ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Robert Smalls

By **Ethan J. Kytle**, California State University, Fresno

Few people more fully embodied the heroism associated with or revolutionary changes wrought by the Civil War than Robert Smalls. Born into slavery in Beaufort, South Carolina, Smalls seized his and his family's freedom by commandeering a Confederate ship in nearby Charleston in 1862. After sailing out of the city's well-guarded harbor, Smalls surrendered the vessel to the Union fleet blockading Charleston, earning fame across the North and infamy across the South. The skilled mariner, now a free man, spent the rest of the conflict sailing ships for the U.S. Navy and Army. In the postwar era, Smalls became a leading figure in South Carolina politics, helping to found the state's Republican Party and draft South Carolina's new constitution. The former bondman was eventually elected to the South Carolina General Assembly and to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he served five terms in office—the capstone to a remarkable ascent forged in the cauldron of war.

Robert Smalls was born on April 5, 1839, to Lydia Polite, an enslaved house servant who lived in Beaufort. The property of Henry McKee, a prominent cotton planter who may have also been Smalls' father, Lydia raised Robert in a small shack that sat behind the stately McKee home on Prince Street. As a young boy, Smalls served the McKee family as a domestic slave, before being sent to Charleston in 1851, when he was just twelve years old.

During his early years in Charleston, Smalls lived in slave quarters on the property of Henry McKee's sister-in-law. He was hired out as a laborer, working as a waiter at the Planter's Hotel and a city lamplighter and passing on his earnings to his owner. Later, Smalls secured employment at the city's bustling docks, loading and unloading ships as a stevedore and then serving aboard local vessels as a rigger, sailor, and wheelman.

In December 1856, Smalls married an enslaved washerwoman named Hannah Jones. He managed to convince McKee and Hannah's enslaver, Samuel Kingman, to allow the young couple to live on their own and keep a small portion of their monthly earnings. This arrangement enabled Smalls not only to pay rent but also to squirrel away money with the hopes of saving enough to purchase the freedom of Hannah and the couple's first child, Elizabeth, whom Kingman had agreed to sell to Smalls for $800.

When the Civil War broke out, Smalls was working on the *Planter*, a 147-foot cotton steamer that the Confederacy soon commissioned to transport troops and supplies, lay torpedoes and survey southeastern coast waterways. At some point in early 1862, Smalls concocted a daring plan to highjack the *Planter* and sail it to freedom.

As the vessel's wheelman, Smalls was well prepared for the endeavor. He knew Charleston Harbor, knew the signals the boat would have to use to pass Confederate checkpoints, and even knew where the

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torpedoes were, since he had helped lay them. Still, the plan was dangerous. When he told his wife about it, she asked what would happen if he were caught. "I shall be shot," Robert stated matter-of-factly. Hannah no doubt reinforced her husband's determination when she replied, "It is a risk, dear, but you and I, and our little ones must be free. I will go, for where you die, I will die."[1]

The key to the escape was timing. Smalls and the other enslaved crewmen had to find a moment when all three of the *Planter*'s white officers would be off the ship. Although such an absence would violate a Confederate policy mandating that at least one officer stay on a vessel at all times, Smalls knew that the *Planter*'s captain, Charles J. Relyea, occasionally bucked the rule so that he and his officers could spend an evening with their families in Charleston. The opportunity arrived on May 12, 1862, when the three officers, tired from a week's absence from the city, went ashore for the evening.

Smalls and his co-conspirators waited anxiously for several hours before setting sail in the early morning hours of May 13 in order to pass Fort Sumter, at the mouth of the harbor, at first light. Approaching this checkpoint earlier, in the dark of night, would arouse suspicions. But, Smalls gambled, the half-light of dawn would allow him to impersonate Captain Relyea, especially if he donned the white skipper's naval jacket and trademark straw hat and mimicked his distinctive manner of pacing back and forth on the deck.

After picking up Hannah Smalls, the couple's two children (Robert Smalls Jr. had been born a couple years earlier), and eight other enslaved people from a nearby wharf, the *Planter* steamed out into the harbor. The plan worked. From his perch in the pilothouse, Smalls—disguised as Relyea—sailed the vessel by Fort Sumter and its massive guns, sounding the appropriate signal on the boat's steam whistle as he passed. Once the *Planter* was out of the range of the fort's artillery, Smalls ordered his crew to fire up the boilers and replaced the Confederate and South Carolina flags that had been flying with a white bedsheet—a makeshift flag of surrender.

