

University of Richmond

From the Selected Works of Scott T. Allison

2018

Unsung heroes of Richmond: The
extraordinary feats of Gilbert Hunt,
Elizabeth Van Lew, and Sally
Tompkins

Mikaela R Rosen, *University of Richmond*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_allison/69/

16

Unsung Heroes of Richmond: The Extraordinary Feats of Gilbert Hunt, Elizabeth Van Lew, and Sally Tompkins

mikaela r. rosen

*“She risked everything that is dear to man –
friends, comfort, health, life itself,
all for the one absorbing desire of her heart,
that slavery might be abolished
and the Union preserved.”*

The above quotation, which can be found on a Civil War era gravestone, describes a larger-than-life hero. Can you guess the name of this courageous Civil War hero?

Perhaps you guessed Harriet Tubman, well known for her work as an armed scout and spy for the Union. Ms. Tubman would be an excellent guess, but actually the statement describes Elizabeth Van Lew, a southern socialite turned Union spy. So, why is Harriet Tubman a household name and well known for her contributions while Elizabeth Van Lew remains an invisible,

unsung hero? This chapter will investigate this key question by exploring the lives of three important citizens of Richmond, Virginia, who have made important contributions to humanity. First, important definitions and theories of heroism will be provided. Then the chapter will classify and discuss the heroism of Richmond's own Gilbert Hunt, Elizabeth Van Lew, and Sally Tompkins. The chapter concludes by discussing possible explanations as to why these three heroes have remained largely unknown.

Hero vs. Unsung Hero

Heroes are individuals who demonstrate practical wisdom, are concerned with protecting and promoting the welfare of others, and have the capacity to do the right thing in a particular situation (Kinsella et al, 2017). One cannot designate oneself as a hero; it is a designation that is bestowed upon you by others in the community. Heroes' contributions have been recognized with statues and monuments erected in their honor. Harriet Tubman, for example, has been honored with monuments in three states: Massachusetts, New York, and Maryland. Similar to recognized heroes, unsung heroes have also made important and lasting contributions to society.

Unsung heroes have the misfortune of remaining relatively unknown and lacking the praise they so richly deserve. Unsung heroes abound. People making substantial and positive, yet unrecognized, contributions pervade society and have graced every time period throughout human history. Unsung heroes, such as Elizabeth Van Lew, have not been honored with plaques or monuments. The only memorial recognizing the work of Elizabeth Van Lew is found at her gravesite on a stone, paid for by a kind Union soldier whom she had saved.

Theories of Heroic Development

While heroes ultimately make profound contributions, they do not necessarily begin their lives in any profound way. Most heroes start off with routine, humble lives. They are neither ideal citizens nor perfect humans. Instead, they undergo inner transformations during which they develop essential dispositional qualities that lead them to become heroes. Using Joseph Campbell's

(1949) theory of hero development as a guide, this chapter will examine the development of three unsung heroes who lived in and contributed to the community of Richmond in the 19th century.

Although Campbell's work was originally used to understand mythological hero stories, it is also relevant to appreciate real life human stories. Campbell described three phases in a hero's journey. The first phase, the *departure* stage, is the beginning of the journey that describes the pre-hero in her normal, familiar world. Situations change or opportunities emerge that set the hero's journey in motion and call her to embark on an adventure. In the second phase, the *initiation* stage, the hero traverses the threshold into the unknown, into an adventure, during which she faces trials and foes. According to Allison and Goethals (2017), a hero's journey is a human journey packed with experiences that force struggle, growth, and transformation, which ultimately cultivate heroic leadership. In the *return* phase, the final stage, the now-transformed hero returns to the ordinary world and uses newly gained skills to benefit humanity.

Another well-known theory of heroism that can shed light on our unsung heroes is the situationist perspective. This theory states that there are two factors that lead people to heroic action: the circumstances in which they find themselves, and how they react to these circumstances. The relationship between circumstance and reaction is called person-situation interaction; in other words, heroic personality factors predict heroic action and personality factors can be altered by these actions (Dik et al., 2017). According to Franco (2017), "Every human crisis demands a hero, an individual or small group of individuals who are not only aware of impending chaos, but in the vernacular are, 'ready, willing, and able' to act decisively." A situation can provide impetus to act heroically or malevolently, pushing some people to villainy and inspiring others to perform heroic deeds, an idea proposed by Zimbardo (2008) in his Lucifer Effect. Heroic leadership is illustrated in actions taken, or not taken, to reduce the crisis or to transform it in an unanticipated way (Franco, 2017).

Transformation can be measured by examining the development of important inner qualities. According to Allison and Goethals (2011), there are eight

characteristics, or inner qualities, that heroes usually possess: caring, charismatic, strong, smart, selfless, reliable, resilient, and inspirational. The early struggles a hero experiences grant them opportunities to better understand themselves and to develop qualities that allow them to take action that positively impacts humanity.

Kocher (2016) suggests that heroes demonstrate strong resilience to stay the course, allowing them to remain completely dedicated to their cause in spite of any obstacles that get in their way. The heroic desire to protect others is congruent with the EMP heroic theory proposed by Kinsella (2017) that identifies three goals of a hero: to promote change, to serve as a moral role model, and to protect those around her. The three unsung heroes featured in this chapter lived during a time when slavery ripped apart the northern and southern regions of the United States. The unique crisis set each person on a heroic path that required her to find and use her special talent to bring about change, protect those around her, and achieve heroic goals. While their goals and skills differed dramatically, their paths had many commonalities. Each person's story provides a window into Civil War history, describing the resilience and great heroism needed to combat debate over slavery and other racial injustices.

introducing our unsung heroes

Before delving deeply into each hero's life, it is helpful to provide a summary of each unsung hero's life context and their transformative impact.

