

Women like those included in this group of individuals recently escaped from slavery (often called “contrabands”) aided Federal military leaders by providing useful information on terrain or location of Confederate forces. Some women willingly went back behind Confederate lines to gather such information.



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African American women played highly visible roles in the leadership and fighting of the recent war with Iraq, but this is only the latest American military engagement to which they have contributed. During the American Civil War, African American women played active roles in securing their own freedom; they resisted and escaped from slavery, assisted Union soldiers in Southern territory, and acquired militarily sensitive information while laboring as servants in Confederate households. Some of the most fascinating contributions of African American women to the war effort involved their work as spies and scouts. Discussion of such activities in today’s social studies classrooms will not only interest students but will also bring to light the significant part played by black women in this important historic drama.

African American Women and Espionage in the Civil War

Theresa McDevitt

“The greatest source of military and naval intelligence, particularly on the tactical level, for the Federal government during the war was the Negro.”

—HERBERT APTHEKER¹

Covert activity on the part of African Americans to resist, undermine, and destroy the institution of slavery predated the onset of the Civil War. In fact, since the development of involuntary servitude by race in America, black women and men struggled to maintain control over their lives, planned and staged slave rebellions, and took great risks to escape slavery—often utilizing the covert network known as the Underground Railroad in which both free African Americans and the enslaved played active roles.

When the war began, most African Americans were eager to aid the Union cause, which they realized—earlier than many whites—would lead to the abolition of slavery. Perhaps 700,000 of the nearly four million people held in slavery prior to the war escaped to Union lines during the conflict as the Union military advanced deeper and deeper into the South. As they freed themselves, the former slaves also aided the Union by depriving the Confederacy of their valuable labor. Once within Union lines they also provided significant information on Confederate troop strength and movements. Behind Southern lines they assisted Union soldiers taking possession of Confederate territory by providing information concerning the terrain and by disclosing the locations of hidden weapons, property, and treasures. They also assisted escaped Union prisoners in fleeing from Confederate territory, hiding them, feeding them, and helping them find their way North.² Others utilized their positions as servants to eavesdrop on conversations, gathering information of military significance and passing it on to Union operatives. Some free blacks even crossed over to Confederate territory to provide such services, endangering their freedom and even their lives to gather information that would aid the Union.

Union officials recognized the significance of such assistance and called the valuable information obtained in this fashion “black dispatches.”³ Union generals appreciated the advantage that this intelligence provided them. Confederate generals also recognized that such intelligence hurt them. Robert E. Lee himself declared that

the Union’s “chief source of information” was southern blacks.⁴ A Confederate district attorney from Goochland County, Virginia, echoed the general’s sentiments when he suggested that in areas of the South where Union raids were frequent it was commonly believed that federal

forces were “nearly always” guided by “free Negroes and slaves.”⁵ Contrary to older notions that African Americans waited passively for freedom, southern blacks played a significant part in the Union victory, and their pivotal involvement in espionage is a prime example.

Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman

When our armies and gun-boats first appeared in any part of the South, many of the poor negroes were as much afraid of “de Yankee Buckra” as of their own masters. It was almost impossible to win their confidence, or to get information from them. But to Harriet they would tell anything; and so it became quite important that she should accompany expeditions going up the rivers, or into unexplored parts of the country, to control and get information from those whom they took with them as guides.

Gen. Hunter asked her at one time if she would go with several gunboats up the Combahee River, the object of the expedition being to take up the torpedoes placed by the rebels in the river, to destroy railroads and bridges, and to cut off supplies from the rebel troops. She said she would go if Col. Montgomery was to be appointed commander of the expedition. Col. Montgomery was one of John Brown’s men, and was well known to Harriet. Accordingly, Col. Montgomery was appointed to the command, and Harriet, with several men under her, the principal of whom was J. Plowden, whose pass I have, accompanied the expedition. Harriet describes in the most graphic manner the appearance of the plantations as they passed up the river; the frightened negroes leaving their work and taking to the woods, at sight of the gun-boats; then coming to peer out like startled deer, and scudding away like the wind at the sound of the steam-whistle. “Well,” said one old negro, “Mas’r said de Yankees had horns and tails, but I nebber beliebed it till now.” But the word was passed along by the mysterious telegraphic communication existing among these simple people, that these were “Lincoln’s gun-boats come to set them free.” In vain, then, the drivers used their whips, in their efforts to hurry the poor creatures back to their quarters; they all turned and ran for the gun-boats.

