

STEALING A GUNBOAT TO FREEDOM

To escape pre-Civil War slavery took courage, plus a hardhearted acceptance that recapture meant physical punishment and/or physical mutilation. The beginning of the end for the concept of humans being bought and sold as property in America began with a Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor in April of 1861. And with a Civil War now assured, one man began planning one of the greatest escapes from slavery that the world had ever seen. He stole a Confederate gunboat.



A house servant and field hand named Lydia Polite gave birth to a baby boy in 1839. The father was most likely her master, Henry McKee, and the birth took place in a cabin behind Henry McKee's house at 511 Prince Street in Beaufort, South Carolina. The boy was named and grew up as **Robert Smalls**.

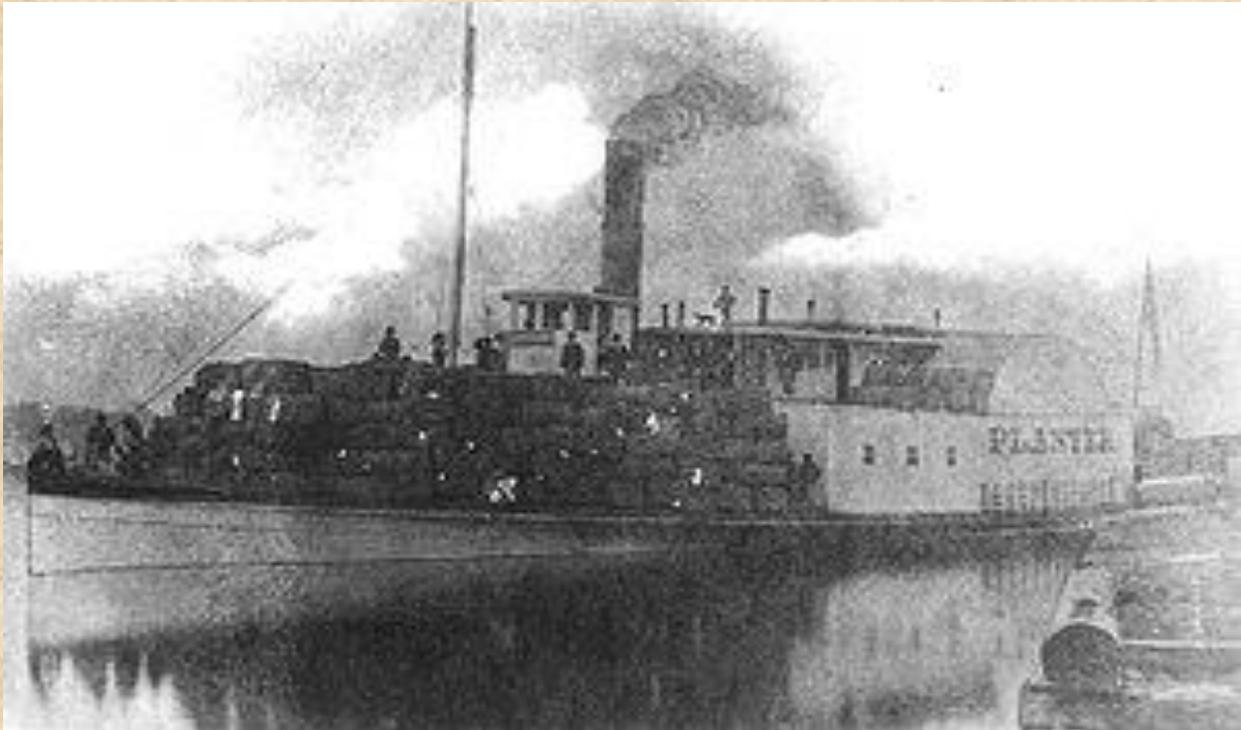
His childhood was greatly influenced by his mother's Lowcountry Gullah culture. Gullah is an English based Creole language based on Bahamian Creole. Spoken pre-Civil War from Cape May, New Jersey to just north of Jacksonville, Florida, the Gullah culture

and language is now almost exclusively in Georgia and South Carolina. The language is also called Geechee, derived from the name of the Ogeechee River near Savannah, Georgia.