The *Planter* steamed swiftly toward the naval blockade and a clipper ship called the *Onward*. As the *Planter* pulled aside the Union vessel, Smalls and his fifteen enslaved passengers began dancing, jumping, and singing in celebration of their newfound liberty. According to the *Onward*'s captain, who was the first to board the Confederate ship, Smalls revealed that freedom had not been his only goal. "I thought the *Planter*," Smalls reportedly remarked, "might be of some use to Uncle Abe." [2]

Smalls' audacious feat caught northerners and southerners off guard. He was hailed as a hero by newspapers throughout the North. The *New York Herald* proclaimed the escape "one of the most daring…adventures since the war was commenced."[3] The episode also spoke directly to one of the most pressing policy debates of the war, persuading some reluctant northerners that African Americans would indeed don a blue uniform and fight for their liberty. Smalls, insisted the *New-York Tribune*, "has added new proof to the evidence, that negroes have skill—and courage and tact, and that they will risk their lives

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[1] Quoted in Cate Lineberry, *Be Free or Die: The Amazing Story of Robert Smalls' Escape from Slavery to Union Hero* (New York: Picador, 2017), 13.
[2] Quoted in Philip Dray, *Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction Through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2018), 8.
[3] Quoted in Lineberry, *Be Free or Die*, 86.

for the sake of their liberty."[4] It was no surprise, then, that Union Major General David Hunter, who advocated arming former slaves, sent Smalls as part of a delegation to convince President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin McMasters Stanton of the wisdom of this course of action later that summer.

Among Confederates, in contrast, the story was a bitter pill to swallow. "Our community was intensely agitated Tuesday morning," reported the *Charleston Courier* on May 14.[5] Smalls had deprived the upstart nation of precious commodities—sixteen former bondpeople, a well-armed gunboat, and cargo that included four cannon and a gun carriage—while providing Union forces with essential intelligence about the Confederate defenses and waterways around Charleston.

As a reward for delivering the *Planter* to the Union, Congress passed a bill authorizing prize money be paid to Smalls and his crew. Smalls received $1500, a significantly lower sum than he would have gotten had the boat been accurately appraised but still a princely reward for a former slave. Recognizing Smalls' seafaring talents, Rear Admiral Samuel Francis Du Pont, the commander of the South Atlantic blockade, offered him a position as a civilian pilot for the U.S. Navy. Smalls accepted the job, which paid the hefty salary of forty dollars a month, and put his skills to good use as the pilot of several vessels, including the *Planter*.

In April 1863, Smalls steamed back toward Charleston as the pilot of the *Keokuk*, a 750-ton ironclad that was part of a major naval assault on the city. During the attack, which was ultimately repelled, an intense Confederate barrage from Fort Sumter sunk the *Keokuk,* despite extraordinary efforts by Smalls and his fellow crewmembers to save the ship. Smalls thereafter resumed his duties aboard the *Planter*, though this time he was a civilian pilot for the Army, to which the ship had been reassigned. Later that year, the *Planter*, while transporting provisions from Folly Island to Morris Island, where some six thousand Union soldiers were stationed, came under such intense fire that the captain of the boat ordered Smalls to beach the ship. But Smalls refused. As the captain retreated from the pilot house to the coal bunker, the black pilot assumed command of the *Planter* and sailed it to safety. Smalls was rewarded by being named the ship's captain—the first African American to hold that position in the Union Army.

Smalls continued in this new role through the end of the war and into 1866. By his own count, he participated in seventeen military engagements. In early 1864, Smalls' growing salary—which had ballooned to $150 per month with his promotion to captain—as well as his *Planter* prize money had enabled the former bondmen to do the unthinkable: purchase the Beaufort home of his former owner Henry McKee. The handsome Prince Street house was put up for auction that January because its previous owner, William DeTreville, had failed to pay property taxes after the Union occupied the area. Smalls bid $665 and won, moving his family into the house. DeTreville filed a lawsuit to regain the property, but the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled in Smalls' favor in 1878. Three years earlier, Smalls had demonstrated noteworthy generosity when he permitted Jane McKee, the impoverished widow of his former master, and several of her children to live with his family in their Beaufort home.

In the Reconstruction era, Smalls became a successful local businessman and state politician. He operated a general store in Beaufort and invested in several properties in the area in addition to his Prince

[4] Quoted in Lineberry, *Be Free or Die*, 87.
[5] "The Steamer Planter," *Charleston Courier*, May 14, 1862.

