

Was She or Wasn't She?

Antonia Ford: polite southern lady or J.E.B. Stuart's spy?

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“A young lady at or near Fairfax Court House, has also been arrested, and some others—all charged with giving information that led to the late raid on the Court House.”¹ This young lady in question was Antonia Ford, who was arrested as a Confederate spy on March 16, 1863. Her guilt was confirmed to her accusers when an honorary commission given to her by Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart was discovered during a search of her home. As recounted in *The Washington Star* it read,

“TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Know Ye, that reposing special confidence in the patriotism, fidelity and ability of Antonia J. Ford, I, James E.B. Stuart, by virtue of the power invested in me as Brigadier General in the Provisional Army of the Confederate States of America, do hereby appoint and commission her my Honorary Aide de Camp, to rank as such from this date. She will be obeyed, respected, and admired by all the lovers of a noble nature. Given under my hand and sealed the Headquarters Cavalry Brigade at Camp Beverly, the seventh day of October, A. D. 1861, and the first year of our Independence.

J.E.B. Stuart [impression of his signet ring]²

However, despite this paper evidence, the leader of the raid, John Singleton Mosby, as well as J.E.B. Stuart, always denied that Ford had acted as a spy for them. So, was she or wasn't she?

Antonia Ford was born in 1838 in Fairfax Court House, Virginia. Her father, Edward R. Ford, was a successful merchant. As a result, Ford grew up comfortably and was raised “for society.” As an adult, she was known both in Fairfax and Washington social circles and was considered to be beautiful and well mannered.³

The Fords were staunch secessionists and supported the Confederacy throughout the war. As the war progressed, Fairfax quickly became an area populated by Union soldiers. While the Fords sympathies to the Confederacy were known, they nevertheless had much contact with Union soldiers and loyalists. They even took in Union soldiers as boarders. Because of this proximity, Antonia Ford was in a good position to gather Union activities information that she could pass to the Confederates. She thus sought information using a unique method: “she seemed to do nothing, talked of everything except actual military affairs, and allowed the other fellow to presume she sided with him.”⁴ One person commented that she listened, “in an apparently very careless and no-interest-to-me-I-assure-you manner, which quite deceived the men.”⁵ She then passed on what she knew to her Confederate military contacts.

A couple of stories of Antonia Ford's spying exploits are fairly well known. The first occurred shortly after she had begun gathering documents and subtly soliciting information that would be helpful to the Confederacy. She learned that Union soldiers planned to search local homes for Confederate contraband so she gathered all her spying materials and put them under her huge hoop skirts and then sat down in a chair. When Union soldiers arrived to search her

house she remained seated as they searched. After they finished searching her home, one of the officers who was investigating asked her to stand up. She famously replied, "I thought not even a Yankee would expect a Southern woman to rise for him." She embarrassed the officer enough that he did not force her to stand. The search party left and thus she was able to protect the fruits of her spying.⁶

Another famous story of spying involving Antonia Ford was her twenty-mile ride before the Second Battle of Bull Run. She had come upon information that the Union forces "planned to use Confederate colors to draw the Confederate soldiers away from their assigned positions"⁷ in the forthcoming battle. She could not find anyone to deliver this important information to General Stuart so she set out with an aunt on the twenty-mile ride to his camp, where she successfully passed along her information.⁸

The most famous of Antonia Ford's spying exploits was her connection to Colonel Mosby's raid which resulted in the capture of General Edwin H. Stoughton. Ford's brother was a soldier under General Stuart's command. It was this connection that enabled Ford to meet both General Stuart and Colonel Mosby.⁹

James Ewell Brown "J.E.B." Stuart was born in 1833 and grew up on a small plantation in rural Virginia. He did well in school and, with his family's political connections, was able to get an appointment to West Point for the class of 1854. After a successful career in the Union army, fighting Indians in the West, keeping the peace during fighting over slavery in Kansas, and quelling John Brown's uprising at Harpers Ferry, he resigned his commission when his home state Virginia seceded. He decided he would "go with Virginia ... I for one would throw my saber in the scale consecrated by principles and blood of our forefathers—our constitutional rights without which the Union is a mere mockery."¹⁰ He entered the Confederate army as a lieutenant colonel and quickly received a promotion to brigadier general after performing admirably in the first major battle of the war.¹¹

John Singleton Mosby's background was much less conventional than Stuart's. He was born in Powhatan County, Virginia, in 1833 and grew up in Albemarle County. As a young man, he attended the University of Virginia where he studied Greek literature. He was expelled after he shot a classmate in what he claimed was an act of self-defense.¹²

After serving nine months of his twelve-month jail sentence he became a lawyer. He was very opposed to succession and said that he would fight for the Union if it came to war. However, once his home state of Virginia seceded, he joined the Confederate army, declaring, "Virginia is my mother, God bless her! I can't fight against my mother, can I?"¹³

Mosby entered the Confederate army as a private at the beginning of the war and rose to the rank of colonel by the end of the war.¹⁴ He came to serve, while he was a private, under J.E.B. Stuart. He greatly admired Stuart and was a very successful scout for him. Eventually, he

convinced General Stuart to let him go out on his own to conduct guerilla activities against the North.

