

BELLE BOYD

CONFEDERATE SPY



RICHARD F. SNOW



AMERICAN HERITAGE • NEW WORD CITY



BELLE BOYD

CONFEDERATE SPY

RICHARD F. SNOW

AMERICAN HERITAGE • NEW WORD CITY

She began her career as a spy and ended it as an actress – professions layered with myth and lies. One historian concluded she had never lived at all. But Belle Boyd was, in the words of Douglas Southall Freeman, “one of the most active and most reliable of the many secret woman agents of the Confederacy.”

Boyd was born in [Martinsburg](#), Virginia, on May 9, 1844, to Mary Rebecca and Benjamin Reed Boyd, a prosperous store owner. She described her childhood as the idyllic, care-free life of a tomboy who climbed trees and raced through the woods with her brothers, sisters, and cousins. Her hometown – nestled in the Shenandoah Valley – was populated by some of the most respectable families of “The Old Dominion”: the descendants of [Thomas Fairfax](#), a British lord who financed early settlement of the Virginia colony, and the Warringtons, whom novelist [William Makepeace Thackeray](#) immortalized in his novel, *The Virginians*. Martinsburg was also a town on the rise, its importance buoyed by the engine and machine shops of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad that were erected in the late 1840s.

But Belle was most impressed by the town’s natural beauty. “Imagine a bright warm sun shining upon a pretty two-storied house,” she wrote of her childhood home, “the walls of which are completely hidden by roses and honeysuckle in most luxuriant bloom. At a short distance in front of it flows a broad, clear, rapid stream: around it the silver maples wave their graceful branches in the perfume-laden air of the South.”

When she was twelve, Boyd was sent to Baltimore, Maryland, to study French, music, and the classics at Mount Washington Female College. When she turned sixteen, she was introduced into Washington society. The year was 1860; within a few months, the country would be divided by Civil War. But that spring, for Boyd, was filled “with all the high hopes and thoughtless joy natural to my time of life.” She didn’t dream, she wrote, “how soon my youth was to be blasted with a curse.”

Boyd attended theaters “crowded to excess.” She listened as great and statesmen gave speeches in the halls of Congress. “. . . for the last time for many years to come,” she remembered, “the daughters of the North and South commingled in sisterly love and friendship. . . . we ate and drank, we dined and

danced . . . without a thought of the volcano that was seething beneath our feet."

The ripples of rebellion were unmistakable that winter, with the election of President Abraham Lincoln decided. Boyd soon was at odds with her society friends from the North. When Virginia voted to secede from the Union the following April, Boyd returned home to Martinsburg, excited about contributing to the cause. Recruits were being rallied for the Confederate army, and Boyd's father Benjamin was one of the first to volunteer. Because of his social stature, Benjamin was offered a commission as an officer, but elected to leave the post open for someone else who might benefit more from the pay. He was assigned to the ranks of the 2nd Virginian – a regiment commanded by General Thomas J. Jackson, who had not yet earned his famous nickname "Stonewall;" the unit would later be known as the ["Stonewall Brigade."](#) Boyd joined with other women to raise money to arm and equip her father's regiment, whose colors included the inscription: "Our God, our country, and our women."

The 2nd Virginian was called to defend the arsenal at Harpers Ferry on April 27, 1861, and the absence of the men cast a pall over Martinsburg. "My home had now become desolate and lonely," Boyd wrote, ". . . and the reaction of feeling had set in." The effects of depression were most pronounced in her mother, Mary, whose face wore "an anxious, careworn expression." Mary, the daughter of an old officer and orphaned very young, had been sixteen when she married Benjamin Boyd; now she was separated from him for the first time.

Boyd tried to distract herself with books, and with assembling packets of provisions to be sent to her father in the field. But, she wrote, "I soon found these employments too tame and monotonous to satisfy my temperament, and I made up my mind to pay a visit to the camp."

The arsenal at Harpers Ferry had been in ruins when Jackson's brigades arrived, stripped of weapons and burned by a Union general named [Roger Jones](#) so it could not aid the Confederates. But Jackson had been able to salvage machines, tools, and rifle stocks, which he had shipped to Richmond, and set to fortifying the town.