This fearless woman was often sent into the rebel lines as a spy, and brought back valuable information as to the position of armies and batteries; she has been in battle when the shot was falling like hail, and the bodies of dead and wounded men were dropping around her like leaves in autumn; but the thought of fear never seems to have had place for a moment in her mind. She had her duty to perform, and she expected to be taken care of till it was done.

Excerpted from *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman: Electronic Edition*, written by Sarah H. Bradford. Originally published in 1869 by Moses, Printer, and available electronically from the Documenting the American South Digital Collection, docsouth.dsi.internet2.edu/neh/bradford/bradford.html.

However, finding both primary and secondary materials which document the involvement of African Americans in such clandestine activities can be a challenge. Many of these operatives and scouts were either illiterate or shrewd enough to hide diaries and memoirs which included espionage-related activities that might lead to retaliation from loyal Confederates during and after the war.⁶ Historians, whose interests have only recently turned to the activities of women and African Americans, too often overlooked documents that told the stories of these women. In any case, too few detailed accounts documenting their work are known, though evidence does exist. Narratives of the enslaved gathered after the war document their reactions to the arrival of Union forces and their efforts to assist them. Other memoirs, including some by disgruntled slaveholders, also document the help bondsmen and women gave Northern forces, and the memoirs of other operatives and military records provide enough information to introduce this unique topic to social studies students.⁷

The most famous African American woman to act as spy, scout, and even military commander was Harriet Tubman, best known for her antebellum involvement in

Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman

“... the news came of the capture of Port Royal. Instantly she [Harriet Tubman] conceived the idea of going there and working among her people on the islands and the mainland. Money was given her, a pass was secured through the agency of Governor Andrew, and she went to Beaufort. There she has made herself useful in many ways—has been employed as a spy by General Hunter, and finally has piloted Col. Montgomery on his most successful expedition. We gave some notice of this fact last week. Since then we have received the following letter, dictated by her...

“You have, without doubt, seen a full account of the expedition I refer to. Don’t you think we colored people are entitled to some credit for that exploit, under the lead of the brave Colonel Montgomery? We weakened the rebels somewhat on the Combahee River, by taking and bringing away seven hundred and fifty-six head of their most valuable live stock, known up in your region as “contrabands,” and this, too, without the loss of a single life on our part, though we had good reason to believe that a number of rebels bit the dust. Of these seven hundred and fifty-six contrabands, nearly or quite all the able-bodied men have joined the colored regiments here.”

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the Underground Railroad. Born and raised in slavery, she made the life changing decision at about the age of thirty to try to escape to freedom. Successful in her quest, she forged a free life above the Mason-

Dixon Line, but could not forget those who still remained in slavery. Subsequently, she returned South to assist others in escaping North. Often considered the most successful conductor on the Underground Railroad, Tubman made nineteen forays into the South and is credited with freeing three hundred people on such trips.⁸ And when the war began, she was more than willing to assist the Union.

Tubman’s genius and her prewar experience in secreting fugitives through the perilous South to freedom proved beneficial to Northern military commanders who recognized her skills. When she arrived in the newly liberated coastal regions of South Carolina in 1862 to work as a nurse, relief worker, and educator, her value as a liaison between military authorities and the many African Americans gathered behind Union lines was recognized and utilized by Union authorities. She assisted the Federal General Staff in the formation of corps of spies and scouts, participated in the work of gathering information on troop strength and location, masterminded raids into Confederate territory, and encouraged enslaved men and women to flee behind Union lines.

A Letter from Gen. Saxton to a Lady of Auburn

ATLANTA, GA., March 21, 1868.

MY DEAR MADAME: I have just received your letter informing me that Hon. Wm. H. Seward, Secretary of State, would present a petition to Congress for a pension to Harriet Tubman, for services rendered in the Union Army during the late war. I can bear witness to the value of her services in South Carolina and Florida. She was employed in the hospitals and as a spy. She made many a raid inside the enemy’s lines, displaying remarkable courage, zeal, and fidelity. She was employed by General Hunter, and I think by Generals Stevens and Sherman, and is as deserving of a pension from the Government for her services as any other of its faithful servants.