Gilbert Hunt was a slave whose circumstances led him to develop the industry, self-confidence, and independence that allowed him to earn a living and respect from the Richmond community, in addition to saving lives, and ultimately to buying his own freedom.

Elizabeth Van Lew was a Southern socialite whose circumstances fostered a life of espionage in her effort to support the Union and promote abolition. She devoted her life to aiding the Union by infiltrating the Confederate Army, risking her well-being and social status in the process.

Sally Louisa Tompkins was a Southern socialite whose circumstances thrust her to fund and manage a general hospital in Richmond, where her high sanitary standards saved lives. This exemplary work forced Confederate President Jefferson Davis to commission Tompkins with the rank of captain, making her the one and only confederate female officer.

In the next section of this chapter, we will reveal and analyze the lives and journeys taken by each hero in addition to exploring why they remain unsung even in the 21st century.

gilbert hunt: a slave and a hero

Gilbert Hunt was born in 1780 in King William County, Virginia. There are few records about Hunt since he was born a slave. However, it is reasonable to assume that he lived an extremely hard life of a slave of that time period. His strong work ethic and natural talent as a blacksmith allowed him to take a very unique journey that ended in attaining heroic status and freedom. Hunt's early life was unstable because he was sold and resold as valuable skilled property. Somewhere during this time Hunt developed welding and building skills under the mentorship of experienced blacksmiths. He moved to Richmond, Virginia when his master's daughter married.

Hunt's Departure

Hunt first gained public attention in 1811 when he helped save nearly a dozen civilians caught in a fire at the Richmond Theater. On the evening of December 26, just after Hunt returned from worship at a local church, Hunt was startled by his master's mistress crying, "Help! The playhouse is on fire!" She begged the blacksmith to rush to the scene and to save her only daughter. Hunt ran to the fire and analyzed the situation. In his diary, Hunt described the gruesome scene: "The door was too small to let the crowd, push forward by the scorching flames to get out, and numbers of them were leaping from the windows only to be crushed to death by the fall" (Barrett, 1859). His first step was to approach a neighbor to borrow a mattress to catch people who had jumped as they attempted to escape the fire.

Unfortunately, the callous and cowardly neighbor refused Hunt's request, so he implemented his backup plan, which put him in even greater danger. He grabbed a stepladder and ran to a spot below a top window from which several people had made fatal leaps. Climbing up the ladder as far as he could, he then braced to catch ladies who were carefully lowered down from the window by James McCaw, a local doctor. One by one, the two saved twelve women until the flames intensified to the point that Dr. McCaw was forced to jump out the window himself.

Years later Hunt retold the story: "He jumped from one of the windows, and when he touched ground, I thought he was dead. He could not move an inch. No one was near him; for the wall above, was tottering like a drunken man, ready at any moment to fall and crush him to death. I heard him scream out, 'Will nobody save me' and, at the risk of my own life, I rushed to him and bore him away to a place of safety" (Drucker, 2016b).

Hunt's action in this difficult situation provides evidence that he possessed several of the eight important inner qualities of heroes as described by Allison and Goethals (2011). Specifically, he exemplified the qualities of caring, strong, reliable, selfless, and intelligent. Rushing to search for the mistress' daughter demonstrates loyalty to his master's family, and staying to save as many people as possible demonstrates his loyalty and reliability to the entire community. Hunt's actions also epitomize immense physical bravery and intelligence. According to Becker and Eagly (2004), heroes are willing to act in a "courageous way despite physical risk." Gilbert Hunt approached this crisis situation with a well-devised plan and implemented thoughtful follow-up plans, without any hesitation or concern for his own safety.

Examining this story from a situationist perspective can illustrate the significance of Hunt's bravery. Although calamity often inspires people to respond heroically, the weakness or strength of a person's character can also be exposed when he or she is placed in the face of danger (Kinsella et al, 2017). Hunt showed heroic courage that night, but not everyone in attendance showed the same quality. For example, during this fire, one young girl who had become separated from her companions as the fire spread approached a white man. Instead of helping the girl when she grabbed onto the man's

coat skirt, he reached for his penknife and cut his coat skirt loose and fled (Drucker, 2016b).

According to Franco et al. (2011), people who take action in crises are often motivated by altruism, which Franco suggests is fundamentally different from heroism. Using a soft drink analogy, Zimbardo (2007) calls altruism “heroism light.” Often in times of crisis, people’s actions are motivated by kin altruism, which refers to voluntary behavior that is intended to benefit a genetically close relative (Batson, 2011). Many people that night during the devastating fire acted because of kin altruism. As Hunt described, “there were displays of love in death,” as parents, children, and spouses took great risk to save a loved one (Barret, 1859). Hunt, on the other hand, did not have any kin at risk in the fire. Without blood connection to anyone at the theater and as a black slave unable to attend performances with those in the theater, he risked his life to save the lives of others who likely would not have done the same for him. There is no truer heroism.

Hunt’s Initiation

The initiation stage of Hunt’s journey began shortly after the fire. Until June of 1812, it is likely that Hunt worked hard for his master and carefully followed orders as expected of a slave. However, when the War of 1812 broke out, Hunt found greater independence and new opportunities for heroism. Fearful that his family would be collateral casualties of the war, Hunt’s master left Richmond and hid in the countryside. He left Hunt minding the blacksmith store. Hunt took expert care of his master’s home and store with an ironclad loyalty. Hunt, even as a slave, had developed emotional strength and leadership skills needed to succeed during his master’s absence. In his diary, Hunt wrote: “During my absence of the family, my master’s residence and all its contents were left entirely in my charge, and had the British come upon us, no American would have fought more bravely for the defense of his own home and fireside than I would have done for the defense of my master’s property; for he never treated me like a servant, but rather like a member of his own household” (Drucker, 2016a).

