

The Civil War-era periodical *Harper's Weekly* highlighted the bravery of South Carolina slave Robert Smalls and his crew as they commandeered the *Planter* to gain their freedom.

An Equal Chance in the Battle of Life

Born a slave, Robert Smalls persevered to become a decorated veteran and U.S. congressman

BY SARAH ACHENBACH

As darkness fell on South Carolina's Charleston Harbor on May 13, 1862, Robert Smalls' chance for freedom had finally arrived. The white Confederate officers of the transport steamer *Planter* had gone ashore to attend a party. Smalls, the *Planter's* quartermaster or wheelman, and the other black crew members quickly put their plan in motion. Their family members, including Smalls' wife, left their hiding places in other vessels and crept aboard.

Smalls, the son of a white man and a Beaufort, S.C., house slave, donned the Confederate captain's clothing and expertly piloted the steamship past Fort Sumter to the Union blockade. He knew the waters well. Before gaining employment on the *Planter* a year earlier, he had spent a decade on the Charleston docks as a sailmaker and rigger—his owner sent him there when Smalls was 12 to work for hire.

The *USS Onward*, the first vessel in the blockade, prepared to fire. Smalls raised a white flag, and in exchange for his freedom and that of the dozen slaves on board, he surrendered the *Planter* with its prized artillery of a howitzer, pivot gun, rifle and four cannons. Dubbed "the first trophy from Fort Sumter"—and with its firearms, shallow draft and capacity to carry 1,000 passengers, it was, indeed, a prize—Smalls and his crew were hailed as heroes. They received a cash prize, as was the custom for the surrender of an enemy ship, but because they were former slaves and considered contraband under the Dred Scott Decision, it took a congressional bill signed by President Lincoln to award the prize.

During the Civil War and for the rest of his days, Smalls proved himself as a leader of equal weight on land as on sea. He met with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and

President Lincoln to request the recruitment of 5,000 African-American soldiers to create the U.S. Colored Troops, though he himself would never receive a commission in the troops. (He was employed by both the U.S. Army and Navy, though he was never commissioned by either service branch.)

In 1863, he was detailed to the ironclad *Keokuk* and survived an ill-fated Union attack in the Charleston Harbor that sank the *Keokuk* moments after the crew was rescued. Several months later, he returned to the *Planter*, where his courage, once again, prevailed. During a battle, the steamer's white captain signaled to surrender. Knowing full well the harsh treatment he would receive if captured by the Confederacy, Smalls commanded the gunners to continue to fire. While the captain cowered in the coal bin, Smalls led the crew in a heroic—and victorious—battle. The captain was dismissed and Smalls was named captain of the *Planter*, becoming the first black man to be named captain of a vessel in U.S. service.


After learning to read and write, Smalls attended the 1864 Republican Party Convention as part of a delegation of free blacks, which set the course for his political career. He served as a South Carolina state legislator from 1868 to 1870, and in 1875, he was elected to the first of his five terms as a U.S. congressman. Smalls' progressive agenda helped to define equality for African-Americans, fighting

for equal travel accommodations and for the civil and legal protection of multiracial children. Smalls' leadership of his home state was far-reaching, as well. His legislation created South Carolina's public school system, the first such educational system in the United States, and he helped to draft South Carolina's constitution and founded its Republican Party.


Smalls resigned from office in 1887, and for nearly 20 years served as the U.S. Collector of Customs in Beaufort, living in the house where he was born a slave. He also served as a major general in the South Carolina militia, though his lifelong petition to collect a pension for his military service was unsuccessful.

Smalls, who died in 1916, constantly struggled against racial barriers, but his tenacity and belief in liberty and justice for all created a better life for white and black citizens alike. He once wrote, "My race needs no special defense, for the past history of them in this country proves them to be equal of any people anywhere. All they need is an equal chance in the battle of life." In 2004, the U.S. Army commissioned its first Army Reserve vessel named for an African-American: U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Robert Smalls (Logistics Support Vessel-8), a fitting tribute to a man who found his freedom and fortitude—and helped to change this country—on a similar working vessel nearly 150 years ago. —

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