I am very truly yours,

RUFUS SAXTON, Bvt. Brig.-Gen. U. S. A.

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MRS. HARRIET TUBMAN.
SHE ACTED AS A SPY FOR THE UNION ARMY.

This illustration from the autobiography of Harriet Tubman as told to Sarah Bradford suggests how Tubman would have looked as she served as nurse, relief worker, spy and scout during the Civil

Her most well-publicized and dramatic contribution to military operations was in June of 1863 when she provided leadership for a raid carried out by a regiment of black troops under Colonel James Montgomery, on the Combahee River in South Carolina. During this foray, Union gunboats with three hundred black troops sailed past Confederate torpedoes (avoiding them with information provided by Tubman and other African Americans), entered Confederate territory, led nearly eight hundred African Americans to freedom, and destroyed millions of dollars worth of commissary stores and cotton.⁹

Though Tubman's leadership in the Combahee Raid may have been the most dramatic example of an African American

woman employed as spy or scout, many other women provided information that assisted Union military activities. Mary Elizabeth Bowser was another free black woman who risked her life and liberty to assist the Union.

Bowser was born a slave in the Richmond, Virginia, household of John Van Lew. Freed after his death, she maintained cordial relations with the rest of his family and even attended school in Philadelphia with their assistance. During the war she returned to Richmond and played a key role in the Unionist spy network that developed in that city. At the center of this spy ring was Elizabeth Van Lew, John Van Lew's daughter, who in spite of her Southern

rearing was dedicated to abolition and the Union cause which she expected would destroy slavery. Van Lew shunned efforts to aid the Confederacy and devoted herself to nursing Union soldiers held in Richmond prisons. She covertly helped them to escape and gathered intelligence for Union military authorities, passing it on through a complex network of Union spies which involved many African American operatives, including Bowser.¹⁰

To obtain information for the Union, Bowser accepted employment as a servant in the Confederate White House. Her employers were unaware of Bowser's level of intelligence and education; thus she was able to eavesdrop on conversations and read confidential documents, which she passed along to Union military commanders. Much of this information was passed on to a Union agent named Thomas McNiven who ran a Richmond bakery. He spoke highly of Bowser, who he said, "had a photographic mind" and was able to repeat "word for word" what she saw on Confederate President Jefferson Davis's desk. So significant was her service that she was inducted into Arizona's Fort Huachuca Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame with the assertion that she was "one of the highest-placed and most productive espionage agents of the Civil War."¹¹

Other free black women were as eager as Bowser to undertake risks to assist the Union. After the Battle of Fredericksburg, while the Union army was camped on the Rappahannock in Virginia, an African American man known as Dabney and his wife escaped to Union lines. Dabney served as a cook and groom in camp, but also shared his knowledge about the local terrain, which assisted in Union military planning. His wife, whose name is not recorded, also undertook dangerous work. She insisted on crossing over to a nearby Confederate camp where she found employment as a laundress in a prominent general's headquarters. As a servant there she was able to overhear sensitive plans and transmitted the information to her husband, who remained in the Union camp, utilizing a code based on the manner and composition of the laundry line which was visible from the Union camp.

Partially because of his wife's daring acts, Dabney was seen as one of General Joseph Hooker's most valuable scouts.¹²

Another woman who used her position as a servant to gather militarily significant information for the Union was Mary Louvestre.¹³ Louvestre was an employee of the Gosport Navy Yard in Norfolk, Virginia, which brought her into contact with information on the development of the CSS *Virginia*, the Confederate's first ironclad warship. When it neared completion, she made her way through Confederate lines to Washington, D.C., and asked for a private meeting with the secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles. She informed Welles that the ironclad was nearly completed and gave him a letter from a mechanic in the Navy Yard, which confirmed her story. This vital information caused the Navy to abandon other plans and speed up work on its own ironclad. After the war, Welles wrote a letter supporting Louvestre's application for a pension and declaring that she provided this information as well as "other facts," suggesting her work had been ongoing.¹⁴