The broad community and Hunt's master directly benefited from Hunt's actions. Throughout the war against Great Britain, while caring after his master's house and business, Hunt made carriages for cannons, grappling hooks for boarding vessels, pick-axes, and horseshoes for the United States Army. "We worked night and day, not even stopping to rest on the Sabbath day ... During all this time, my master gave me complete control of the whole shop," he said (Tyler-McGraw & Kimball, 1988).

Hunt's Return

During the return part of Gilbert's journey, he developed additional confidence and independence. In 1823, Hunt signed on with the Richmond volunteer fire brigade and was present at another major fire, this one at the State Penitentiary. After a hole was cut in the side of the building, Hunt firmly supported the Captain as he grabbed prisoners, one by one, and handed them down to soldiers below who were present to prevent escapes. During this entire ordeal, Hunt's immense strength allowed him to be a stable base for the Captain. Together, they rescued 224 prisoners, many of whom wore shackles that he had made in his own blacksmith shop (Bethea, 1999). Hunt turned his initial heroism into his vocation, which can classify his work as a calling, or as Dik et al. (2017) defines it, a "perceived transcendent summons" to live a particular way. Because Hunt's work and calling were one and the same, he had deep intrinsic motivation to do well in his position and to provide heroic benefit to the community.

By December of 1829, he had saved enough money to purchase his own freedom. As a free black man in a Southern state, he navigated a world of restricted opportunities and unequal rights. Independent and relatively well off, Hunt joined a colonization movement among free blacks. Soon after he bought his freedom, he boarded the schooner Harriet and sailed for Liberia, established to be a free black republic on Africa's western coast. Hunt wrote in his publication, "Since this time I have been quietly following my calling. I have lived in Richmond, I have labored in Richmond, I hope to die and be buried in Richmond." (Barrett, 1859).

With that, he returned to Richmond. His intention was to accomplish something that was personally meaningful and would lead to an eventual interaction with aspects of the world beyond himself. Bronk and Riches (2017) proposed the idea of purpose-guided heroism, which suggests that having an enduring purpose in life predisposes individuals for heroic action. Individuals with purpose are more likely to act heroically because they are able to recognize fulfilling opportunities for heroic action. Hunt was dedicated to his purpose in Richmond, repeatedly saving the lives of others in two separate fires (Jones, 2016). The first emergency guided him to his purpose and the second was more easily recognizable as an opportunity for him to pursue his heroic calling.

Hunt's Transformative Effect

In total 72 people died the night of the infamous Richmond Fire, including many government officials, and at that time it was deemed the worst urban disaster in American history. This fire spurred legislation regarding building codes for future theaters (Bethea, 1999). Hunt's famed bravery in the face of a deadly fire resulted in the 1859 publication of a booklet, "Gilbert Hunt, the City Blacksmith." Proceeds of the booklet were given to Hunt to support him in his old age. By the time of his death in 1863, people of all races throughout Virginia and other southern states held Gilbert Hunt in high esteem. His courage and philanthropy had earned him respect of the highest kind. This was evident at Gilbert's funeral when hundreds of mourners packed the Richmond burial site (Drucker, 2016a). Hunt's transformative impact is best demonstrated by the fact that he was held in high regard by all races during an era when white people in the South did not often show respect to black people.

elizabeth van lew: the rise of a spy

Elizabeth Van Lew was born on October 25, 1818, in Richmond, Virginia, to John and Eliza Van Lew. To better understand the complexities of Elizabeth's life, it is helpful to explore the background of her parents. Her father was born in Long Island, New York, and moved to Richmond as a teenager. By

the time John was in his mid-thirties he had developed a successful hardware business and was therefore able to provide Elizabeth and her family with a highly privileged lifestyle. Elizabeth's mother, Eliza Baker, grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Eliza's father, Hilary Baker, was the mayor of Philadelphia for 3 terms, from 1789 to 1796, and he was an early member of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Eliza followed in her father's footsteps and joined that same society in her later years. As a result, Eliza acquired a strong commitment to abolitionist sentiment, which she retained even when living in the south. The upbringing of Elizabeth's mother, Eliza, strongly influenced decisions made by Elizabeth's family. Eliza transmitted her abolitionist views to her children, especially to Elizabeth. This made Eliza a key mentor and heroic influence for Elizabeth.

Van Lew's Departure

In the departure stage of Elizabeth's story, she was sent by her father, who wanted the best education for his daughter, to Philadelphia to attend a Quaker school that instilled the values of a traditional Christian woman. These values were charity, respect, and equality. Elizabeth's time in Philadelphia was transformative; she entered school a young girl and emerged a sophisticated activist. Despite the fact that she grew up owning slaves, after attending the school in Philadelphia she adopted a Quaker perspective on slavery, which viewed abolition as a Christian duty. This antislavery perspective caused Elizabeth to change her lifestyle and many of her fundamental assumptions.

The Van Lew hardware business was prosperous, serving elite leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and large organizations such as the University of Virginia. Her family's great success and fortune allowed Elizabeth and her two younger siblings, Anna and John, to host famous houseguests such as Judge John Marshall and Edgar Allan Poe (Weaver, 2016). Her family was so well connected that they enjoyed front row seats in the Van Lew family pew at St. Episcopal Church (Abbott, 2014).

