



# UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FREE PRESS®

Independent reporting for today's Underground Railroad community

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## Mnuchin, at Trump's Urging, Kicks Tubman Off of New \$20 Bill

At the behest of President Trump, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin has scuttled the plan approved in the Obama administration to honor American heroine Harriet Tubman by putting her image on the \$20 bill. Mnuchin said that the change might take place in 2026 after Trump is no longer in office, but he made no promises.

The Tubman design was announced in 2016 by Obama's Treasury Secretary, Jack Lew, after nearly a year of soliciting public opinion. Said Lew, "The decision to put Harriet Tubman on the new \$20 was driven by thousands of responses we received from Americans young and old. I have been particularly struck by the many comments and reactions from children for whom Harriet Tubman is not just a historical figure, but a role model for leadership and participation in our democracy."

Learning of Mnuchin's action, Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., said, "The needless foot-dragging on this important effort is unacceptable. Our currency tells our country's story and it is past time to honor the contribu-



tions of Harriet Tubman. This delay sends an unmistakable message to women and girls, and communities of color, who were promised they'd see Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill."

Hearing rumors that Mnuchin might torpedo the Tubman \$20, Sen. Shaheen earlier introduced the Harriet Tubman Tribute Act of 2019 directing the Treasury to print Tubman's portrait on all new \$20 bills starting in 2021.

Passage of the House of Representatives companion bill, sponsored by Reps. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., and John Katko, R-N.Y., is assured in the Democratic House but not Sen. Shaheen's bill in Mitch McConnell's Senate. However, as six of the fifteen House cosponsors were Republicans, there might be strong enough Republican sentiment in the Senate to hold McConnell at bay.

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Weak excuses are used to mask the racism behind reversing the decision to put Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill.

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Just when a neighborhood thought it had its preservation battle won, a developer rears its ugly head again.

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Throughout the Civil War there was a mole in the Confederate president's household and she was black.

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Write one. Let us and, if you choose, *Free Press* readers know what is on your mind.

2

Nominate a person or group you know for a Free Press Prize awarded each September. The prizes are for preservation, leadership and advancement of knowledge in the Underground Railroad community. Visit [urfreepress.com](http://urfreepress.com) for a fillable nomination form. Nominations close August 31.

## At It Again, Developers Threaten Only Known Brooklyn Safehouse

As far back as our January 2008 issue, *Free Press* has been reporting on the saga of a homeowner and preservationists versus a developer and the City of New York over whether to preserve or demolish the last known Underground Railroad safe-house in the city's Brooklyn borough. From 1851 to 1863, the home was owned by prominent abolitionists Thomas and Harriet Truesdell.

It was a long bureaucratic battle, but by March 2016 we were able to report that the City's decision to seize the home at 227 Duffield Street by invoking eminent domain had been thwarted despite the developer's having poured over \$500,000 in legal fees into the fight. Visit [urfreepress.com](http://urfreepress.com) and click on Archives for the article.

Last month the City received an application to

tear down the home, which quickly triggered a Change.org petition by the Circle for Justice Innovations group urging the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate the building as an official landmark so that it cannot be torn down. Local preservationists plan a museum for the property to illuminate Brooklyn's Underground Railroad heritage. The Commission is currently evaluating the application.

Petitioners identify the building as "the last known standing historic site in Brooklyn where well-known abolitionists lived and where people found freedom through the Underground Railroad."

Several local City, State and Congressional elected officials are supporting groups trying to save the building.



227 Duffield Street in Brooklyn

# Free Black Mary Bowser Worked as Union Spy in the Confederate Capital

In spycraft, access to an adversary's plans doesn't get much better than being able to plant an agent among an opposing leader's personal staff. Such was the case with Mary Bowser's position as a servant in the household of Confederate President Jefferson Davis during the Civil War. Bowser was no ordinary servant or spy.

Born enslaved as Mary Jane Richards about 1839, she grew up in the household of Eliza and John Van Lew whose daughter, Elizabeth L. Van Lew, a well-known Richmond society figure, grew to abhor slavery.

At some point apparently in her teens, Richards became free, probably by manumission, as the Van Lew family grew to favor abolition. At age seven, Richards was baptized not in Richmond's First African Baptist Church where other Van Lew slaves were baptized, but in the Van Lew family church, suggesting that the Van Lews took special notice of Richards' high intelligence.

When the couple renounced slavery and moved to the North, Elizabeth Van Lew remained in the family mansion near Richmond. From there, she sent Richards north to school in Princeton, New Jersey, and in 1855 to a missionary community in Liberia.

In spring of 1860, Richards returned to Richmond and in 1861 married Wilson Bowser becoming Mary Bowser, the wedding taking place just four days after Confederate troops opened fire on Fort Sumter, South Carolina, starting the Civil War. When Bowser was arrested soon after, as it was illegal in Virginia to return there after living in a free state, Van Lew bailed her out. Elizabeth Van Lew had an ambitious plan for Mary Bowser.

As the Civil War broke out and Richmond became the Confederate capital, Elizabeth Van Lew recruited a spy ring which became known as the Richmond Underground. Though not expert, her spycraft was highly successful, with intelligence gathered by her agents crucial throughout the war, particularly to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant during the Battle of Richmond.

Soon after the war began, the socially well-connected Elizabeth Van Lew, all along passing as a loyal Confederate, arranged for Mary Bowser to be hired into none other than the Richmond household of Jefferson Davis, President of the Con-



The Jefferson Davis home in Richmond, Virginia, where Mary Bowser worked as a Union spy throughout the Civil War

federate States of America, where the alert, well educated Bowser served as Mrs. Davis's dressmaker.

Said historical novelist Lois Leveen who has written a book on Bowser, "Bowser used the assumption that she was far less intelligent than her white employers against them. By playing to that stereotype, she becomes an intelligence agent and, therefore, proves the value of black intelligence at undermining the institution of slavery itself."

Adds University of Virginia historian Elizabeth Varon who wrote of Bowser's spy career in her book, *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy*, "This is a humdinger of a tale."

Within days after the Confederacy's surrender and demise at Appomattox, Mary Bowser was teaching freed slaves in Richmond and giving lectures in the North under pseudonyms for protection. By early 1867, under the name Mary J. Richards, she founded a freedmen's school in Saint Mary's, Georgia, where she taught children by day, adults at night by herself. In June of that year, she began going by her new married name, Mary Jane Richards Garvin. At the close of the school year, it appears, though it is not certain, that Mary Jane Richards Garvin relocated with her new husband to the West Indies. Nothing further is known of her. She was about 30.

Yes, one humdinger of a tale.

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