Smalls was a bright child and favored over other slaves, yet saw and comprehended the unhappy plight of field hands, including the cruel punishment often administered. At the request of his mother, at age of 12 Small's master sent him to work as a laborer in Charleston for one dollar a week. He worked in a hotel, toiled as a lamplighter on the streets of Charleston, but his love for the sea found him working the docks and wharves in his early teens. Smalls labored as a longshoreman, a rigger and a sail maker, and in short order worked his way up to become a wheelman, really a pilot, but slaves were not allowed that title. His experiences in Charleston Harbor gave him an extraordinary knowledge of the waterway.

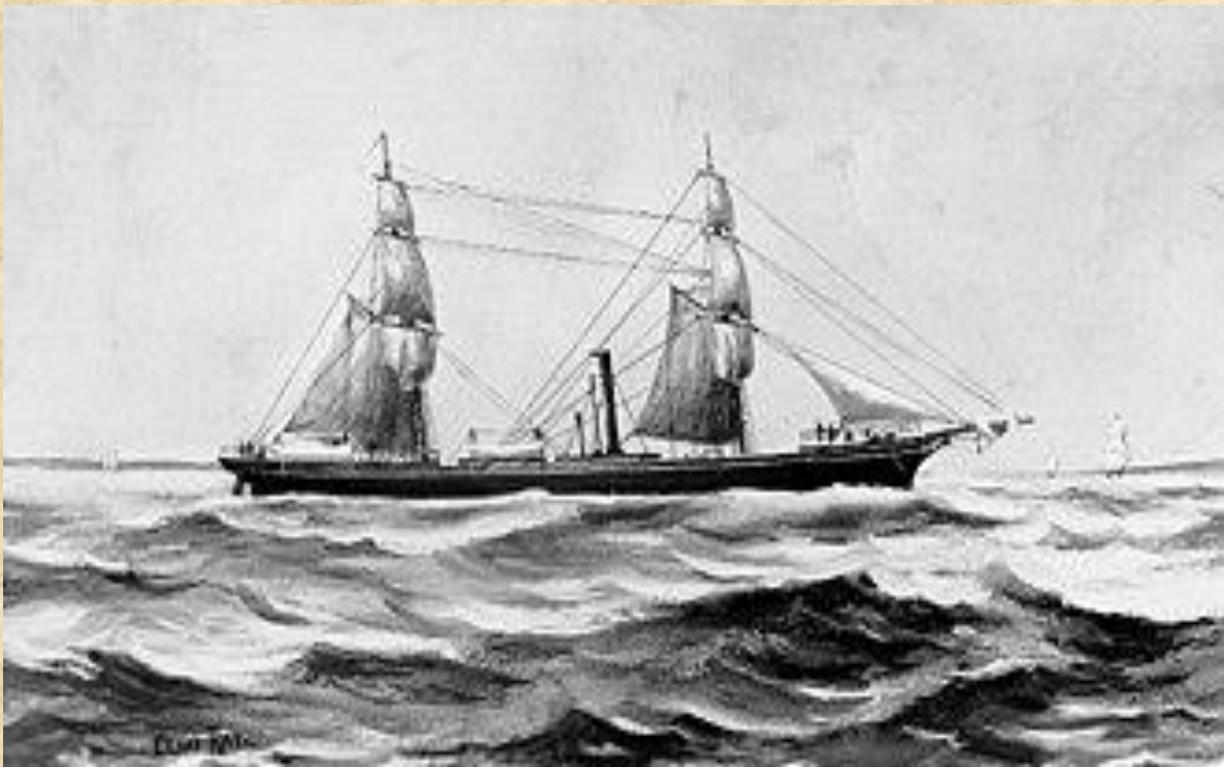
He married Hannah Jones, a hotel maid, in December of 1856. Smalls was 17; she was 22, already the mother of two children. She bore Robert two children, first-born Elizabeth, and Robert, Jr., who died at the age of two.