Everyone in Richmond knew Elizabeth and her family. However, she was very different from her father and her community, as she documented in her diary: "It was my sad privilege to differ in many things from the perceived

opinions and principles in my locality” (Abbott, 2014). In the South during the early 1800s, high society families were expected to own slaves. While the Van Lews maintained slaves to uphold their status, Elizabeth made certain that they were treated well. As a neighbor observed, “From what I have seen of the management of the Negroes of the place, the family of Van Lew’s are, I am satisfied, genuine abolitionists” (Abbott, 2014). Because Elizabeth embraced her Yankee roots, she was unable to achieve the high standing that came with her family name. Instead of being embraced by the community, she was “tolerated” and referred to as a “benign oddity” for her differences in opinion.

Elizabeth accomplished many morally notable and extraordinary things. She did not benefit financially or socially from her espionage. She took action because she cared about the plight of black people. As her heroic journey unfolded, she never lost her initial attitude towards the African Americans. She often said to her brother’s wife Mary, a close relative of Thomas Jefferson and a deeply rooted southern belle, “The negroes have black faces, but white hearts” (Abbott, 2014). As a Unionist in the heart of the Southern Confederate states, Elizabeth established a sophisticated ability to reason through complex moral problems, a characteristic psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg identified as key in heroes (Kohlberg, 1984).

Elizabeth challenged her father to free the family slaves. While her father did not release the slaves, she stayed deeply committed to this goal. Finally, upon her father’s death in 1843, Elizabeth convinced her brother, John, to emancipate the family slaves, including future Union spy Mary Elizabeth Bowser. She not only freed Mary, but she arranged for her education in the North and sent her as a missionary to Liberia, enhancing the life of her ex-slave. Elizabeth’s steadfast commitment to abolition and her willingness to constantly risk her life as a Union spy qualifies Elizabeth as a moral hero, as defined by Janoff-Bulman and Bharadwaj (2017). What makes the moral hero special is that her behavior is deeply rooted in a morally worthy motivation to do what is right simply because it is right. Elizabeth is a moral hero because her desire to uphold Quaker values motivated her actions, not any reward.

Elizabeth’s alignment with the Union during the Civil War began the most exciting portion of her heroic journey. During the summer of 1861, Elizabeth

and her mother visited captured Union soldiers held in Richmond prisons. Shortly after their first visit, *The Richmond Enquirer* wrote, “Two ladies, a mother and a daughter, living on Church Hill, have lately attracted public notice by their assiduous attentions to the Yankee prisoners... these two women have been expending their opulent means in aiding and giving comfort to the miscreants who have invaded our sacred soil” (LeSourd, 2006). Some would have fled from this kind of public attention, but not Elizabeth Van Lew. These actions reflect what Joseph Campbell (1949) describes as the initiation phase, which is the time when challenges become increasingly difficult and heroic transformation is most likely to unfold.

Cunning Wit Defeats Villains

As a Union supporter, Elizabeth was surrounded by villains in the Confederate capital city of Richmond. In order to win favor in her city and hide her abolitionist leanings, she purposefully welcomed both Union and Confederate guests. At one dinner party, a particular Confederate guest, Captain Alfred Gibbs, discussed a topic that changed her life forever. Gibbs casually reported about Union escapees from the local prison; this disclosure prompted Elizabeth to choose to help by becoming a spy. Gibbs was unaware that his boastful prison stories actually helped the Union cause.

Throughout much of her time as a spy and leader of a successful espionage ring, Elizabeth faced suspicion. Initially, women were presumed safe from suspicion but after Rose Greenhow, a Confederate spy, was imprisoned for espionage in 1862 for spying in Washington DC, women were targeted by the government officials just as often, if not more, than men. To not arouse suspicion, Elizabeth adopted the persona of a crazy woman, and the citizens of Richmond soon called her “Crazy Bet” (Lineberry, 2011).

Another villain Elizabeth encountered was General John Wildner, the menacing, 61-year-old commanding officer of prisons. General Wildner was part of an elite group, called the “plug-uglies” who had the sole purpose of identifying and intercepting Union spies. So when Elizabeth was eager to help union prisoners, he was extremely suspicious of her intentions. Elizabeth assured him that she was merely acting as any good Christian would. The prisoners were

“in need of charity is surely the general, as a fellow Christian, would understand” (Abbott, 2014). While this was true at the time, ultimately, Elizabeth’s motives were far from innocent and General John Wildner was correct to be suspicious. Elizabeth soon realized the importance of going beyond showing compassion for the imprisoned, and she expanded her work by aiding prison escapes, providing information about safe houses, and ultimately becoming a spy.

Van Lew’s Initiation and Mentors

Choosing to assist Union soldiers was choosing to risk her own life for a highly cherished cause (Lineberry, 2011). These actions demonstrated that Elizabeth had evolved tremendously from the privileged young girl who graduated from a Quaker school with strong convictions. Yet Elizabeth was poised to experience even greater change. Two of these soldiers she helped to successfully escape returned to the North, and upon their return, told General Benjamin F. Butler about Elizabeth. Identifying an opportunity, General Butler contacted Elizabeth about becoming a spy for the Union. According to the hero’s monomyth (Campbell, 1949), Elizabeth needed guidance at this crucial turning point. General Butler became Miss Van Lew’s mentor when he gave her wise advice, indirect practical training, and inspiration for her creation of a successful spy league. At this point the challenges become increasingly difficult for Elizabeth, testing her to the utmost limit, forcing her to change and grow.

Back in her home, Elizabeth took actions to support civil war soldiers. For example, she cared for one dying Union soldier in her own house, and when he died she was threatened. The night of the funeral, she was followed by a strange man who said, “you dare to show sympathy for any of those prisoners. I would shoot them as I would blackbirds” (Abbott, 2014). The town did not appreciate her charity work; the Richmond Examiner printed about Elizabeth and her mother: “They are Yankee offshoots, who had succeeded by stinginess, double-dealing and cuteness to amass out of the credulity of Virginians a good, substantial pile of the root of all evil” (Varon, 2003).

