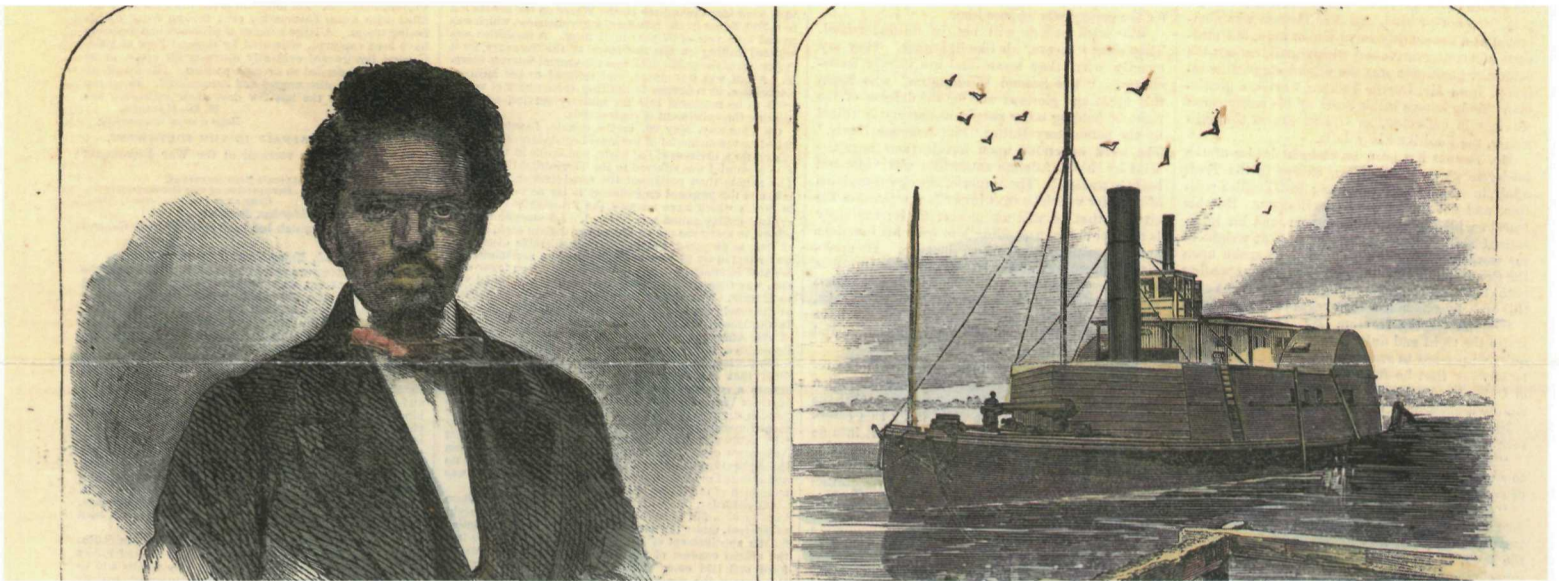




Robert Smalls



From Slave to Statesman Robert Smalls, born into slavery, was catapulted to fame in both North and South after he and a small crew of slaves sailed the *Planter* from a wharf in Charleston, past the guns of Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie to the Union blockade. Seventeen men, women and children courageously escaped to freedom aboard the *Planter*. Smalls fought to dispell myths of black inferiority by serving with the Union military during the Civil War. He dedicated his life to achieving equality for all, holding a variety of public offices including a seat in the United States Congress.

Early Years

Robert Smalls' mother, Lydia Polite, was born on John McKee's Ashdale Plantation located on Lady's Island, South Carolina. She lived and worked there until age ten when McKee moved her to his home in Beaufort to work as a house servant. Robert Smalls was born on April 5, 1839 in a slave cabin behind the McKee house. While Smalls did not know who his father was, some suspected that it was John McKee, his master.

At age 12 McKee sent Robert Smalls to Charleston to be hired out. He worked as a waiter at the

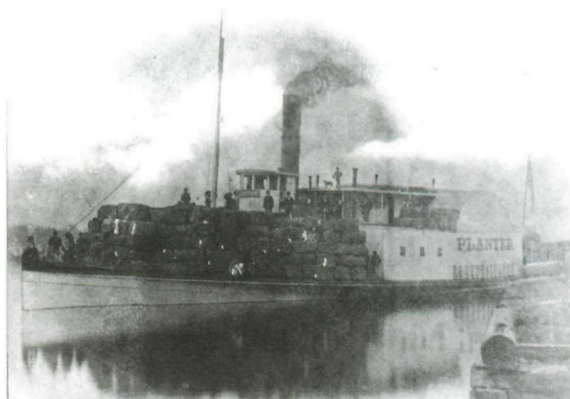
Planter's Hotel and then as a lamplighter for the city. He began his maritime career as a stevedore loading and unloading ships in port and quickly worked his way up, learning to operate steamships and navigate the challenging waterways around Charleston. At age 17 Smalls met and married Hannah Jones. Even though he received permission from his owner to live with Hannah, Smalls was painfully aware that he and his wife were not free. He made a deal with McKee to buy Hannah's freedom for \$800. But how would he save that much money?

