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Mary Bowser: Secret Spy

Mary Bowser has been described as an enigma. Little is known about her personal life, but historians do know that she went undercover on one of the most dangerous missions in American history. She posed as a house slave for none other than Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy. Confederate military leaders and strategists never learned her identity, and she transmitted crucial information that helped to turn the tide of the Civil War.

Mary Bowser was baptized in St. John’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on May 17, 1846. This was unusual because this was a white church. Mary Bowser was likely a slave belonging to Eliza Baker and John Van Lew. The Van Lews had a daughter, Elizabeth Van Lew, who manumitted many slaves and took special interest in Mary Bowser. Noting her intelligence, Elizabeth Van Lew sent her to the Quaker School for Negroes in Philadelphia.

Mary Bowser used the alias Ellen Bond to secure her position. A friend of Elizabeth Van Lew took “Ellen Bond” to meet Varina Davis, the wife of Jefferson Davis. Since she was an able servant, the Davis household hired her full time. Servants of that day were expected to look and act invisible, so Bowser was able to eavesdrop on plenty of top-secret conversations without anyone ever taking notice of her. No one expected a slave or a servant to be able to read and write, so members of the household left war documents in plain sight for Bowser to read and memorize. Eventually Jefferson Davis suspected a leak in his house, but Bowser escaped before she was caught. Some say she attempted to burn down the Confederate White House before she fled, but if so, she was unsuccessful.

Little is known about Mary Bowser today because the Van Lew family had to burn many records to prevent other Southerners from learning they were Union sympathizers. It is important to remember Bowser, though, because her courage was emblematic of so many other slaves and servants who put themselves in danger to change the oppressive system into which they were born. Bowser was fortunate to have been educated, and after the Civil War she dedicated herself to education. She became a teacher to former slaves in the city of Richmond and also founded a freedman’s school in Georgia. Her life is a testament to the power of education and commitment to change.