The Spy Ring

Elizabeth's long-term dedication to protecting human rights makes her a powerful role model, mentor, and great protector of people. These are three important heroic qualities identified by Kinsella et al.'s (2017) EMP theory of heroism. Elizabeth concocted an immensely intricate spy network comprised of many different people, including fellow aristocrats, slaves, former slaves, civilians, and both Union and Confederate generals. Slaves were an integral part of the operation, both behind the scenes and in the action. Luckily, Elizabeth had maintained a good relationship with her freed slaves, some of whom still worked for her and others who kept in contact. Many of Elizabeth's former slaves helped guide escaped Union prisoners to Elizabeth's secret room in the dark of night and then guided them again to Union General McClellan.

One extremely important slave was Mary Jane Bowser, who has a chapter devoted to her in this book (Caron, 2017). Elizabeth Van Lew treated Mary Bowser as part of her own family and had sent her North to learn how to read. This came in handy when Elizabeth convinced Bowser to join her spy coalition. It just so happened that the President of the Confederacy's wife, Mrs. Jefferson Davis, was looking for a new slave. There was a golden opportunity for an educated slave to infiltrate the Confederate headquarters.

Bowser was inspired by her mentor, Elizabeth, and agreed to be a spy inside of the southern capital. She was able to read important military documents and memorize information that she would relay to Elizabeth while out doing errands. On days when there was information of crucial importance, Mary would hang a specific article of clothing out to dry and subsequently go to the seamstress with a dress containing the update. Other days, she would go to the bakery of Thomas McNiren or to grocers like FWE Lohmann (Abbott, 2014).

Elizabeth not only recruited many carriers for her espionage; she united an entire spy network using her strong leadership skills. Ordinary people, such as the seamstress, played a monumental role in the success of the spy ring as they provided inconspicuous vehicles for information to be transferred.

Charles Palmer and John Minor Botts, two ex-Whigs, also helped transfer vital messages to the North in their business travels. Elizabeth was a hero, in this case, for uniting and representing the values of her organization of spies, despite tremendous risk to her own well-being.

Van Lew's Transformative Effect on the War

In the return phase of her journey, Elizabeth enacted long-acting influence. As the head of a Richmond spy network, historians credit her with providing perhaps the most important intelligence that impacted the outcome of the war. Elizabeth, code-named "Babcock" by the Union, wrote her messages in colorless ink that would only become visible after it was soaked in milk. She had those messages torn up and then transported in the oddest of places, such as the soles of shoes and the shells of eggs, by multiple couriers and through various relay stations (DeMarco, 2014). As the war proceeded, she underwent what Allison and Smith (2015) refer to as an emotional transformation, showing a great sense of compassion for others as motivation to act accordingly with her moral code. Elizabeth remained active in intelligence gathering until the end of the war. Following the war, Van Lew became involved in Republican politics. In 1869, President Grant appointed her postmaster of Richmond, a position that she held during his two terms. During her term as postmaster, she helped modernize the city's postal system, employing a number of African Americans in the process. She also sponsored a library for African Americans that opened in Richmond in 1876 (DeMarco, 2014).

Evidence of Van Lew's Heroic Traits

In a time when people were afraid to speak up for what they believed in, Elizabeth was heroic for courageously defying the norms of society by supporting and protecting people of color. According to Staub's (2015) analysis of heroism, Elizabeth was willing to risk "intense social opposition, ridicule, or risk her social status or standing in a community." As a result, Ms. Van Lew lived a life of ostracization by the Richmond community. Elizabeth wrote in her diary, "I was never an abolitionist. Abolitionists are fanatics who will stop at nothing to achieve their goals. I have always spoke out against slavery, for which I paid dearly in the loss of many friends. But I was never a fanatic"

(Varon, 2003). Elizabeth died a transformed woman, penniless and buried in an unmarked grave, until a soldier whom she saved donated a tombstone. Her heroic transformation not only affected her own life but also the course of the Civil War and the trajectory of the United States for centuries afterward.

captain sally tompkins: the rise of a medical entrepreneur

Miss Sally Louisa Tompkins was born on November 11, 1833, at the Poplar Grove estate in Mathews County, Virginia. She was the youngest of eight children, in a family of wealth and rich military history, dating back to the American Revolution. The Tompkins family had a strong background of military service, which sparked Sally's eventual interest in aiding soldiers during the Civil War.

In the departure stage of Tompkins' story, she developed an instinct for caring for others and for nursing skills. In her early years, she was active in the restoration of her church and in tending to the sick. Unfortunately, three of Sally's sisters died due to an epidemic and her father died when she was only five years old. One of the family slaves recalled that as a young girl, "She goes out to our cabins to comfort the sick and old, she search the woods for ailing critters..." (Hagerman, 1996). So even as a child, Tompkins dedicated her time to helping care for others. At the age of six, Sally, her mother, and her only remaining sister moved to Richmond where they joined St. James Episcopal Church and made the acquaintance of Judge John Robertson, an extremely well known and wealthy Richmond resident.

After the Battle of Bull Run, President Jefferson Davis sent out a plea to the Confederate citizens to contribute to the war effort. At the outbreak of the war, women in every station in life were more than willing to give to their cause and country, but not all were viable (Andrews, 1920). Tompkins believed that caring for the sick was not only her duty as a devout Christian and loyal confederate, but also as a good humanitarian. Sally had clearly defined values and beliefs so she did not have to wonder if she should act. Being that the main issue with the Confederate Army was a shortage of medical care, it is

not surprising that she took action by converting the recently vacated home of Judge Robertson into a hospital.