As previously discussed, Antonia Ford's brother was also a soldier under General Stuart, and the Fords knew both Mosby and Stuart. Through her social position in Fairfax Court House, Ford also became friends with General Stoughton. In fact, in a letter that became public after Stoughton's capture, a Union soldier wrote home discussing Stoughton's friendship with a known Rebel sympathizer. He wrote, "There is a woman living in the town by the name of Ford, not married, who has been of great service to General Stuart in giving information, et cetera—so much so that Stuart has conferred on her the rank of major in the Rebel army. She belongs to his staff. Why our people do not send her beyond the lines is another question. I understand that she and Stoughton are very intimate. If he gets picked up some night, he may thank her for it. Her father lives here, and is known to harbor and give all the aid he can to the Rebs, and this in this little hole of Fairfax, under the nose of the provost-marshal, who is always full of bad whiskey."¹⁵

The actual raid that resulted in General Stoughton's capture occurred on March 9, 1863, and was described at the time in the *Alexandria Gazette*:

"Last night the Confederates, under Captain Mosby, came into this town, dressed in Union clothes took all the pickets and patrols prisoners, one hundred and ten fine horses, General Stoughton, of the Vermont Brigade, prisoner; hunted for Capt. L.E. O'Conner, of the New York 5th, Provost Marshal of the town, but could not find him; they also searched Colonel Johnstone's house for him but he made his escape in his night clothes.

The night was dark and rainy, but these guerillas dashed to and fro in a reckless manner, although their plans were well matured, as the different squads who went to the different headquarters would indicate."¹⁶

The raid was considered highly successful both because of what was secured, "General Stoughton, along with close to forty of his soldiers, over fifty of his horses, and all of his weapons,"¹⁷ and because of the embarrassment it caused the Union. Stoughton had been caught alone sleeping and Colonel Johnstone had escaped only by running away in his nightshirt and hiding under the outhouse. Stoughton and several other officers had their reputations and careers ruined as a result.

Mosby's raid was wildly reported in the press. "The *New York Times* called the capture 'utterly disgraceful.' The *Baltimore American* styled Stoughton 'the luckless sleeper at Fairfax' who was 'Caught Napping.' ... A humorous howl went up, and Lincoln joined in by making a statement to the reporters. He said that he did not mind losing a brigadier as much as the horses, 'For I can make a much better brigadier in five minutes, but the horses cost a hundred and twenty-five dollars apiece.'"¹⁸

Less reported on, but still speculated about, was the involvement of local sympathizers in giving Mosby the information necessary to carry out his plan. The Secret Service was brought in to investigate and fairly quickly Antonia Ford became the prime suspect. She was known to have been friendly with both Mosby and Stoughton. An undercover female agent posing as a Southern sympathizer got Ford to show her the commission from Stuart, as well as to discuss how she had gathered information about “the number of our forces there [at Fairfax Court House] and in the neighborhood, the location of our camps, the places where officers’ quarters were established, the precise points where our pickets were stationed, the strength of the outposts, the names of officers in command, the nature of general orders, and all other information valuable to the rebel leaders”¹⁹ and passed it to Mosby before the raid.

Ford was promptly arrested. “At her home were found letters which indicated she had been corresponding with Confederate authorities at Richmond.”²⁰ The Secret Service also found her honorary commission.

Ford was imprisoned in Old Capital Prison. It is unclear exactly when she was released, although she was definitely out of prison a year after the raid. At this time she married one of her Yankee jailors. When asked by a friend in a letter how such a staunch Confederate could marry a Northerner, she replied, “I will tell you truly, Sallie, I knew I could not revenge myself on a whole nation, but felt very capable of tormenting one Yankee to death, so I took the Major.”²¹

So was she or wasn’t she? While Ford’s involvement in the raid has been questioned, it does seem clear that Ford was involved in spying. Ample evidence in her confession to the undercover Secret Service agent, the correspondence found in her home between her and Confederate authorities in Richmond, and the open secret of the Fords’ support of the Confederacy would seem to indicate it.

As for the raid, it seems less clear what her involvement was. On the pro side is Ford’s own confession to the undercover female agent. On the con side was the behavior of Stuart and Mosby who always denied her involvement. During the war, General Stuart tried to secure her release from prison by soliciting from Mosby a letter saying that Ford had nothing to do with the raid. While Stuart died during the war, Mosby lived until the age of eighty-one and always maintained Ford’s innocence. In fact, he famously wrote in a letter to a friend in 1900, “That he met Ford when he was a private on picket duty early in the war but did not communicate with her again until after the war: ‘She was innocent as Abraham Lincoln.’”²²



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End Notes

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4. Harnett T. Kane, *Spies for the Blue and Gray* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1954), 169–70.
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14. Kevin H. Spiepel, *Rebel: The Life and Times of John Singleton Mosby* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1983), 135.
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18. James A. Ramage, *Gray Ghost*, 71.
19. Elizabeth D. Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier*, 48.
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21. Elizabeth D. Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier*, 50.
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