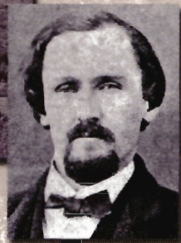
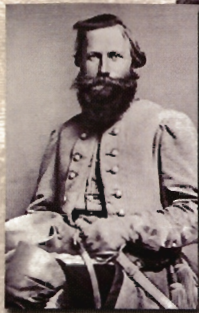


# INTELLIGENCE in the CIVIL WAR





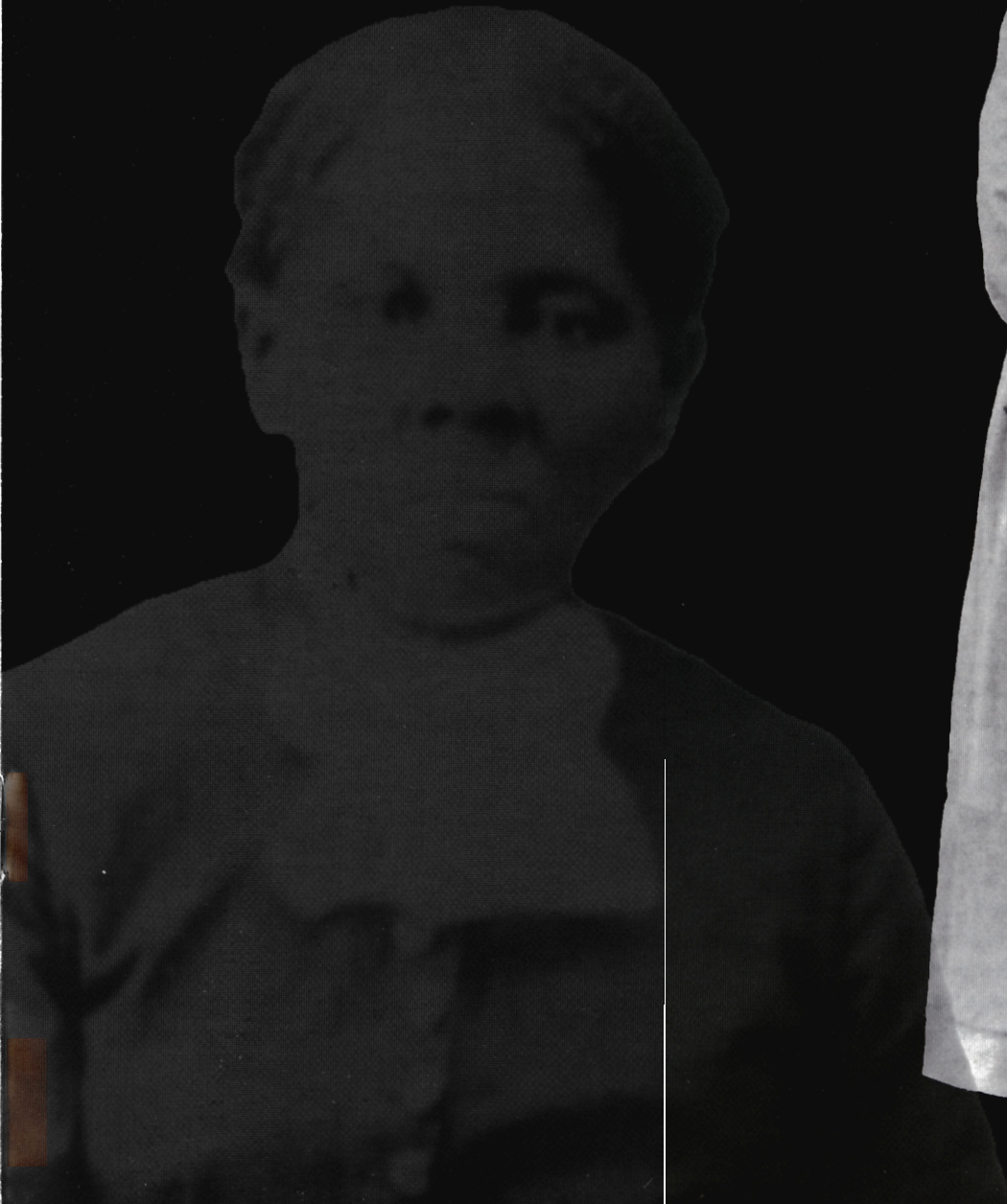
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# *Black Dispatches*



Harriet Ross was born into slavery in Maryland in 1819 or 1820. She was whipped when she was a small child, and, when she was 15 years old, was struck on the head by a scale weight hurled at a slave she was helping escape. The injury produced a life-long suffering from headaches and seizures. When she was 25 years old, she married John Tubman, a free African-American. About four years later, when her master died, she feared that she and her kin would be sold and scattered. So she began to think about escaping. Her husband declined to go with her, as did her brothers.