Only ten short days after President Davis' call for help, Sally Tompkins opened the Robertson Hospital to care for wounded soldiers, not knowing that Richmond would soon become an epicenter of the war. Tompkins set to work preparing the building, using her substantial inheritance from her father as well as donations from her lady friends at St. James Episcopal Church to refurbish the house into a hospital. The furniture was moved upstairs, and cots were assembled on the first floor. However, Mrs. Robertson insisted that the furniture they had moved upstairs be rearranged and used. The capacity of the house was thereby increased to hold 25 beds.

Sally took a gambit in this crisis, playing one set of contingencies off of another. A gambit can be defined as a move that trades off one resource to gain another in order to achieve a desired goal (Franco, 2017). Sally, the crisis leader, accepted a further loss of precious resources, in this case her money, to buy time until another set of resources from the government arrived. What differentiates this move from the typical leader's response is that it is heroic to deliberately sacrifice some key assets in the hopes of gaining others. Similar to that of Gilbert Hunt, Sally Tompkins' heroism is seen in her work as a calling because she had intrinsic motivation to do good for the community, and her career path granted her the opportunity.

Unparalleled Sanitation and Care Defeats Villains

On July 31, 1861, Ms. Tompkins opened the hospital as a private entity and did not charge for any services. Other civilian run hospitals began popping up near battlefields, but they overcharged and cared very little for their patients. As a result, President Davis sent out Dr. Carrington, an inspector of hospitals, to shut down all private hospitals in the South (MacLean, 2013). The inspector and even the government itself did not intimidate Tompkins. She was confronted with a glass cliff, a precarious situation associated with greater risk and criticism directed at women leaders (Hoyt, 2014). Tompkins pleaded her case to the President; after all, during the war she cared for 1,333 Confederate soldiers in her hospital with only 73 deaths, establishing the remarkable

record of returning 94% of them to service and sustaining the lowest mortality rate of any military hospital (MacLean, 2013).

At this time, in the "Old South", it was unheard of to use force to compel a lady to comply with the law (Andrews, 1920). As a result, President Davis was convinced by her impressive positive statistics and established the Robertson Hospital in the network of official military hospitals. The Confederate government assigned six surgeons to her staff but had to limit food and medicine due to the supplies blockade implemented by the North. Miss Tompkins took on the responsibility of a hero, according to Decter-Frain et al. (2017). She united people in the supply chain, fostering their cooperation in the collection of needed goods and inspiring her friends and neighbors to contribute to the war effort. Civilians donated bandages and linen, and women who could not handle working with the graphically wounded rolled bandages at home or donated food. Tompkins supplied everything else with her own money, contributing her own resources after running out of what was given. She had "the ability to act for a meaningful cause, despite experiencing the fear associated with perceived threat exceeding the available resources" (Shelp, 1984).

Tompkins's Transformative Effect on the War and Medicine

The ability to inspire others is viewed as a central characteristic of heroism and an essential element of a hero's journey (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015). One quality that made Sally so unique was her natural talent with medical care. In her era, public nursing was considered a vocation for women of low social status, and in fact it was illegal to be a military nurse until 1862. Tompkins did not let the status quo or even the laws prevent her from giving back to her community. In fact, Tompkins monitored her hospital closely to ensure that no one could question the morality of any of the young women caring for the soldiers. She did an exemplary job of guiding these women, never letting criticisms from others interfere with their good deeds. Sally commended them: "I admire their courage in the face of public criticism and male resentment..." (Hagerman, 1996). Sally then became the first high-ranking female military officer, becoming the Captain of Cavalry, inspiring many talented women who had been afraid to aid with the war effort.

While Tompkins inspired her community, her greatest impact would not be appreciated for many years. The Robertson Hospital had an extremely low mortality rate because Tompkins' obsession with cleanliness prevented the spread of disease and infection among patients and volunteers alike. Her anti-septic practices led to progress in sanitation during war, and afterwards. Her leadership style in her hospital allowed her staff to develop what Smith (2004) describes as a "crisis-prepared culture" under situational constraints, such as supply shortage and terminally ill patients. Tompkins was indeed a woman who was ahead of her time, a hero who broke barriers and who established innovations in her hospital.

Evidence of Tompkins' Heroic Traits

Allison and Goethals (2011) proposed that heroes possess most or all of the great eight characteristics of heroes. Tompkins clearly possessed seven of these eight traits. The traits are caring, selfless, charismatic, strong, smart, reliable, resilient, and inspiring. She was a naturally caring woman from the beginning, caring for her family and then ailing soldiers. Tompkins had what Franco et al. (2011) refer to as the heroic imagination or the "mind-set, a collection of attitudes about helping others in need, beginning with caring for others in compassionate ways, but also willing to sacrifice or take risks on behalf of others or in defense of a moral cause." She risked her financial security, eventually lost her abundance of wealth and fell from greatness (Allison & Goethals, 2013). She even broke the law for an entire year caring for military personnel without explicit permission. Tompkins eventually obtained permission from authorities by exhibiting more key personality traits such as charm, resilience, and reliability. By going to President Davis directly and fighting for her cause, she was able to keep her hospital open, convincing him with her likability and the impressive reliability of her hospital.

