
A **Bold** Break for Freedom

Robert Smalls Made a Daring Escape from Slavery During the Civil War. His Real Battle, However, Came When He Tried to Preserve the Freedom He Had Won.

by Mark H. Dunkelman

The plot to steal the Confederate steamship *Planter* started with a joke. One spring day in 1862, Captain C.J. Relyea and the ship's other officers went ashore at their home port of Charleston, South Carolina, leaving the *Planter* in the hands of her African-American crewmen. With the white men gone, 23-year-old wheelman Robert Smalls amused his fellow slaves by trying on Relyea's distinctive broad-brimmed straw hat. The crew kidded Smalls about his resemblance to Relyea—both men were short and stocky—and suggested that from a distance it would be impossible to distinguish between the black slave and the white captain. Smalls cut short the ensuing laughter with a warning not to repeat the joke. He had an idea.

Later, at a secret meeting in Smalls' tiny East Bay Street room, he revealed his plan. On a night when the *Planter's* officers were ashore, the crew would take the ship from her mooring, pick up family members hidden aboard another vessel nearby, and sail to the safety of the Union blockading fleet outside the harbor. Smalls would disguise himself as the captain and duplicate Relyea's usual routine so as not to arouse suspicion when the *Planter* steamed past the watchful sentries at Charleston's Confederate forts and batteries.

Smalls was up to the perilous task. Although he was referred to as the *Planter's* wheelman, Smalls was in fact the ship's pilot in all but name—the title being reserved exclusively for white

men. He had been sailing aboard the *Planter* since before the Civil War began. Built in Charleston in 1860, the 300-ton, two-engine sidewheeler was about 150 feet long and could carry 1,400 bales of cotton or 1,000 troops. She was armed with a 32-pound pivot gun on her foredeck and a 24-pound howitzer on her afterdeck. Guided by Smalls, the *Planter* had navigated the harbor, rivers, and coast, making surveys, laying torpedoes, and delivering men and matériel to fortifications. Smalls knew the signals Relyea used to pass Confederate military installations, and the location of deadly underwater mines. He needed no supervision from a white man to sail the *Planter* safely.

ROBERT SMALLS WAS BORN on April 5, 1839, in the slave quarters of the home of his master, John McKee, on Prince Street in Beaufort, South Carolina. Smalls' descendants have claimed that McKee was Robert's father, but even white paternity would have made no difference for the newborn boy. Robert's mother, Lydia, was McKee's slave, and so her son was also a slave.

By slavery's standards, though, Robert led a pampered life. Lydia was one of McKee's "Swonga people," as house servants were called in the Gullah dialect spoken by the local black population. Robert consequently grew up in the McKee household instead of toiling in the master's rice fields, and he enjoyed considerable independence. His mother had

spent her childhood as a field hand on the McKee's rice plantation, and she made Robert aware of his advantages—and that his situation could change instantly. She forced him to watch slaves being whipped and sold at auction, told him stories of their sufferings, and made him identify with less-fortunate blacks.

When McKee died in 1848, his son Henry inherited Lydia and Robert. In 1851, Henry hired Robert out in Charleston, and the 12-year-old moved to the city, where he waited tables and worked as a lamplighter. The boy, however, was drawn to the bustling waterfront, where he found work as a stevedore, a teamster, and a sailmaker and rigger. During the summers Smalls sailed aboard a coastal schooner, developing skills as a boat handler and navigator. He took control of his financial affairs by arranging to hire himself out and pay Henry McKee \$15 per month. After his 1856 marriage to Hannah Jones, a hotel maid 14 years his senior, Smalls bought her time from her master for \$7 a month. When the couple had daughter Elizabeth, he arranged to purchase Hannah and the baby for \$800. He was still saving toward that end when he hatched his plan to escape with his family from slavery aboard the *Planter*.

ON AN APRIL SUNDAY Smalls reassembled the plotters at another clandestine meeting in his room to detail his plan. Then they waited for the right circumstances to spring the plot. The opportunity finally arrived on the evening of

May 12, 1862, when Captain Relyea ordered Smalls to ready the *Planter* for an early morning departure to deliver guns and ammunition to a battery. Smalls acknowledged the order and betrayed no excitement when Relyea and his white mate and chief engineer went ashore to spend the night—in violation of standing orders—leaving Smalls and eight black crewmen aboard the ship.