The courage and skill she used in her escape she would later use again as a spy for the Union.

Harriet Tubman fled to the North on the Underground Railroad, the network of abolitionists who helped slaves make their way to freedom. After freeing herself, she returned to Maryland, became a conductor on the railroad, and brought out members of her family. She made a score of dangerous trips, helping some 300 slaves reach the North. With each trip, she taught herself the ways of covert work behind enemy lines.

In 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Dred Scott, a black man who had moved from a free state to a slave state, had no right to sue for his freedom because African-Americans could not be citizens; the court also ruled that Congress did not have the power to prohibit slavery in the territories. The decision emboldened slaveholders and put Tubman in even more jeopardy. But, in that same year, she slipped into Maryland and conducted her elderly parents to freedom.

Because of fugitive slave laws, escapees could find ultimate freedom only in Canada. Tubman went frequently to the main underground terminal in Canada, St. Catherines, Ontario. There she met John Brown, who told her of his plans for an armed raid on Harpers Ferry. She later said that if she had not been ill at the time, she would have joined in the raid.

Tubman went to war in May 1861, joining a Union force dispatched to her native Maryland, which was a hotbed of Southern sympathizers. There, she knew, her knowledge of the land would be helpful to Union troops. Later, she served in the Union's Fort Monroe in Virginia. But it would be at her

## *The Conductor Becomes a Spy*

next duty post, in South Carolina, that she would become a full-fledged undercover operative.

In the spring of 1862, Tubman sailed from New York City to Beaufort, South Carolina, the operations center for Union forces that held the southeastern coast of South Carolina. She was sent to the region at the suggestion of Massachusetts Governor John Andrew, who believed that "she would be a valuable person to operate within the enemy's lines in procuring information & scouts."

The Union-held area was a magnet for slaves fleeing to freedom. Tubman helped to clothe and feed them while also setting up agent networks and conferring with Union officers, including Colonel James Montgomery. He made her his second-in-command for the night raid up the Combahee River that freed more than 750 plantation slaves.

After the war, Harriet Tubman lived on a small farm in Auburn, New York. Years before, William A. Seward, then an anti-slavery senator from New York—later to be Lincoln's Secretary of State—had sold her the property and arranged for a mortgage. She continued to help ex-slaves and black veterans and supported the crusade for women's suffrage. In 1869, two years after the death of John Tubman, she married Nelson Davis, an ex-slave whom she had met when he was a Union soldier.

Citing her work for the Union Army, especially the Combahee River raid, she petitioned for a pension. A member of Congress who had been a Union general backed her claim, noting "her services in the various capacities of nurse, scout, and spy." But not until 1890, two years after the death of Davis, did she receive a pension of eight dollars a month. By then, she was in poverty, and neighbors were providing her with food. Nine years later, her monthly pension was raised to twenty dollars.

In 1903, she donated the farm to a church group on the condition that the home be maintained as a refuge for "aged and indigent colored people" and that she be allowed to live in the house for the rest of her life. In 1913, the woman known in the Union Army as "the General" died and was buried with military honors.

*Harriet Tubman*





Union officers got so many valuable pieces of intelligence from slaves that the reports were put in a special category: "Black Dispatches." Runaway slaves, many of them conscripted to work on Confederate fortifications, gave the Union Army a continually flowing stream of intelligence. So did slaves who volunteered to be stay-in-place agents.

Tens of thousands of ex-slaves fought and died for the Union in military units. Less known is the work of other African-Americans who risked their lives in secret, gathering intelligence or while entering enemy territory as scouts. Brigadier General Grenville M. Dodge mentioned how he used black scouts during a search for Confederate troops in Tennessee: "Two negroes led our cavalry to them, guiding them around their pickets. No white man had the pluck to do it."