Tompkins also was immensely intelligent, showing an ability to care for all types of patients and wounds with little schooling. Most importantly, she was selfless, maintaining Robertson Hospital without any form of payment (Faust, 1986). Finally, her patients, who called her "Captain Sally," clearly worshipped and adored her. This adulation is common for people who idolize their heroes (Becker, 1973). Tompkins was admired and had many friends, and she was also

loved by many in the community. Helping others was her purpose; those who do not view the world through a lens of purpose may ignore or miss entirely opportunities for heroic action, according to Bronk and Riches (2017). The following quote is from a contemporary newspaper account of her death and the semi-military honors accorded her: "She was more than eighty years of age, and she was shrunken and bent and piteously feeble; she died, too, in a Home for Needy..." (Andrews, 1920).

differences in dimensions of transformation

The three heroes in this chapter all followed a similar journey, including departure, initiation, and return. During the course of their journey, heroes undergo inner transformations that can be observed and quantified by analyzing the recognizable dispositional qualities that they gain. Allison and Goethals' (2017) ten dimensions of transformation help with understanding the similarities and differences in heroes' transformations. Understanding the disparities between these heroic transformations and the factors behind them will allow us to more deeply understand each of our unsung hero's body of work.

The ten dimensions of transformation include subject (hero or followers), scale (individual, dyad, group, or society), speed (fast or slow), duration (short-lived or long lasting), timing (early life or late life), direction (classic, enlightened, redeemed, no transformation), type (moral, emotional, spiritual, physical, motivational), depth (shallow or deep), openness (motivation and ability) and source (internal and external). The dimensions of subject, speed, and type are most relevant to the heroes considered in this chapter.

Subject. Heroes can be lone heroes, without a target audience committed to them, or a hero whose metamorphic effect on other people attracted a throng of followers. While Gilbert Hunt was a lone hero, Elizabeth Van Lew and Sally Tompkins had followers. They served as heroic role models for others, inspiring them to develop important inner traits and strengths. Van Lew developed a successful network of spies and Tompkins inspired an entire hospital of volunteers.

Speed. Transformations do not occur at fixed intervals or at a steady speed. Some heroes may be in the process of transforming for decades before realizing their full heroic potential, while others may only take an instant to realize that potential. Hunt's transformation was the slowest because it took place over many years as he found his purpose. Speed is a critical variable in responses to emergency situations that demand a rapid response, according to Franco (2017). Both women heroes considered in this chapter were directly influenced by the Civil War and were, therefore, catapulted in their transformations. Tompkins, whose transformation happened during the war, transformed the fastest. She transformed from privileged southern belle to hospital leader almost overnight. While Van Lew's transformation was relatively quick, it actually began when she was a student in a Quaker school in Philadelphia. Similar to Tompkins, the crisis situation of the Civil War acted as a catalyst for Van Lew's further transformations and actions.

Type. There are many types of transformations that heroes experience, such as moral, motivational, emotional, and physical (Allison & Smith, 2015). The heroes discussed in this chapter each manifested a different transformation type. Gilbert had a motivational transformation during which events in his life slowly changed his motivational focus (Allison & Smith, 2015). Often tragedies or stressful situations will foster this change of direction in a person's life; for example, consider how the fires that Hunt was involved in shaped the course of his life. Elizabeth adopted a strong moral code, displaying a moral transformation by which her sense of right and wrong intensified over time and allowing her to gain the confidence to act heroically. Sally had the most interesting and private emotional transformation. Transformations of this type involve the attainment of heroic emotional traits such as courage, compassion, confidence, and humility (Allison & Smith, 2015; Worthington & Allison, 2018). During this transformation, Sally benefited from an increased confidence in herself and her work. She embraced her calling and helped the war effort by maintaining an impeccable hospital and inspiring a myriad of volunteers.

why are they unsung?

While this chapter presents Hunt, Van Lew and Tompkins as heroes deserving of attention, they have never been adequately recognized during their lifetimes or afterwards. The following quotes provide insight to why these heroes are not underappreciated.

“He loved his master and respected him his master never beat him or spoke to him in a degrading way. They had a good relationship” (Drucker, 2016a, referring to Gilbert Hunt)

She [Elizabeth Van Lew] was *“tolerated”* and referred to as a *“benign oddity”* for her differences in opinion.

“In Richmond I believe I’m considered something of an oddity - harmless, so I’m tolerated.” - Sally Tompkins (Hagerman, 1996)

These quotes reveal a visceral response to our unsung heroes, a response rooted in a fear of difference. All three heroes considered in this chapter broke out of their traditional restrictive roles dictated by social norms of the times. They were committed to protecting others by serving their communities and speaking up against what was considered “common sense” during their time. As the three quotes illustrate, our heroes were actually considered by their contemporaries as oddities, weird, and even crazy. Gilbert Hunt was freed and resided in the capital of the Confederate South. He had a good relationship with his master and was therefore considered an odd outlier. Van Lew and her mother were isolated, labeled as odd, and considered traitors. Tompkins knew she was going against what was socially acceptable and felt discontent from the community. It is important to note that their status as “odd” and harmless is actually what enabled them to act as heroes, allowing them to avoid persecution, evade authorities, and establish a pattern of heroic leadership.

Another reason why these heroes remain unsung is because they represented resistance. Heroes are destined to “act as a source of social control” (Klapp, 1954). Each of the heroes discussed in this chapter was a member of a minority group that resided outside of the culture mainstream. “Heroes

shape and represent culture” (Hegel, 1801/1975). During the time of the Civil War, mainstream culture was represented by Christian white men, and thus the heroes of the day came from these demographics. Gilbert Hunt was an African American in the South during a time of heightened racial tension. Van Lew and Tompkins were women in a time of extreme patriarchy. Their achievements were easily overshadowed by the contributions of white, male counterparts.