After Fort Sumter was bombarded, Smalls was assigned to pilot the Confederate gunboat and military transport CSS *Planter*. The ship delivered dispatches, supplies and troops, and eventually became a minelayer in Charleston Harbor and other areas along the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Smalls could clearly see the Federal ships blockading the harbor, seven miles out. In April of 1862, he began to plot his escape.



On May 12, 1862, the **CSS Planter** stopped at Coles Island on the Stono River to pick up four large guns for harbor defense. Back in Charleston, the crew loaded 200 lbs. of ammunition and 20 cords of firewood. While loading, the families of the African-American crew, and Smalls' family, snuck aboard another small steamer at the North Atlantic wharf. That evening, as always, the three white officers assigned to the *Planter* left the ship to spend the night ashore, leaving Smalls and the African-American crew to babysit the ship. Around 0300, Smalls donned a straw hat similar to the Captain's and also put on his uniform. He then sailed the *Planter* past Southern Wharf and picked up the waiting families at North Atlantic wharf. (The three white officers were later court-martialed for allowing a slave to steal their ship, two were convicted).

In the dead of night, wearing the Captain's uniform and a similar straw hat, copying the Captain's mannerisms and knowledgeable of the correct signals at checkpoints, Smalls navigated the ship past five Confederate harbor forts and sailed past Fort Sumter at 0430. The crew replaced the rebel flag with a white bed sheet his wife had brought aboard, and Smalls headed straight for the Union Navy fleet. Lookouts on the **USS Onward** spotted the ship heading their way. Presuming the ship was a Confederate vessel, a gun crew on the *Onward* elevated No. 3 port gun and readied to fire.



The sheet, or white flag, was impossible to see in the pre-dawn darkness, but sunrise came just in the nick of time. Someone yelled, "I see something that looks like a white flag!" Realizing the Union warship was not engaging them in combat, dancing

and singing and chanting broke out on the *Planter*. As *Planter* came under the stern of the *Onward*, Robert Smalls stepped forward, took off his hat, and shouted, "Good morning, sir! I have brought you some of the old United States guns, sir!"

The captain of the Union ship boarded the *Planter*. Smalls asked for a United States flag to display and surrendered the *Planter* to the United States Navy. One of the most ingenious escape plans ever devised had succeeded.

The Union's bounty included *Planter's* own light guns, heavy guns from Coles Island, 200 lbs. of ammunition, other cargo, and the prized code book containing the Confederate signals and a map of the mines and torpedoes in Charleston Harbor. Most valuable of all, was Smalls extensive knowledge of the harbor, other waterways, and military installations. Smalls informed the commander of the blockading fleet that Coles Island was being abandoned and that few troops remained. One week after Smalls escape, Union forces captured Coles Island and its batteries without a fight.

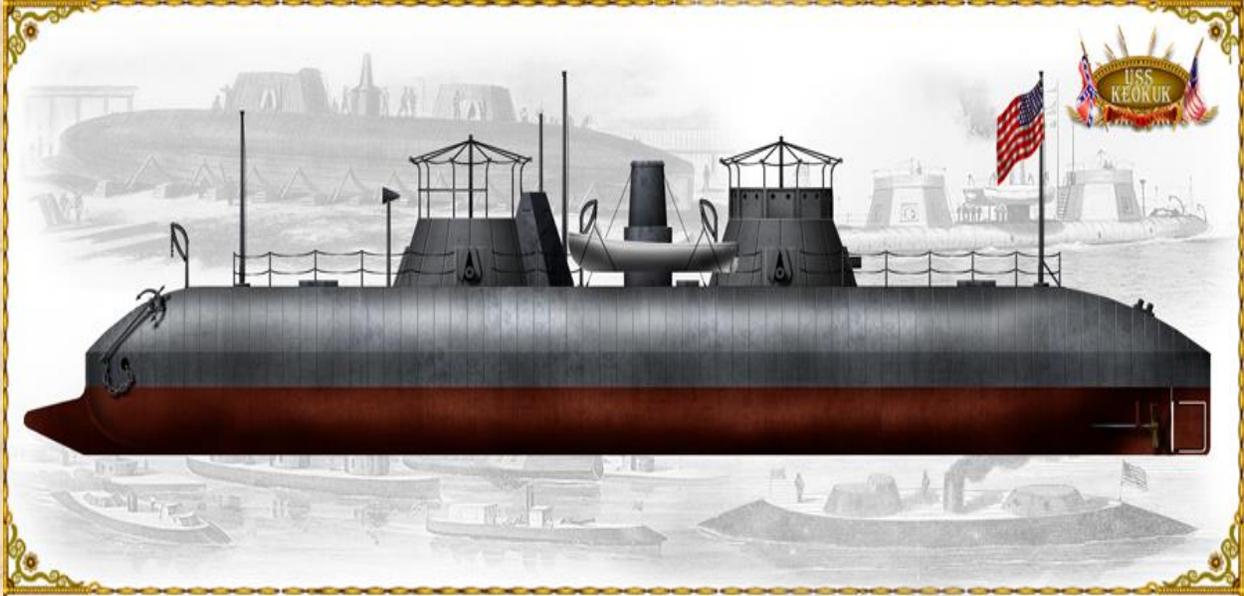
The fleet commander, Du Pont, was so impressed with Smalls' intelligence and demeanor that he wrote to the Secretary of the Navy, "Robert, the intelligent slave and pilot of the boat, who performed this bold feat so skillfully, informed me of the guns at Coles Island. He is superior to any who have come into our lines."

