



Maggie L. Walker: Growing Up in the Home of a Civil War Spy!

Target audience: 11th grade VA/ US History

Ties to Virginia Standards of Learning: History and Social Science SOL VUS7.e-f

Materials: Access to reference books, internet, copy of book *Dear Ellen Bee: A Civil War Scrapbook of Two Union Spies* by Mary Lyons and Muriel Branch

Abstract: The scrapbook format offers insights into history. Facsimiles of freedom papers, train tickets with a rebus for the many illiterate travelers and a broadside from a Frederick Douglas rally are "pasted" onto the pages. After reading excerpts from the novel, students will assume the identity of either Miss Bet, Liza, General Grant, or a wounded prisoner of war to add their own scrapbook page to the novel. Student may produce a mixed media/collage page, a personal letter or other reproduction of a Civil War era artifact or document to share with the class and add to the scrapbook.

Maggie Lena Walker was born in Richmond, Virginia, during the Civil War. Her father, Eccles Cuthbert, was an Irish-born newspaperman. Her mother, Elizabeth Draper, married William Mitchell while they were both working as servants in the home of an aristocratic Richmond woman, Elizabeth Van Lew.

During the Civil War, Elizabeth Van Lew was a valued spy for the North, helping captured Union soldiers escape from Libby prison, hiding them in her home and getting them to the North. Van Lew had a reputation as being "eccentric," thus earning the nickname "Crazy Bet." She operated undercover as a charity worker, and was allowed to enter the infamous Libby Prison in the Southern capital of Richmond to bring Union prisoners food, medicine and supplies. While there, she would gather information from newer inmates about recent Confederate troop movements and pass it on to General Grant and the U.S. forces. She also operated a small spy ring that was based out of Richmond and included several high profile members of the Confederate government. It is

rumored that she even managed to get one of her former slaves, Mary Elizabeth Bowser, “sold” as a servant at the White House of the Confederacy to act as an informant. After the war ended, Van Lew was credited by Ulysses Grant as the most valuable source of information on the Confederate capital city. Along with Belle Boyd on the Southern side, she is remembered as the most famous spy of the Civil War, and she was eventually inducted into the Military Intelligence Hall of Fame.

Students will read excerpts from the novel, *Dear Ellen Bee*, which explores the tensions of the Civil War via a scrapbook format in this novel told through letters, newspaper clippings, and photographs. “Ellen Bee” is the joint alias of Miss Bet, the wealthy white abolitionist, and her freed slave, Liza, who wind up acting as Union spies in Richmond, Va. Meticulously researched and based on real persons and events, the novel covers the years 1856-1865, starting from the time Miss Bet sends a 10-year-old Liza to be educated in Philadelphia through fictional letters and diary entries, this book is based on the true story of two women living in Richmond, Virginia during the Civil War, who worked together to spy for the Union.

Students will become familiar with the story of Elizabeth Van Lew, the abolitionist who is well known to have pretended to be crazy so she would not be suspected of being a spy. But few will have heard of Mary Elizabeth Bowser, the daughter of two former slaves that Van Lew set free. Liza, as she is called in this story, is sent North by "Miss Bet," as she calls Miss Van Lew, to get an education. She returns to Richmond at age fifteen with her new husband. When her husband heads north to join the black Union regiments, Liza agrees to pose as a slave in the home of Jefferson Davis so she can listen and learn, and maybe help the Union cause. Although both are in danger because of their actions, they continue with their work because of their fierce loyalty to their country.