It is incumbent upon us, as 21st-century citizens, to bring into the light these unsung heroes’ accomplishments. While these heroes made their contributions two centuries ago, true heroism is timeless and cries out for recognition. These extraordinary Richmond citizens were denied the proper recognition for their heroism because of the prejudices and social restrictions of their time. It is important that society views the actions of people from all backgrounds and demographics with equal consideration for recognized heroic status. It has been the central goal of this chapter to give this heroic trio the reverence and recognition that they so richly deserve in the hopes that you, the reader, will be inspired by their legacies.

references

- Abbott, Karen. Z (2014). *Liar, Temptress, Soldier, Spy: Four Women Undercover in the Civil War*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2011). *Heroes: What They Do & Why We Need Them*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2013). *Heroic Leadership: An Influence Taxonomy of 100 Exceptional Individuals*. New York: Routledge.
- Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R., & Kramer, R. M. (2017). “The Hero’s Transformation.” In *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, 379-396. New York: Routledge.
- Allison, S. T., & Smith, G. (2015). *Reel heroes & villains*. Richmond, VA: Agile Writer Press.
- Andrews, Matthew P. (1920). *The women of the South in war times*. Baltimore: The Norman, Remington Co.
- Barrett, Philip, comp. (1859). *Gilbert Hunt, the City Blacksmith*. Richmond: J. Woodhouse.
- Batson, C. D. (2011). *Altruism in humans*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Becker, S. W., & Eagly, A. H. (2004). The heroism of women and men. *American Psychologist*, 59, 163-178.

- Bethea, Dorine. (2016). "Gilbert Hunt." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, February 5, 1999. 12 October.
- Bronk, Kendell and Riches, Brian. (2017). "The Intersection of Purpose and Heroism: A Study of Exemplars." In *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, 495-506. New York: Routledge.
- Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Caron, M. E. (2017). *Mary Elizabeth Bowser: The Game-Changing Hero*. In S. T. Allison (Ed.), *Heroes of Richmond: Four Centuries of Courage, Dignity, and Virtue*. Richmond: Palsgrove Press.
- Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 119–128.
- Decter-Frain et. al. (2017). "Why and How Groups Create Moral Heroes." In *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, 12-125. New York: Routledge.
- DeMarco, M. Elizabeth Van Lew (1818–1900). (2014, February 24). In *Encyclopedia Virginia*.
- Dik et al. (2017). "Career Development and a Sense of Calling: Contexts of Heroism." In *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, 317-327. New York: Routledge.
- Drucker, Robert. (2016a). "Gilbert Hunt: A Herculean Hero." *Bridge to Strength*. Web. 16 October.
- Drucker, Robert. "Richmond Theatre." (2016b). *Bridge to Strength*. Web. 16 October.
- Faust, Patricia L. (1986). "Historical Times Encyclopedia of The Civil War." Harper and Row, First Edition.
- Franco, Zeno E. (2017). "Heroism in Times of Crisis: Understanding Leadership during Extreme Events." In *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, 194-198. New York: Routledge.
- Franco, Z. E., Blau, K., & Zimbardo, P. G. (2011). Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis and Differentiation Between Heroic Action and Altruism. *Review of General Psychology*, 15, 99-113.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1801/1975). *Aesthetics: Lectures on fine art*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Hagerman, Keppel. (1996). *Dearest of Captains: A Biography of Sally Louisa Tompkins*. White Stone, VA: Brandylane.
- Hoyt, C. (2014). "Social Identities and Leadership: The Case of Gender." In *Conceptions of Leadership*, 71-74. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie & Bharadwaj, Prerana. (2017). "The Courage of One's Moral Convictions: Exploring the Two Sides of Heroism." In *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, 547-553. New York: Routledge.
- Jones, Jae. "Gilbert Hunt: Slave Recognized for Heroic Actions in 1811." (2016). *Black Then*. 21 June.
- Kinsella et al. (2017). "Attributions and Applications of Heroes: A Brief History of Lay and Academic Perspectives." In *The Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, 19-31. New York: Routledge.
- Kinsella, E. L., Ritchie, T. D., & Igou, E. R. (2015). "Zeroing in on heroes: A prototype analysis of hero features." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108, 114–127.

- Klapp, Orrin E. (1954). "Heroes, Villains and Fools, as Agents of Social Control." *American Sociological Review* 19, no. 1, 56-62.
- Kocher, Craig T. (2016). "Living a Life of Consequence: How Not to Chase a Fake Rabbit." *Frontiers in Spiritual Leadership: Discovering the Better Angels of Our Nature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *Essays on moral development: Vol. 2. The psychology of moral development*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.
- LeSourd, Nancy. (2016). "Captain Sally Tompkins" *Liberty Letters*. 2006. Web 6. Lineberry, Cate. (2011). "Elizabeth Van Lew: An Unlikely Union Spy." *The Civil War*. Smithsonian.com. Web 7. 2016.
- MacLean, Maggie. (2016). "Sally Tompkins." *Civil War Women*. October 27, 2013. Web 9 Oct. Shelp, E. E. (1984). Courage: A neglected virtue in the patient-physician relationship. *Social Science and Medicine*, 18, 351–360.
- Staub, E. (2015). *The roots of goodness and resistance to evil*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tyler-McGraw, Marie, and Gregg D. Kimball (1988). *In Bondage and Freedom: Antebellum Black Life in Richmond, Virginia*. Richmond, VA: Valentine Museum.
- Varon, Elizabeth R. (2003). *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.
- Weaver, Mark. (2016). "Elizabeth Van Lew." *American Civil War Stories*. Web 10 Oct. 2016.
- Worthington, E. L., & Allison, S. T. (2018). *Heroic humility: What the science of humility can say to people raised on self-focus*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Zimbardo, Philip G. (2007). *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. New York: Random House.