

# A Guide to the Elizabeth L. Van Lew papers, 1842-1911

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A Collection in the Library of Virginia 52783, 52880  
Library of Virginia  
2020

## History

**Processed by:** Trenton Hizer

## Title Statement

A Guide to the Elizabeth L. Van Lew papers, 1842-1911

**Subtitle:** Van Lew, Elizabeth L.

**Collection:** 52783, 52880

**Author:** Trenton Hizer

## Publication Statement

**Date:** © 2020 By The Library of Virginia. All Rights Reserved.

**Publisher:** Library of Virginia

## Profile Description

**Creation:** Machine-readable finding aid derived from MARC record by Trenton Hizer, 21 January 2020

**Language Usage:** Description is in English

## Descriptive Summary

### Collection Number

52783, 52880

### Language

English

### Creator

Elizabeth L. Van Lew

### Extent

.55 cubic feet and 2 boxes

### Repository

The Library of Virginia

## Administrative Information

### Access Restrictions

There are no restrictions.

## Biographical Information

Elizabeth L. Van Lew was born 15 October 1818 in Richmond, Virginia, to John Van Lew (1790-1843) and Eliza Louise Baker Van Lew (1798-1875). She attended an academy in Richmond, then was sent to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to finish her education. After her father's death, Van Lew and her mother supported individual slave manumission and African colonization as means to end the institution. Before the Civil War, Van Lew secretly freed some of her slaves. During the war, Van Lew established an interracial spy ring that assisted Union escapees and provided intelligence to the Union army. After the war ended, Van Lew was appointed postmaster of Richmond by President Ulysses S. Grant and held the post from 1869 to 1877. She later served as a clerk in the Washington D.C. post office from 1883 to 1887. Van Lew died in Richmond 25 September 1900 and was buried in Shockoe Cemetery.

## Scope and Content

Papers, 1842-1911, of and relating to Elizabeth Van Lew (1818-1900) of Richmond, Virginia, consisting of articles, broadsides, correspondence, currency, envelopes, ephemera, insurance documents, photographs, receipts, and reminiscences. Papers concern Van Lew's personal life, her family, and her activities as a Union spy during the American Civil War; as well as reminiscences by Elizabeth Griffin Carrington Nowland (1827-1913) of Richmond, information on William C. Carrington, mayor of Richmond; and the Carrington family coat-of-arms.

## Arrangement

This collection is arranged

- Series I: Letters and Papers, 1842-1911.
- Series II: Articles and Reminiscences.
- Series III: Photographs, 1876-1902.
- Series IV: Ephemera.

## Contents List

### Series I: Letters and papers, 1842-1911.

#### Box 1

#### Extent

Extent: 6 folders.

#### Scope and Content

Series I: Letters and papers, 1842-1911, consists of correspondence to and from Elizabeth Van Lew, her mother Eliza Van Lew (1798-1875), her brother John Newton Van Lew (1825-1896) (all of Richmond, Virginia), and her sister Anna Van Lew Klapp (ca. 1820-1891) of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, regarding family and social news, and business; as well as correspondence to and from Elizabeth Griffin Carrington Nowland (1827-1913) about her family and with William Henry Bymer regarding Elizabeth Van Lew. Also, receipts, 1852 and 1865, for money received in payment; Confederate currency; broadside, 1870, for an appeal for aid after the collapse at the state capitol; Fireman's Fund Insurance Company documents, 1872, to Eliza Van Lew as executor of John Van Lew (1790-1843); check, 8 May 1871, on the Planters National Bank; and a calling card for Miss Klapp. Of particular interest is a letter, 31 October 1870, from M. J. Denman to Elizabeth Van Lew. M. J. Denman was Mary Bowser, an African American who was part of Van Lew's spy ring.

#### Letters, 1842-1855

##### Folder 1

#### Letters, 1866-1870

##### Folder 2

#### Letters, 1874-1911

##### Folder 3

#### Letters, undated

##### Folder 4

## **Envelopes**

**Folder 5**

## **Papers, 1852-1872**

**Folder 6**

## **Series II: Articles and Reminiscences.**

**Box 1**

**Extent**

Extent: 5 folders.