With the whites gone, Smalls notified his shipmates that the time had come. Presumably, one of the men assembled the women and children at their hiding place, a merchant ship berthed in the Cooper River. Meanwhile, Smalls and his crew waited and listened as a crier ashore called out the passing hours. At about 3:00 A.M. on May 13, Smalls donned the absent captain's coat and straw hat and ordered the crew to fire the boilers. Crewmembers hoisted the Confederate and South Carolina flags, cast off the hawsers mooring the ship to the wharf, sounded the required departure signal, and slowly backed the *Planter* away from the dock. A Confederate sentry, barely 50 yards away, paid the *Planter* no heed.

Imitating Relyea's gait and posture, Smalls ordered his crew to proceed to the North Atlantic Wharf in the Cooper River, where he made a brief stop to pick up his passengers—five women and three children. Among them were Smalls' wife and his children, four-year-old Elizabeth and newborn Robert, Jr. With everyone safely aboard, Smalls blew the steam whistle, eased into the inner channel, patiently kept the ship at her regular pace, and, as Confederate guards idly watched, sailed away from Charleston and slavery.

However, Confederate artillery of the harbor defenses still offered a threat. Fighting an impulse to hurry the pace, Smalls gave the traditional whistle salute as he passed Fort Johnson on James Island. Then he and his crew peered apprehensively as they approached their next obstacle—Fort Sumter, the brick pentagon looming 40 feet above the water on a man-made island, famous as the site where the war began. Situated near the center of the channel between Morris and Sullivan's Islands, Sumter com-

manded all entrances and exits from Charleston Harbor.

As the *Planter* labored against the incoming tide and daybreak began lighting the eastern horizon, some of the crew pleaded with their leader to alter course and make a run for it. Smalls refused and reportedly prayed to God to deliver the ship as He had delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians. Then, as the *Planter* passed beneath Sumter's walls, Smalls stood in the shadows of the pilothouse, his face shielded by Captain Relyea's hat, and gave two long and one short yanks on the whistle cord and waved to the sentinel atop the ramparts. A suspense-laden moment passed before the guard shouted, "Pass the *Planter*!" Completely fooled by Smalls' masquerade, the Confederate added, "Blow the damned Yankees to hell, or bring one of them in!" "Aye, aye," Smalls called back, and he put his ship to sea.

Now a new danger loomed. Ahead lay the Union fleet, and the Yankee sailors naturally thought that the Confederate steamer approaching at full throttle was either attacking or attempting to run the blockade. Aboard the USS *Onward*, Lieutenant J.F. Nickels hurriedly ordered his men to their duty stations and prepared to fire a broadside at the interloper headed in his direction. Aboard the *Planter*, Smalls ordered a white bedsheet run up the foremast. The Union lookouts saw the surrender signal, and Nickels allowed the *Planter* to come alongside. Quickly boarding her, the lieutenant and his men were astonished to discover Smalls and his all-black crew and passengers. "I thought the *Planter* might be of some use to Uncle Abe," Smalls reportedly said to the Union tars, and he formally surrendered the ship.

News spread quickly of the abduction of the *Planter* and of the brave slave who had masterminded the theft. Confederate newspapers bemoaned the incident and expressed indignation at the negligence of Relyea and his officers. Northern papers praised the bold act. *Harper's Weekly* printed a woodcut of the *Planter* and proclaimed the theft of the ship "one of the most daring and heroic adventures since the war commenced." In his *Naval History of the Civil War*, Union Admiral David Dixon later wrote, "The taking out

of the 'Planter' would have done credit to anyone, but the cleverness with which the whole affair was conducted deserves more than a passing notice."

The black hero was sent to Washington for audiences with President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton. Asked by the president why he had stolen the ship, Smalls gave a succinct answer: "Freedom."

With the shackles of bondage broken, Smalls grasped opportunity after opportunity as they arose. When President Lincoln signed a bill awarding the *Planter*'s black crew a monetary reward for their deed, Smalls, as the leader, received the largest amount, \$1,500. At a tax auction in Beaufort in 1863, the former slave used part of the payment to purchase his birthplace, the Prince Street property of his former master. For the rest of the war, Smalls piloted vessels for the Union forces. He was aboard the ironclad *Keokuk* during the naval attack on Charleston on April 7, 1863, when the ship was hit 90 times. Smalls steered the crippled vessel out of range of the Confederate guns to a position off Morris Island, where she finally sank.