Throughout the official records of the war, there are frequent references to bits of intelligence coming from "contrabands." The term tracks back to a demand for runaway slaves from a Virginia slaveowner who cited the Fugitive Slave Law when he learned that his slaves had fled to Union territory. Responding, Major General Benjamin Butler said that since secession, Virginia had not been under federal law. Butler referred to the slaves as "contraband of war," and the term caught on.

In a typical report: "Three contrabands came in from Fort Johnson yesterday. They were officers' servants, and report, from conversation of the officers there, that north and northwest faces of Fort Sumter are nearly as badly breached as the gorge wall, and that many of our projectiles passed through both walls, and that the fort contains no serviceable guns."

George Scott escaped from a plantation near Yorktown and headed for Fort Monroe, at the mouth of the James River on the tip of the Virginia peninsula. On the way, he noted two large fortifications. To gather more intelligence, Scott joined a Union officer on scouting missions. On one such mission, Scott was the target of a Confederate picket, whose bullet missed Scott's body, but put a hole in his jacket. Another slave worked on the

defenses of Leesburg. He escaped, bringing with him his detailed observations about the deployment of 5,000 Confederate troops. Many other

slaves provided similar information about Confederate plans and maneuvers.

While Allan Pinkerton was serving as Major General George D. McClellan's intelligence chief, the private detective ordered a careful debriefing of runaway slaves, some of whom he personally recruited to go back as agents. One of Pinkerton's black agents was John Scobell of Mississippi, who had been educated and freed by his owner. Scobell used the cover of servant to two other Pinkerton agents, Timothy Webster and Carrie Lawton, when they operated in Richmond. Scobell also posed as a cook and a laborer on his trips south, where he often signed up black couriers for the Union at secret meetings of the Legal League, an underground slave organization.

Another black spy for Pinkerton was W. H. Ringgold, a free man who had been forced to work on a Virginia riverboat that was moving Confederate troops and supplies. After about six months, he and the other crewmen were allowed to return to the North. Debriefed by Pinkerton, Ringgold told all he knew about Confederate fortifications on the Virginia peninsula. When McClellan began his peninsula campaign in March 1862, the best intelligence he had was from Ringgold.

The Union Navy also profited from Black Dispatches. Robert Smalls, a free African-American who was a harbor pilot knowledgeable about Fernandina, Florida, noticed that Confederates were preparing to destroy the harbor as they withdrew. He realized that Fernandina would provide the Union with a good port for blockade ships patrolling Charleston.

In March 1862, Smalls rowed out to a Union warship and reported what he had seen. The fleet, waiting to attack Fernandina, moved swiftly before the damage was done and captured the port. In another instance, Smalls loaded his family and other African-American sailors aboard a Confederate patrol ship in Charleston, calmly gave the correct countersigns to Confederate signals as he sailed her out of the harbor, and surrendered her to a Union blockade ship. He and the crew were rewarded with half the value of the captured ship.

Mary Touvestre, a freed slave, worked as a housekeeper for one of the Confederate engineers who were repairing the U.S. Navy's Merrimac. The steam-powered frigate had been partially burned on April 21, 1861, when Federal forces abandoned the Gosport Navy Yard. Rebuilt as an ironclad, she was renamed the C.S.S. Virginia. Touvestre overheard the engineers talking about the ship and realized its significance as a weapon against the Northern blockade. Traveling at great risk with a stolen set of plans, she made her way to Washington and got an audience with officials in the Department of the Navy.

Surprised by the momentum of the Confederate project, the officials speeded up the building of the Union ironclad, the Monitor. Some historians believe that if the former slave had not carried her warning to Washington, the Virginia might have had several unchallenged weeks for a rampage against vulnerable Union ships, thwarting the blockade long enough for the arrival of desperately needed supplies from Europe.

Harriet Tubman, one of the nation's most famous African-Americans, was also one of the war's most daring and effective spies. She is renowned as a conductor of the Underground Railroad. Her espionage work, like that of many black spies, is far less known. But her exploits, centered along the South Carolina coast, are well documented, mostly because they were military operations.

Early in 1863, after she had spent nearly a year caring for refugee slaves, Union officers in South Carolina decided that she would be more valuable as a covert operative. She was asked to assemble a small reconnaissance unit of ex-slaves who knew the region and could gather timely intelligence. She found nine men, some of them riverboat pilots who knew every inch of the waterways threading through the coastal lowlands. One of her tasks was the finding of "torpedoes," as remotely-detonated mines were called then, placed along the waterways patrolled by Union river craft.