These few but intriguing histories only begin to tell the story of African American women's involvement in espionage. The existence of these women suggests that there were many more who performed similar work, but whose stories remain hidden. It is certainly true that these and other women contributed significantly to the Union war effort and, contrary to older notions, did not passively submit to slavery and wait for white men to win freedom for them. Their stories can help modern learners gain a more realistic picture of the war and the role African American women played in the conflict. 📖

Notes

1. Quoted in Donald E. Markle, *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994): 55.
2. One contemporary source stated that it would have been impossible for Union POWs to escape without the help of African Americans. Quoted in Herbert Aptheker, *Essays in the History of the American Negro* (New York: International Publishers, 1964): 177.

3. PK Rose, *Black Dispatches: Black American Contributions to Union Intelligence during the Civil War*. (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1998-1999). www.cia.gov/cia/publications/dispatches/index.html
4. *Ibid.*
5. James M. McPherson, *Marching toward Freedom: The Negro in the Civil War, 1861-1865*. (New York: Knopf, 1968): 56.
6. One example is the diary of Mary Elizabeth Bowser, a woman who worked as a servant in the Confederate White House during the war and who passed militarily significant information to Union commanders. Her descendants claim that she recorded her deeds in a diary, but it was kept hidden for fear of arousing "anti-Negro" sentiments among local whites even after the war had ended. Unfortunately, it seems to have been lost without ever having been examined by historians. "Mary Elizabeth Bowser," *Notable Black American Women*. (Detroit, Mich.: Gale Resource, 1992): 100-101.
7. For example, Ella Forbes offers a good introduction to black women and espionage in *African American Women During the Civil War* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1998.)
8. The exact number of trips taken south by Harriet Tubman or the number of African Americans liberated by such journeys is variously reported in different sources. In any case, it is certain that these trips were so successful that Southern slave owners were willing to offer a \$40,000 reward for her capture. Sylvia Dannett, "Harriet Ross Tubman, 1821-1913," in *Profiles of Negro Womanhood, 1619-1900*, vol. 1 (New York: M.W. Lads, 1964): 134.
9. Division of Publications, National Park Service, *Underground Railroad* (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of the Interior, [1998]): 47. Earl Conrad, *Harriet Tubman: Negro Soldier and Abolitionist* (New York: International Publishers, 1942): 37-40; Markle, *Spies*, 58-59; Michael Lee Lanning, *The African-American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell* (Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Publishing Group, 1997): 60; Forbes, *African*, 37-39.
10. In spite of the importance of her work, Bowser remains a shadowy figure in the historical record with few details of her life fully documented. A recent book on Elizabeth Van Lew even questions whether Mary's name was really Bowser, though it does not deny that a highly intelligent African American woman may have worked in the Confederate White House and passed many secrets to the Union military authorities. Elizabeth R. Varon, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, a Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003): 165-169.
11. Richmond Newspapers, Inc., "Mary Elizabeth Bowser" (Richmond, Va.: Richmond Newspapers, Inc., 2002). (www.timesdispatch.com/blackhistory/MGBQM54OAI.html); Forbes, *African*, 41-42; Markle, *Spies*, 60-61; Harriet Peterson, "Mary Elizabeth Bowser," in *Notable Black American Women* (Detroit, Mich.: Gale, 1992): 100-101.
12. McPherson, *Marching*, 56-58; Forbes, *African*, 42; Ervin L. Jordon, Jr. *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia*. (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1994): 283-284.
13. While numerous sources cite the work of this woman, there is some disagreement over her name. Some sources give her name as Touvestre; however, the more authoritative, Ella Forbes and Ervin Jordan suggest it was Louvestre. Jordon, *Black*, 284, 383; Forbes, *African*, 41. What is certain is that an African American woman provided important and ongoing services to the Union Navy.

14. The fact that Louvestre was able to meet with Welles confirms that high-ranking Union officials recognized the importance of intelligence provided by African Americans. Jordon, *Black*, 284, 383; Intelligence Community, "Intelligence Officers of the Past" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Intelligence Community, 2003) www.intelligence.gov/2-overyears_b.shtml; Markle, *Spies*, 58; Lanning, *African*, 59; Gideon Welles, "The First Ironclad Monitor," *Annals of the War Written by Leading Participants North and South* (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Times Publishing Company, 1879): 20.

