ELIZABETH VAN LEW (Oct. 17, 1818-Sept. 25, 1900)
Elizabeth and her mother, both abolitionists, freed their slaves in 1860. Elizabeth was U. S. Grant’s best information source in Richmond during the Civil War. Her agents included one of her former slaves employed as a maid to Mrs. Jefferson Davis. She survived the Civil War despite constant surveillance by Confederate police and, as President, Grant acknowledged her extraordinary organizing abilities by naming her Postmistress of Richmond in 1869. Post-War bitterness against the former spy ran deep, but her administration was so honest and efficient that some of Richmond’s press praised her even as conservatives sought her dismissal. In the 1870’s, with Black slavery destroyed, Van Lew joined the Virginia State Woman Suffrage Association. Her later years were often lonely and poor. Support came mainly from a grateful former prisoner-of-war from Massachusetts whom she helped during the Civil War. Her Massachusetts’ friends placed a stone at her grave in Shockoe Cemetery that was inscribed: “She risked everything that is dear to man — friends, fortune, comfort, health, life itself, all for the one absorbing desire of her heart, that slavery might be abolished and the Union preserved.”

“Remember the Ladies” Project
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