019 with a Bachelor of Arts in history. Abby knew that she wanted to be a historian after she took 6th-grade United States history. Since then, Abby has been interested in the complex outcome of the Civil War, especially for spies. She hopes to continue researching the reputation of spies as well as other individuals who attained unexpected reputations in the aftermath of the war. Originally from Tucson, Arizona, Abby loves photography, reading, board games, baking, traveling, and spending time with her family.*