Suggested Readings

- Bradford, Sarah Elizabeth. *Harriet, the Moses of her People*. New York: G.R. Lockwood & Son, 1886. (Electronic edition available from docsouth.unc.edu/harriet/harriet.html) Revised edition of the autobiography of Harriet Tubman as told to the author. (Grade 12+); Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. Auburn, N.Y.: W.J. Moses, Printer, 1969. (Electronic edition available from docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bradford/bradford.html) First attempt to tell the story of Harriet Tubman as told to the author. (Grade 12+)
- Caravantes, Peggy. *Petticoat Spies: Six Women Spies of the Civil War*. Greensboro, N.C.: Morgan Reynolds Publishers, 2002. A collective biography of well-known female Civil War operatives that includes information on Mary Elizabeth Bowser. (Ages 9-12)
- Chang, Ina. *Separate Battle: Women and the Civil War* (Young Readers' History of the Civil War Series). New York: Lodestar Books, 1991. This book offers a general introduction to women in the war period and includes information on spies and scouts. (Ages 9-12)
- Clinton, Catherine. *Scholastic Encyclopedia of the Civil War*. New York: Scholastic, 1999. A general encyclopedia on the Civil War for children that includes information on African American women and their important wartime activities. (Ages 9-12)
- Colman, Peggy. *Spies! Women of the Civil War*. Cincinnati, Ohio: Better Way Books, 1992. Award winning writer of children's books writes about female spies in the Civil War, including Harriet Tubman. (Ages 9-12)
- Conrad, Earl. *Harriet Tubman: Negro Soldier and Abolitionist*. New York: International Publishers, 1942. Though dated, this excellent study of Harriet Tubman's life includes extensive information on her wartime work. (Grade 12+)
- Dannett, Sylvia "Harriet Ross Tubman, 1821-1913." In *Profiles of Negro Womanhood, 1619-1900*, vol. 1. New York: M.W. Lads, 1964. Profile of Tubman, offers some information on her wartime work. (Grade 12+)
- Dannett, "Mary Elizabeth Bowser: Union Spy," *Profiles of Negro Womanhood, 1619-1900*, vol. 1. New York: M.W. Lads, 1984. This profile of Mary Elizabeth Bowser describes her work as a Union operative in the Confederate White House. (Grade 12+)
- Forbes, Ella. *African American Women during the Civil War*. New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1998. This book offers the most extensive general treatment of African American women's experience in the Civil War, including a useful chapter on their involvement in military activities. (Grade 12+)
- Foster, Allen G. "The Woman Who Saved the Union Navy: Mary Louvestre Helped Defeat Confederates in Critical Sea Battle by Spying on the South." *Ebony* 33, no. 2 (December 1977): 131-132, 134. This popular periodical article provides a fictionalized account of Mary Louvestre's successful efforts to transfer information on the development of the Confederate's ironclad to Union military authorities. (Grade 12+)

