

Maria Isabella “Belle” Boyd Hardinge Hammond High

It would take a lot of nerve, a deep-seated belief in the cause she was fighting for and a tragic incident to turn a teen-aged, well-bred Southern girl into one of the Confederacy’s most notorious spies. Belle **(Photo at right)** was born in May of 1844 and, according to the *New York Times*, she was in Bunker Hill, Virginia, at the time and the family moved to Martinsburg, Virginia, when she was ten years old. The two towns are very near to each other and are both now in West Virginia. According to the Civil War Trust, she was born in Martinsburg. Her parents, Benjamin Reed Boyd and Mary Rebecca Glenn Boyd, named her “Isabella,” but she shortened her name to “Belle.” Her family was prosperous, owners of six slaves and staunch believers in the Southern cause. In the War for Southern Independence, her father would become a member of the Stonewall Brigade and three other members of the family would be convicted of spying for the cause.

One of the family slaves, Eliza Corsey, became a close companion of Belle and was reported to be an accomplice in her espionage adventures. It was against the law to teach slaves to read and write, so Belle

defied the law and spent hours at night by candlelight teaching Eliza. “Slavery, like all other imperfect forms of society, will have its day,” Belle wrote, “but the time for its final extinction in the Confederate States of America has not yet arrived.”

A family legend says that at eleven years old she was not allowed to join an adult dinner party. She protested by riding her horse into the dining room and proclaiming that the horse was old enough. At the age of twelve she was sent to school at the prestigious Mount Washington Female College of Baltimore. She graduated at sixteen and returned to Martinsburg just after the fall of Fort Sumter.

On July 2, 1861, Union forces occupied Martinsburg. On July 4, a drunken Union soldier, 25-year-old Frederick Martin of the Seventh Pennsylvania Volunteers, who, as she wrote in her post-war memoirs, “addressed my mother and myself in language as offensive as it is possible to conceive. I could stand it no longer...we ladies were obliged to go armed in order to protect ourselves as best we might from insult and outrage.”



Belle pulled a Colt 1849 pocket pistol and shot him dead. She reported in her memoirs that Martin's commanding officer investigated "all the circumstances with strict impartiality, and finally said I had "done perfectly right." Her career as a Confederate spy had just begun at the age of seventeen.

It is known that her memoirs, like so many other memoirs, were exaggerated. She wrote that in May of 1862 she managed to eavesdrop through a peephole on a Council of War while visiting relatives whose home in Front Royal, Virginia, was being used as a Union headquarters. She learned that Union Major General Nathaniel Banks' forces had been ordered to march and she rode fifteen miles to inform Stonewall Jackson who was nearby in the Shenandoah Valley.

Early in the next year, 1862, her spying activities had become well known to the Union Army and the northern press was now referring to her as "La Belle Rebelle," "the Siren of the Shenandoah," "the Rebel Joan of Arc," "Secesh Cleopatra," "Pet of the Confederacy" and "Amazon of Secessia."

A New York *Times* editorial reported, "It was an oddly conspicuous act for a girl purporting to be a spy: On May 23, 1862, Belle Boyd, newly 18 and possessed of a "little rebel heart," sprinted across the battlefield in Front Royal, Va., crinoline swinging, bullets plowing up the earth around her. She waved her white bonnet in grandiose loops, a signal for Confederate troops to advance, and caught the attention of staff officer Lieutenant Henry Kyd Douglas."

Douglas wrote, "It took only a few minutes for my horse to carry me to meet the romantic maiden whose (sic) tall, supple, and graceful figure struck me as soon as I came in sight of her." Speaking in gasps, Belle said she had vital intelligence for General Stonewall Jackson: the Union had only 1,000 men at Front Royal under Colonel John Kenly, but forces in the adjacent towns of Strasburg, Winchester and Harpers Ferry could easily unite and set a trap. If Jackson charged down quickly, he could catch them all. "I must hurry back," Belle said, and blew Douglas a kiss. "Goodbye. My love to all the dear boys." Belle described in her version, "the Federal pickets... immediately fired upon me...my escape was most providential...rifle-balls flew thick and fast about me...so near my feet as to throw dust in my eyes ...numerous bullets whistled by my ears, several actually pierced different parts of my clothing."

James I. Robertson, Jr. in his biography *Stonewall Jackson*, says that she informed Stonewall that the only force in the town was the 1st Maryland and two companies of a Pennsylvania regiment. Robertson then says that Stonewall "reacted with typical Old Testament anger. If Maryland infidels were going to invade Virginia, Maryland faithful would smite them. He promptly ordered the Confederate 1st Maryland to the front."

Robertson also said, "Regrettably, every account of what Belle Boyd supposedly did in the Civil War is a victim of exaggeration. ... Boyd no doubt got some kind of message to Jackson, and she may have been the one who told of the Federal 1st Maryland being the only force in town." Jackson also refused to see her when she came to Bunker Hill specifically to see the general.

Upon hearing of Stonewall's death She sent a telegram to Virginia's governor, John Letcher, "Please telegh if General Jackson is dead. If so please save me a lock of his hair. Yours truly, Belle Boyd."

Stonewall's victory at Front Royal was of minor importance in the overall success of the legendary campaign he led through the Shenandoah Valley, but it made the teenaged girl who ran onto a battlefield instantly famous nationwide.

In July of 1862 Secretary of War Edwin Stanton had personally issued a warrant for her arrest and on July 29, 1862, Belle was arrested by Union forces and detained at the Old Capitol Prison in Washington, DC. According to the Civil War Trust, she was anything but a model prisoner. She waved the Confederate flag from her window, sang Dixie and devised a way of communication where her contact would use a bow and arrow to shoot a rubber ball into her cell. She would then sew messages inside the ball and send it back. After a month in prison she was part of a prisoner exchange program. She was arrested again in July of 1863 and held until December of that year when she was released and banished to the South. On May 8, 1864, she sailed for England and was arrested once again, this time as a Confederate courier. With the help of Lieutenant Sam Hardinge, a Union naval officer, she escaped to Canada. Hardinge would be dropped from the Navy for his role in her escape. From Canada she went to England and there she and Hardinge were married on August 25, 1863. But she would become a widow in 1866 when Hardinge died at the age of 30.

Belle stayed on in England for two years while she wrote her memoirs, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison* and garnered considerable success as a stage actress. She returned to America in 1866 as a widow and the mother of a child, probably named Grace. She continued to act on stage and gave lectures on her spying activities during the war. She called her show “The Perils of a Spy” and called herself the “Cleopatra of the Secession.”

In 1869 she married an Englishman and former Union officer, John Swainston Hammond. The two would remain married for 16 years and have four children and three would live to maturity; Byrd Swainston Hammond, Marie Isabelle Boyd Hammond and John Edmund Swainston Hammond. The fourth child’s history is unknown. In November, 1884, the couple divorced and two months later she married Nathaniel High, Jr., an actor seventeen years younger than she. This marriage also ended in divorce at some time before 1900.



The Encyclopedia Virginia says that she died on June 11, 1900, while on a tour in Kilbourn, Wisconsin, (now known as Wisconsin Dells). She had been lecturing on her career as a spy before an audience of members of the Grand Army of the Republic, a Union veterans association. She suffered a heart attack and died in poverty. Others reported that the GAR members performed as pallbearers for her funeral. She is buried in the Spring Grove Cemetery in Wisconsin Dells.



The above cemetery photos are courtesy of Scott Megow a findagrave.com friend.

James I. Robertson, Jr., *Stonewall Jackson*