### **Scope and Content**

Series II: Articles and reminiscences contains a manuscript copy of William Gilmore Beymer's (1881-1969) article "Miss Van Lew" published in Harper's Magazine in June 1911; reminiscences and responses by Elizabeth G. Nowland about Elizabeth Van Lew for Beymer; reminiscences about Van Lew by an unidentified acquaintance; articles on Mary Bowser/Mary Jane Denman (b. ca. 1840) by author Lois Leveen; and reminiscences about William C. Carrington as mayor of Richmond by an unidentified author.

### **Miss Van Lew by William Beymer. Manuscript copy of article for Harper's Magazine, June 1911**

**folder 7**

### **Elizabeth G. Nowland's recollections, comments on William Beymer's article on Elizabeth Van Lew**

**folder 8**

### **Recollection of Elizabeth Van Lew (Elizabeth G. Nowland--possibly dictated to or transcribed by someone else)**

**folder 9**

### **Articles by Lois Leveen on Mary Bowser/Mary Jane Denman--The Vanishing Black Woman Spy Reappears (Los Angeles Review of Books) and She Was Born Into Slavery, Was a Spy and Is Celebrated as a Hero--But We're Missing the Point of the Mary Bowser Story (Time), 19 June 2019**

**folder 10**

### **William C. Carrington as mayor of Richmond by an unidentified author**

**folder 11**

## **Series III: Photographs, 1876-1902, undated.**

**Box 1**

**Extent**

Extent: 14 folders.

### **Scope and Content**

Series III: Photographs, 1876-1902 contain a silhouette, possibly of Elizabeth Van Lew; photographs of Mary Hawes Tyler (Davis Gallery, Richmond, Virginia); G. W. Carrington, and "Mary and Anna" (W. H. Illingworth photographer, St. Paul, Minnesota). Also includes unidentified photographs from the following studios: W. G. R. Frayser, Richmond (5); Lee Gallery, Richmond (4); C. R. Rees, Richmond (2 of the same person); H. N. Weaver, Richmond (1); M. J. Powers and Company, Richmond (1); Anderson and Company, Richmond (2); Walzl's Imperial Portrait Studio, Baltimore, Maryland (1); South and Hay, York, Pennsylvania (1); and Wykes, Quincy, Illinois (1). Also contains two photographs with no name or studio identification. Also includes Carrington family coat-of-arms.

### **Silhouette possibly of Elizabeth Van Lew, undated**

**Folder 12**

**Davis Gallery, Richmond, Virginia--photograph of Mary Hawes Tyler, Christmas 1902**

Folder 13

**W.H. Illingsworth Photographer, St. Paul, Minnesota--G. W. Carrington and To Aunt Lizzie with love from Mary and Anna, undated**

Folder 14

**W. G. R. Frayser Photographer, Richmond, Virginia--5 unidentified photographs, 1879 (1) and undated (4)**

Folder 15

**Lee Gallery, Richmond, Virginia--4 unidentified photographs, undated (see also C. R. Rees)**

Folder 16

**C. R. Rees, Richmond, Virginia--2 photographs of the same unidentified person, 1876 (see also Lee Gallery)**

Folder 17

**H. N. Wevere Photographer--Richmond, Virginia--1 unidentified photograph, undated**

Folder 18

**M. J. Powers and Company--Richmond, Virginia--1 unidentified photograph, undated**

Folder 19

**Anderson and Company--Richmond, Virginia--2 unidentified photographs, 16 November 1877 (1) and undated (1)**

Folder 20

**Walzl's Imperial Portrait Studio--Baltimore, Maryland--1 unidentified photograph, undated**

Folder 21

**South and Hay--York, Pennsylvania--1 unidentified photograph, undated**

Folder 22

**Wykes--Quincy, Illinois--1 unidentified photograph, undated**

Folder 23

**No studio--2 unidentified photographs, undated**

Folder 24

**Carrington family coat-of-arms**

Folder 25

## **Series IV: Ephemera.**

**Box 2**

**Extent**

Extent: 1 box.

**Scope and Content**

Series IV: Ephemera consists of a Book of Common Prayer and a locket initialed possibly "KVL."

