

Van Lew, Elizabeth

Elizabeth Van Lew Collection

1854-1926

Title Statement

Van Lew, Elizabeth Guide to the Elizabeth Van Lew Collection Mss. 65 V32

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Descriptive Summary

Unit ID

Mss. 65 V32

Unit ID

/repositories/2/resources/729

Unit Date

1854-1926

Language

English

Creator

Van Lew, Elizabeth

Creator

Albree, John

Extent

0.60 Linear Feet

Repository

Special Collections Research Center

Administrative Information

Conditions Governing Access:

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Acquisition Information:

Gift. Acc. 2000.54: Service copies and printmaster for microfilm of Elizabeth Van Lew Papers. Filmed by Preservation Resources.

Processing Information:

Reprocessed by Amana Katora in December 2011.

Preferred Citation:

Elizabeth Van Lew Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

Biographical Information:

Elizabeth Van Lew (1818-1900), also known as "Crazy Bet," was an American spy during the Civil War who spied for the Union from her home in Richmond, Virginia. Born in 1818 in Richmond, Van Lew's father ran a hardware business and owned several slaves. Van Lew was educated at a Quaker school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she was first exposed to abolitionism. After the death of her father, Van Lew and her mother freed the family's eleven even though her father said they couldn't, the slaves included Mary Bowser. Then they bought and freed some of their relatives. Upon the outbreak of the war, Van Lew began working on behalf of the Union. When Libby Prison was opened in Richmond, Van Lew was allowed to bring food, clothing, writing paper, and other things to the Union soldiers imprisoned there. She aided prisoners in escape attempts, passing them information about safe houses and getting a Union sympathizer appointed to the prison. Prisoners gave Van Lew information on Confederate troop levels and movements, which she was able to pass on to Union commanders. Van Lew also operated a spy ring of 12 people during the war, including clerks in the war and navy departments of the Confederacy and a Richmond mayoral candidate. Van Lew was able to have Bowser hired by Varina Davis, which allowed Bowser to spy in the White House of the Confederacy. To aid in her spying, Van Lew adopted the appearance of a crazy person, letting her hair grow wild and talking to herself in public. Van Lew's spy network was so efficient that on several occasions she sent Ulysses S. Grant fresh flowers from her garden and a copy of the Richmond newspaper. She developed a cipher system and often smuggled messages out of Richmond in hollow eggs. Van Lew's work was valued by the United States. George H. Sharpe, intelligence officer for the Army of the Potomac, credited her with "the greater portion of our intelligence in 1864-65." On Grant's first visit to Richmond after the war, he took tea with Van Lew, and later appointed her postmaster of Richmond. Grant said of her "You have sent me the most valuable information received from Richmond during the war." After Reconstruction, Van Lew became increasingly ostracized in Richmond. She persuaded the United States Department of War to give her all of her records, so she could hide the true extent of her espionage from her neighbors. Having spent her family's fortune on intelligence activities during the war, she tried in vain to be reimbursed by the federal government. Van Lew died on September 25, 1900, and was buried in Richmond.

Scope and Contents

Papers, 1854-1926, collected by John Albree in preparing lectures on Elizabeth Van Lew. Includes letters, notes, newspaper clippings, and photographs. Includes typed copies of her scrapbook. Collection also includes material concerning Jefferson Davis and Civil War letters from North Carolina.

Acc. 2000.54 is microfilm of the collection. Folders 1-10 of the Elizabeth Van Lew Papers are available in Swem Library's microforms area on 1 reel of microfilm, call number E608 .V34 V36.

Separated Materials:

Mss. Acc. 2000.54 Microfilm of Elizabeth Van Lew Papers transferred to Swem Microfilm Collection.

Keywords

Correspondence
Notebooks
Photographs
Virginia--History--Civil War, 1861-1865
United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865

Physical Characteristics or Technical Requirements:

When available, microfilm, photocopies, digital surrogates, or other reproductions must be used in place of original documents.