Street house. He also helped to found the Enterprise Railroad Company of Charleston and, in 1867, South Carolina's Republican Party. One year later, Smalls was a delegate to the 1868 state constitutional convention, a groundbreaking biracial assembly that recast the South Carolina constitution in a more modern and progressive fashion. The convention worked to democratize the state by removing property ownership qualifications for serving in the legislature and establishing universal manhood suffrage. Smalls was particularly influential in the passage of a proposal providing for the creation of a public education system open to children of all races.

Smalls remained a strong voice for education as a member of the South Carolina General Assembly. In 1868, Beaufort County voters sent him to the state House of Representatives. Two years later, the black majority county elected Smalls to the state Senate, where he served until 1875. By this point, Smalls had also been appointed major general of the South Carolina militia, an office he held until 1877, when white Democrats "redeemed" the state and retook political control of the militia.

In 1874, Smalls was elected to the first of five terms he would serve in the U.S. House of Representatives over the course of the next twelve years. Smalls' time in Washington, D.C., was tumultuous, largely because of his conservative opponents' successes back in South Carolina. The black congressman did manage a few legislative victories, including securing funding for harbor improvements at the Port Royal naval station not far from his hometown. But the white supremacist campaign to drive Republican politicians like Smalls from office and return the state to Democratic hands overshadowed such legislative accomplishments.

Smalls was an outspoken critic of the Redeemers' violent tactics. After white vigilante supporters of Democratic gubernatorial candidate Wade Hampton murdered a handful of black militiamen in cold blood in Hamburg, South Carolina, in July 1876, Smalls helped spur a congressional inquiry and a grand jury investigation. Nothing, however, came of either of these responses. By the following year, Hampton and his fellow South Carolina conservatives had secured control of the state and set their sights on Smalls, who had been reelected to Congress by a sizeable margin. In the fall of 1877, in what appears to have been a political hit job based on flimsy evidence, Smalls was arrested, charged, and found guilty of having taken a $5,000 bribe while in the state Senate. Smalls declared his innocence and hoped to appeal his conviction—which came with a three-year sentence—to the Supreme Court. In the end, however, he failed to clear his name because the South Carolina's Democratic governor struck a deal with Republican President Rutherford B. Hayes to pardon Smalls if the U.S. government agreed to drop charges against Redeemer Democrats in the state.

Despite this blow to his reputation and the white supremacist fraud, intimidation, and violence that persisted in post-Reconstruction South Carolina, Smalls continued to win congressional elections in Beaufort, serving portions of three terms between 1882 and 1887. Two years later, in 1889, he was named customs collector for the port of Beaufort, a lucrative position that he occupied for most of the next two decades. Smalls was finally removed for good as Beaufort customs collector in 1913 because South Carolina's two segregationist senators, Democrats Ellison DuRant Smith and Benjamin Ryan Tillman, objected to his appointment.

This was not the only blow that "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman struck against Robert Smalls. Two decades earlier, as one of only six African Americans chosen to represent South Carolina at the 1895 state constitutional convention, Smalls had struggled to defend the black suffrage rights he had helped secure in 1868. Yet Senator Tillman and his fellow white supremacist delegates proved too numerous, and they succeeded in crafting a constitution that required a literacy test and a poll tax that combined to disenfranchise most of the state's black population. Smalls could do little more than speak out against these measures and refuse to sign the new constitution once it was completed.

Robert Smalls died in Beaufort on February 23, 1915 at the age of seventy-five. By this point he lived in a thoroughly segregated state that was a far cry from the more egalitarian society he had worked to create during Reconstruction. But Smalls' inability to stem the Jim Crow tide that washed over not only South Carolina but the rest of the former Confederacy at the turn of the twentieth century takes nothing away from the extraordinary story of an enslaved seafarer who became a Union war hero and a United States congressman.

Robert Smalls

Born	April 5, 1839, Beaufort, South Carolina
Died	February 23, 1915, Beaufort, South Carolina
Buried	Tabernacle Baptist Church, Beaufort, South Carolina
Father	Unknown but possibly his owner Henry McKee
Mother	Lydia Polite
Career Milestones	1862 Sailed a Confederate ship, the *Planter*, out of Charleston to the Union blockading fleet, freeing himself, his family, and more than a dozen others | 1862 Pilot for the U.S. Navy | 1863-1866 Pilot and captain for the U.S. Army | 1867 Co-founder of the South Carolina Republican Party | Delegate to the 1868 and 1895 South Carolina constitutional conventions | 1868-1887South Carolina state congressman and senator | 1889-1913 Customs Collector for the port of Beaufort.

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