Her spying and scouting evolved into a kind of special forces operation under Colonel James Montgomery. A fervent believer in guerrilla warfare, Montgomery was a veteran of antislavery border fighting in Kansas. Like Tubman, he had met and admired firebrand abolitionist John Brown.

In July 1863, Tubman became Montgomery's second-in-command during a night raid up the Combahee River, near Beaufort, South Carolina. The Union gunboats, carrying some 300 black troops, slipped up the river, eluding torpedoes that Tubman's men had spotted. Undetected, the raiders swarmed ashore, destroyed a Confederate supply depot, torched homes and warehouses, and rounded up more than 750 rice plantation slaves.

"The enemy," said a Confederate report on the raid, "seems to have been well posted as to the character and capacity of our troops ... and to have been well guided by persons thoroughly acquainted with the river and country." Unwittingly, the report was praising the work of slaves working for Tubman.

Reporting on the raid to Secretary of War Stanton, Brigadier General Rufus Saxton said, "This is the only military command in American history wherein a woman, black or white, led the raid, and under whose inspiration it was originated and conducted." Tubman's spies added to the heroic chronicles of the Black Dispatches. "This source of information," said one historian, "represented the single most prolific and productive category of intelligence obtained and acted on by Union forces throughout the Civil War."

One of the boldest—and least known—Northern spies of the war was a free African-American who went undercover as a slave in what appears to have been a plan to place her in the official residence of Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

The residence, called the Richmond White House, served as the Davis home and the President's executive office. While he conducted Confederacy business there, he would not have seen his slaves as a threat to security. Official papers did not have to be given special protection when slaves were around because, by law, slaves had to be illiterate.

Elizabeth Van Lew well knew this law, and, while running her spy ring in Richmond, realized the espionage value of a slave who was secretly able to read and write. Van Lew had a perfect candidate for such an agent-in-place role: Mary Elizabeth Bowser.

The wealthy Van Lew family, which had 21 slaves in 1850, had only two by 1860—both of them elderly women. Yet, Virginia and Richmond archives show that the Van Lews had not gone through the legal procedures for the freeing of slaves. Freedom meant exile. Under Virginia law, freed slaves had to leave Virginia within a year after winning their freedom. Only by ignoring that law could Van Lew carry out the audacious placement of an agent in the Richmond White House.

Elizabeth Van Lew and her widowed mother Eliza raised the eyebrows of their social acquaintances in Richmond in 1846 by having a slave baptized as Mary Jane Richards in St. John's Episcopal Church, revered as the site where Patrick Henry said, "Give me liberty or give me death." Later, Elizabeth sent Mary Jane off to Philadelphia for an education. In 1855, Mary Jane sailed to Liberia, the African nation founded by Americans as a colony for ex-slaves.

On March 5, 1860, a ship bearing Mary Jane Richards arrived in Baltimore. She went on to Richmond—an illegal act for a freed slave. Five months later, she was arrested for "perambulating the streets and claiming to be a free person of color..." She was briefly jailed and released after Elizabeth Van Lew paid a \$10 fine and claimed that Mary Jane was still a slave. This declaration would give her perfect cover as an agent. Mary Jane Richards married and became Mary Elizabeth Bowser. It is under that name that she enters Civil War espionage history.

Information about her is scanty. One good source is Thomas McNiven, who posed as a baker while making daily rounds as a Van Lew agent in Richmond. From him, down the years, came the report that she "had a photographic mind" and "Everything she saw on the Rebel President's Desk, she could repeat word for word."

Jefferson Davis' widow, Varina, responding to an inquiry in 1905, denied that the Richmond White House had harbored a spy. "I had no 'educated negro' in my household," she wrote. She did not mention that her coachman, William A. Jackson, had crossed into Union lines, bringing with him military conversations that he had overheard. In a letter from Major General Irvin McDowell to Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, "Jeff Davis' coachman" is cited as the source of information about Confederate deployments. A butler who served Jefferson Davis also made his way to Union lines.

Although McDowell and other Union generals could attest to the value of the Black Dispatches, the best endorsement came from General Robert E. Lee. "The chief source of information to the enemy," he wrote, "is through our negroes."