Description of Subordinate Components

Copy of Elizabeth Van Lew Scrapbook

Unit ID id126264

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/63493

Unit Date 1854-1877

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 1 (folder)

Scope and Contents

Two typed copies of Elizabeth Van Lew's scrapbook created in 1904. Contains description of pressed flowers and leaves, letters and poems received by Van Lew, autographs, photos, stamps, receipts, fliers, and notes by Van Lew.

Harper's Magazine

Unit ID id126265

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/63494

Unit Date June, 1911

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 2 (folder)

Scope and Contents

Copy of Harper's Magazine, "Cockney Travels" from June, 1911. Article titled "Miss Van Lew" by William Gilmore Beymer appears on pages 83-106. Article also contains photos of Van Lew, her estate, and paintings by Howard Pyle.

Photographs of Elizabeth Van Lew, Home, and Notations About John Brown

Unit ID id126266

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/63495

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 3 (folder)

Scope and Contents

Photographs of Elizabeth Van Lew, her home, and John Brown material with notations by Elizabeth Van Lew.

John Albree's Notes on Elizabeth Van Lew

Unit ID id126267

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/63496

Unit Date 1900-1913

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 4 (folder)

Scope and Contents

John Albree's handwritten research on Elizabeth Van Lew on various types/sizes of paper.

News Clippings on John Albee

Unit ID id126268

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/63497

Unit Date 1905-1920

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 5 (folder)

Scope and Contents

Newspaper clippings concerning John Albee's lectures on Elizabeth Van Lew.

John Albee Correspondence

Unit ID id126269

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/63498

Unit Date 1903-1926

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 6 (folder)

Scope and Contents

The correspondence of John Albee. Also contains a postcard and a few photographs sent to Albee.

John Albee Speeches on Elizabeth Van Lew

Unit ID id126270

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/63499

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 7 (folder)

Scope and Contents

Drafts and notes for John Albee's speeches on Elizabeth Van Lew: untitled, "A Woman Who Would Not Tell," "A Union Spy: Her Experiences & Her Correspondents," and "Readings of Van Lew Papers."

John Albee Memorabilia

Unit ID id126271

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/63500

Unit Date 1900-1915

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 8 (folder)

Scope and Contents

Memorabilia of John Albee during his work on Elizabeth Van Lew. Includes bill of sale for Van Lew papers, invitations, and programs of lectures.

Letters from the War

Unit ID id126272

Unit ID /repositories/2/archival_objects/63501

Unit Date 1864-1865

Mixed Materials 1 (Box)

Container 9 (folder)

Scope and Contents

Includes letter from C.C. Blacknall to George Blacknall in which he describes his feelings on the year and the effects of the Civil War, A.R. McDonald to Gov. Zebulon Vance in which he describes his impression, as a private, on the problems caused by the three regiments of the North Carolina Home Guard and suggests ideas for reorganization, and Wm. M. Blackell to "Dear Friend" in which he describes his opinions of State Legislature's activities, mass desertions of Southern army, and mentions General Hampton's Calvary.

Miscellaneous Items**Unit ID** id126273**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/63502**Mixed Materials** 1 (Box)**Container** 10 (folder)**Scope and Contents**

22 items. Miscellaneous items include postcards of Old Blanford Church, drawings of dogs used to track escaped slaves, a clipping of the "Libby Prison Minstrels," clippings and a program concerning John Brown, a photograph of the petit jury on the Jefferson Davis trial, a print of Hon. James K. Moorhead, a stamp, and a page from a math book.

Oversized Items**Unit ID** id126274**Unit ID** /repositories/2/archival_objects/63492**Mixed Materials** 1 (Oversize_Folder)**Scope and Contents**

27 items. Includes Harper's Weekly, February 8, 1862 and February 22, 1862. Also includes photos of Elizabeth Van Lew, Van Lew home, engravings concerning Libby Prison, and other engravings of people, including Frederick Douglass.