The *Planter*

Robert Smalls took a job on the crew of the *Planter*, a civilian boat contracted by the Confederate army as a transport. The captain quickly noticed Smalls' skills and promoted him to wheelman (pilot). Smalls' desire for freedom for himself and his family inspired him to create a daring plan to escape the bonds of slavery with the help of the *Planter's* crew. If the plan failed,

they all could be killed. Now they waited for the opportunity to act.

On May 12, 1862, the *Planter's* captain, his first mate, and the chief engineer disobeyed orders by going into town for the night. Smalls saw his chance. At about 3:00 a.m. Smalls and the crew fired up the boilers, picked up waiting family from a nearby wharf, and sailed the *Planter* out of Charleston Harbor. Smalls put on the captain's hat and used the proper whistle blows signaling safe passage as he steamed past Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie. Once the ship was just out of range of the forts' guns, Smalls sped up and raised a white flag. Imagine the surprise of the Union blockading fleet when Smalls surrendered the *Planter* and its military cargo.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

The daring mission succeeded, winning freedom for a brave group of enslaved African Americans. The sensational escape made headlines and earned Smalls both a monetary reward and a meeting with the Lincoln administration.

Civil War to Civil Rights

Robert Smalls' struggle did not end when he won his own freedom. Union leaders recognized his bravery and skill, and Smalls was hired by the United States Army as a civilian to become one of the first African-American pilots of a military vessel. He was wounded on April 7, 1863 when piloting the *Keokuk* in the Ironclad Attack on Fort Sumter. Though he had proved himself to be a superb pilot, Smalls still did not enjoy the same rights as white citizens, even in northern states.

When Smalls took the *Planter* to a boatyard in Philadelphia he and a white colleague attempted to board a city street car on a rainy day. Even in Philadelphia the streetcars were segregated. The conductor told Smalls he would have to ride on the front platform by the driver, in the rain.

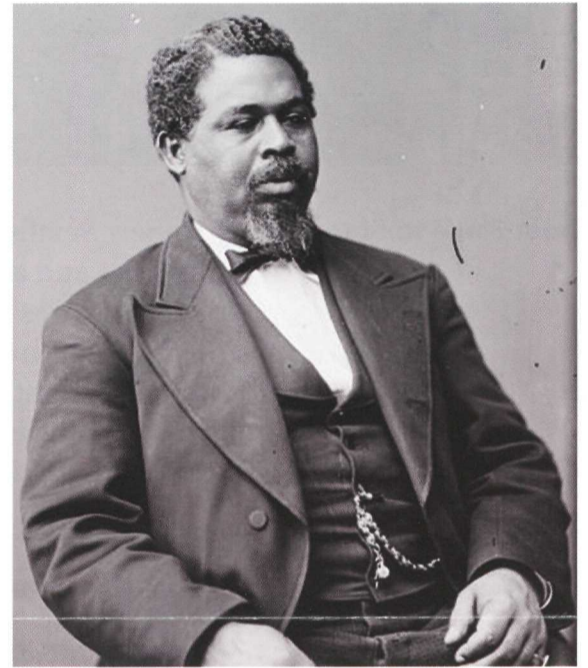
Rather than face the humiliation of riding on the driver's platform, Smalls and his colleague walked across the city in the rain. Reformers in Philadelphia cited the incident in their fight for streetcar integration. The streetcars in Philadelphia were desegregated in 1867—thanks in part to Robert Smalls.



Gullah Statesman

During Reconstruction Smalls held a variety of political offices, including seats in the South Carolina legislature and the U.S. Congress, where he served from 1875 through 1887. As a state representative, Smalls helped create the first public schools in South Carolina. In the U.S. House of Representatives he fought tirelessly against segregation of the military, railroads and restaurants; opposed plans to relocate African Americans to Liberia and the western United States; and served on a number of important committees. He also helped pass legislation that created the Parris Island Marine Base near Beaufort, South Carolina.

After his work in Congress, Smalls was appointed the Collector of Customs in Beaufort and held that post for almost 20 years in the face of relentless opposition from white politicians.



Smalls and the McKees



The McKee-Smalls House, Beaufort, South Carolina

After the Civil War, Smalls' former owners, the McKees, were on the brink of bankruptcy. With prize money he received for capturing the *Planter*, Smalls bought the McKee house at 511 Prince Street in Beaufort where he and his mother had been enslaved before the Civil War. His family lived in the house for the next 90 years. When Mrs. McKee's health began failing, Smalls took her in and let her live in her former home with him and his family—an unprecedented kindness toward his former owner. Smalls died February 23, 1915 and was buried in Beaufort at Tabernacle Baptist Church.

LSV-8 MG Robert Smalls

On September 15, 2007 in Baltimore, Maryland, the United States Army Reserve dedicated the Logistics Support Vessel-8 *Major General Robert Smalls*, the first Army Reserve vessel named after an African American. At the time it was commissioned the *MG Robert Smalls* was the largest sea-going vessel in the Army.



Courtesy of the U.S. Army and Robert Smalls Collection

About Your Visit

Fort Sumter National Monument is administered by the National Park Service. For additional information, write to the Superintendent, Fort Sumter National Monument, 1214 Middle Street, Sullivan's Island, SC 29482 or call (843) 883-3123.

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