Most often, he piloted his old ship. On December 1, 1863, the *Planter* was carrying rations to Union forces when she came under crossfire from Union and Confederate artillery. The white captain panicked, ordered the ship beached and rushed below to hide. Smalls refused to obey the order and guided the *Planter* to safety. The cowardly captain was dismissed from the service; Smalls was appointed in his place.

For more than a year after the end of the war, Smalls worked aboard the *Planter* for the government. In September 1866, he made his last voyage in his beloved ship, sailing her to Baltimore, where she was decommissioned and Smalls was laid off.

WITH ONE WAR OVER, Smalls plunged into another one, a political struggle to preserve the freedom he had won aboard the *Planter*. South Carolina's blacks outnumbered whites by some 400,000 to 275,000, and most of the African-American population was concentrated in the coastal Low Country, where they made up more than 80 percent of the popula-

tion. Robert Smalls was their hero, and they never tired of hearing his story of the *Planter*—and Smalls never tired of telling it. He proved to be an adept politician. He founded his own newspaper to promote his cause and organized a brass band to attract crowds to rallies and torchlight parades. And he literally spoke the language of the black population—Gullah. He was the “King of Beaufort County,” according to the *Charleston News and Courier*.

Smalls disregarded politics in the immediate postwar period, concentrating instead on business ventures and the accumulation of large amounts of property. Political power was beyond the grasp of even a famous black war hero. Pardoned Confederate military and civil officers gained control of South Carolina’s government, ratified a constitution, and enacted legislative “Black Codes” denying blacks social and political equality. But the Radical Republican triumph in the congressional elections of 1866 spelled doom for repressive white regimes in the former Confederate states. The new Congress passed Reconstruction acts establishing military rule in the South and stipulated that no state would be readmitted to the Union until it passed a new state constitution guaranteeing universal male suffrage and ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, which granted black men citizenship and voting rights. Here was an opportunity, and Robert Smalls grasped it.

Smalls was elected a delegate to the 1868 state constitutional convention, which drafted a document guaranteeing black suffrage. In subsequent elections the constitution was overwhelmingly endorsed despite the bitter opposition of reactionary whites. Smalls won a seat in the South Carolina House of Representatives on a Republican ticket that gained huge majorities in both houses, even with widespread intimidation and violence against black voters. South Carolina ratified the Fourteenth Amendment and was readmitted to the Union on July 9, 1868.

After spending time in the state senate, Smalls was elected to the United States House of Representatives in the 1874 election. His four South Carolina congressional colleagues were Republicans, but for the first time in 18 years, Democrats—among them a large num-

ber of Confederate veterans—held the majority in the House. Radical Republican influence was fading, a victim of corrupt Southern state administrations and a decline in support from Northerners. The stage was set for the climax of Reconstruction—and of Robert Smalls’ political career.

As the election of 1876 approached, whites in South Carolina banded together in rifle and saber clubs, ostensible social organizations whose real purpose was the armed intimidation of blacks. By the summer of 1876, almost 300 such clubs numbered 14,000 members. Their uniform—a red shirt—gave a name to their white supremacist movement. Their politics made them diehard supporters of the Democrats, who in August nominated a slate of state officials composed entirely of Confederate veterans, headed by former general Wade Hampton for governor. The Republicans—at a convention chaired by Smalls—countered with the incumbent Daniel H. Chamberlain. The carpetbagger Chamberlain had been implicated in frauds over the years, but after winning the governorship as a reform candidate he proved to be hard-working and honest.

The campaign was marred by violence and threats—perpetrated by both sides. Whites terrorized blacks, Smalls reported, “by riding armed through the country, by day and night; by firing into the houses of republicans; by breaking up republican mass-meetings; ...by discharging employes [sic] who refuse to promise to vote the democratic ticket, etc.” Smalls himself had a close call at a campaign stop in Edgefield on August 12, when a mob of howling Red Shirts prevented him from speaking and chased him to the safety of his railroad car, shouting, “Kill the damn son of a bitch! Kill the nigger!”

Hampton won the governorship in a disputed contest, and the Democrats gained control of the state government. Nationally, the compromise that settled the disputed Tilden-Hayes presidential election ended Reconstruction, and four million African Americans were abandoned to the mercies of white supremacy and Jim Crow. Smalls was reelected to Congress but was arrested before he left for Washington, D.C. The charge was

that, while a state senator, he had accepted a \$5,000 bribe to steer state contracts to Josephus Woodruff, the clerk of the senate, who was also president of a printing company. Smalls denied the charge. Democrats hoped to link Smalls to Republican corruption, to deflect attention from their own misdeeds, and to defame Smalls and delay him from taking his congressional seat while his Democratic opponent contested the election.