- Frankel, Noralee. "The Southern Side of 'Glory': Mississippi African-American Women during the Civil War." *Minerva: Quarterly Report on Women and the Military* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 28-36. This article offers an account of how black women greeted freedom and assisted the Union forces that gained control of increasing sections of the South. (Grade 12+)
- Jordan, Jr., Ervin L. *Black Confederates and Afro-Yankees in Civil War Virginia*. Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 1995. This thoroughly researched study of blacks in Virginia during the Civil War includes otherwise difficult to locate information on female spies and scouts including Mary Elizabeth Bowser and Mary Louvestre. (Grade 12+)
- Markle, Donald E. *Spies and Spymasters of the Civil War*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1994. This general work includes information on Bowser, "Dabney's wife," Mary Louvestre, and Harriet Tubman, and contains sections on African Americans as spies and scouts. (Grade 12+)
- McPherson, James M. *Marching toward Freedom; the Negro in the Civil War, 1861-1865*. New York: Knopf, 1968. This award winning Civil War historian examines the African American experience in the Civil War and includes information on African Americans and espionage. (Ages 9-12)
- Nolan, Jeannette Covert. *Yankee Spy: Elizabeth Van Lew*. New York: Julian Messner, 1970. This volume explores the espionage work of Richmond resident and Union spy Elizabeth Van Lew, and includes information on the intelligence work of Mary Elizabeth Bowser and efforts by other African Americans to aid the Union cause. (Ages 9-12)
- Peterson, Harriet. "Mary Elizabeth Bowser." In *Notable Black American Women*, edited by Jessie C. Smith, 100-101. Detroit, Mich.: Gale, 1992. (Grade 12+)
- Ryan, David D. *A Yankee Spy in Richmond: The Civil War Diary of "Crazy Bet" Van Lew*. Mechanicsburg, Pa: Stackpole Books, 1996. Van Lew's diary includes some information on the work of Mary Elizabeth Bowser. (Grade 12+)
- Sterling, Dorothy. *Freedom Train*. New York: Scholastic, 1954. Classic biography of Harriet Tubman, includes information on the Combahee Raid. (Ages 9-12)
- Varon, Elizabeth R. *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, a Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. This scholarly study of Elizabeth Van Lew closely examines the evidence surrounding the life of Mary Elizabeth Bowser and highlights how she and other African American women worked within a Union spy network in Richmond. (Grade 12+)
- Welles, Gideon. "The First Ironclad Monitor." *Annals of the War Written by Leading Participants North and South*. Philadelphia, Pa.: The Times Publishing Company, 1879. Account of the development of the Union's ironclad by the wartime secretary of the Navy; includes information about the work of Mary Louvestre. (Grade 12+)

Useful Websites

- Allen, Susan and Mary Rockwell. *Ladies, Contraband and Spies: Women in the Civil War*. Library of Congress, American Memory Project, 10-23-2002 2001 [cited 01-15-02]. Available from memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/01/spies/index.html. A lesson plan designed to introduce students to "the experiences of slave women, plantation mistresses, female spies, and Union women in the Civil War;" it offers links to materials selected from the Library of Congress American Memory Collection.
- Intelligence Officers of the Past*. U.S. Intelligence Community, [cited 03-02-03]. Available from www.intelligence.gov/2-overyears_bs.html. Documents the contribution of Mary Louvestre to the Union war effort.
- Mary Elizabeth Bowser*. Richmond Newspapers, Inc., February 1, 2002 [cited 01-25-03]. Available from www.timesdispatch.com/blackhistory/MGBQM54OAI.html. This article provides extensive information on Mary Elizabeth Bowser, a free black woman who worked in the Confederate White House during the Civil War and passed information on to Union military authorities. Bibliographic references.
- "Mary Elizabeth Bowser," *Women in History: Living Vignettes of Notable Women in U.S. History*. Lakewood Public Library. November 26, 2002. [Cited 03-30-2003] Available from www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/bows-mar.htm. Provides information on wartime work of Bowser with a photograph.
- Rose, PK. *Black Dispatches: Black American Contributions to Union Intelligence during the Civil War*. Central Intelligence Agency, Winter 1998-1999 [cited 03-03-03]. Available from www.cia.gov/cia/publications/dispatches/index.html. Article from the CIA website discusses the importance of information gathered during the war from African Americans in general and highlights the work of Harriet Tubman, Mary Louvestre, and Mary Elizabeth Bowser. Includes a bibliography and links to images.

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African American women played highly visible roles in the leadership and fighting of the recent war with Iraq, but this is only the latest American military engagement to which they have contributed. During the American Civil War, African American women played active roles in securing their own freedom; they resisted and escaped from slavery, assisted Union soldiers in Southern territory, and acquired militarily sensitive information while laboring as servants in Confederate households. Some of the most fascinating contributions of African American women to the war effort involved their work as nurses, spies, and couriers. The history of African Americans in The American Civil War includes the over four million slaves and approximately 500,000 free African Americans who were living in the United States at the beginning of the war. Altogether they made up 14% of the population of the country. They served as soldiers in both the Union and Confederate Armies. Slavery began in the English colony of Jamestown in 1619. It started with the purchase of 20 Africansâ€”not as reported by John Rolfe from a Dutch shipâ€”but rather from