The principal witness against Smalls was Woodruff, who had stolen \$250,000 in state funds and fled to Pennsylvania, from where he was extradited and granted immunity in exchange for his testimony against Smalls. Despite a weak case built on the testimony of an unreliable witness, Smalls was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison. Nevertheless, in a deal worked out between the state attorney general and the U.S. district attorney, the state dismissed the charges against Smalls while the federal government dropped charges against South Carolinians accused of violating election laws. Smalls, who was appealing the case, was unaware that such a deal was in the works. In the end, Democratic governor William Simpson granted Smalls a full pardon.

Smalls’ political career never fully recovered from the taint of the conviction. He was elected to two more terms in Congress, but was also twice defeated and failed several times to win renomination. All the while, the white supremacists in control of the Democratic Party tightened their hold on South Carolina. “In South Carolina there is neither a free ballot nor an honest count,” Smalls declared in 1890, “and since the election in 1874 the history of elections in the State is a history of a continued series of murders, outrages, perjury and fraud.” In 1895 Smalls was one of only six black delegates to South Carolina’s constitutional convention; 154 whites attended. In his last important political act, Smalls spoke passionately but in vain against the suffrage provisions of the new constitution, which effectively disenfranchised blacks. “My race needs no special defense,” he declared, “for the past history of them in this country proves them to be the equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life.”

TIME TRAVELER

Beaufort, South Carolina

Antebellum Beaufort was “the most cultured town of its size in America,” according to a local historian. It was a time of “fabulous parties, beautiful women, ornamented coaches, fine wines and bourbon, hunting, fishing, boat racing, long cigars, duels, discussions of the cotton market, political talk, all too often, heated political talk.” Until Yankee cannon brought their world crashing down, Beaufort’s elite fully expected their high life would last forever.

Beaufort began as a colonial seaport in 1712 but suffered hard times when the indigo market collapsed after the Revolutionary War. Local planters sought salvation in the cultivation of long-fibered sea cotton, a commodity coveted by French and English mills. In 1860, prices were as high as any in

living memory, and the crop of 1861 was the best in a decade.

Gullah slaves made it all possible. The Gullah (probably a corruption of Angola) were imported through Charleston in great numbers in the late 1700s. Isolated on remote island plantations, the Gullah retained a rich and cohesive culture despite 150 years of servitude.

Given land and freedom by the Union victors and educated by Quaker schoolmarms, the Gullah survived the chaos of Reconstruction and the whittling away of their rights during the Jim Crow era of the 1890s. The white genteel mindset survived too. Postwar political transitions were painful, but there were no race riots in Beaufort, and no Ku Klux Klan.

Beaufort’s sudden capture by the Union fleet in November 1861 assured the survival of much of its antebellum

architecture. In 1976 the Department of the Interior proclaimed much of the town a National Historic Preservation District. Robert Smalls’ home at 511 Prince Street is a painstakingly restored private residence, but closed to the public. Smalls was buried at the Tabernacle Baptist Church at 911 Craven Street. A bronze bust in the churchyard commemorates his wartime bravery and lifetime of public service. You can contact the Greater Beaufort Chamber of Commerce and Beaufort Visitors Center at P.O. Box 910, 1106 Carteret Street, Beaufort, SC 29901, (843) 524-3163.

The Penn Center on nearby St. Helena Island, which helps preserve Gullah culture, contains a museum, archives, and an extensive photo collection. Call (803) 838-2432 for more information.
—Roger Pinckney

On the convention’s final day each delegate was expected to sign the new constitution. Smalls refused, and when delegates then proposed to cut his travel expenses, he said he would rather walk home than endorse the document.

The 51-year-old war hero was appointed collector of customs at Beaufort by President Benjamin Harrison in 1890 and was repeatedly reappointed by succeeding Republican presidents. His political power had waned, but he continued

to support the Grand Old Party—“the party of Lincoln which unshackled the necks of four millions human beings”—even after it acquiesced in the disenfranchisement and segregation of southern blacks. After his removal as customs collector following the 1912 election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson, Smalls spent much of his time in a rocking chair on his front porch, suffering from ill health. Part of his routine was lunch at a neighborhood drugstore, where he was

the only black served. Smalls died on February 23, 1915. For a half-century, he had been the foremost African American in his native state and a champion of the political, social, and economic improvement of black South Carolinians.

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