At 23 years of age, Robert Smalls became a well-known hero in the North. Newspapers and magazines wrote about his brave, if

not audacious, exploits. Congress passed a bill to award the crew and Smalls prize money for the *Planter*. Small's share of the bounty was \$1,500 – today's equivalent of about \$39,000. Southern newspapers clamored for the scalps of the officers who allowed a slave to pilfer their boat.

Smalls began to serve the Union Navy, especially his detailed knowledge of Charleston Harbor. With the encouragement of Major General David Hunter, commander of Port Royal, Smalls went to Washington, D.C. with Rev. Mansfield French, founder of Wilberforce University, in August of 1862 to persuade Edwin Stanton, Secretary of War, and President Lincoln, to allow and mobilize black troops to fight in the war. Port Royal received 5,000 African-Americans, who formed the 1st and 2nd South Carolina Regiments (Colored). Smalls worked as a civilian with the Navy until transferred to the Army in March of 1863.

The *Planter* underwent repairs and went into Union service at Fort Pulaski. At the time, Smalls was piloting the *Crusader*, but soon found himself piloting both vessels due to his knowledge of Charleston Harbor and other southern waterways. He was present at the Battle of Simmon's Bluff, was under fire several times at Adam's Run on the Dawho River, participated in the battles at Rockville, at John's Island, and the Second Battle of Pocotaligo. Robert Smalls was present during 17 major battles and/or engagements in the Civil War.



The ironclad, **USS Keokuk**, participated in a bombardment and attack on Fort Sumter in April of 1863. The pilot of the ironclad was Robert Smalls. The *Keokuk* was hit 96 times, retired from the fight, and sank the next morning. Smalls, and most of the *Keokuk's* crew, abandoned ship and boarded the USS *Ironside* then returned to Hilton Head Island with the fleet.

Later, in December of 1863, Smalls was once again piloting the *Planter* when Confederate batteries at Secessionville on Folly Island Creek opened up. The Captain of the *Planter*, James Nickerson, panicked, fled the pilot house, and hid in the coal-bunker, acceding surrender. Smalls refused to surrender. He knew the black crewmen would be treated harshly...possibly executed. Small took command and piloted the *Planter* to safety. This action earned him a promotion to the rank of Captain and he was put in charge of the *Planter*.

In the spring of 1864, Smalls piloted the *Planter* to Philadelphia for a refurbishment. At the beginning of the Civil War, Smalls could not read or write. He attained literacy in Philadelphia. While riding in a streetcar in Philadelphia, he was ordered to give up his seat to a white passenger. He gave up his seat, but instead of riding in the open overflow platform, Smalls simply left the streetcar. This discrimination and humiliation of a Civil War hero and veteran resulted in the Pennsylvania legislature passing a bill to integrate public transportation in that state.

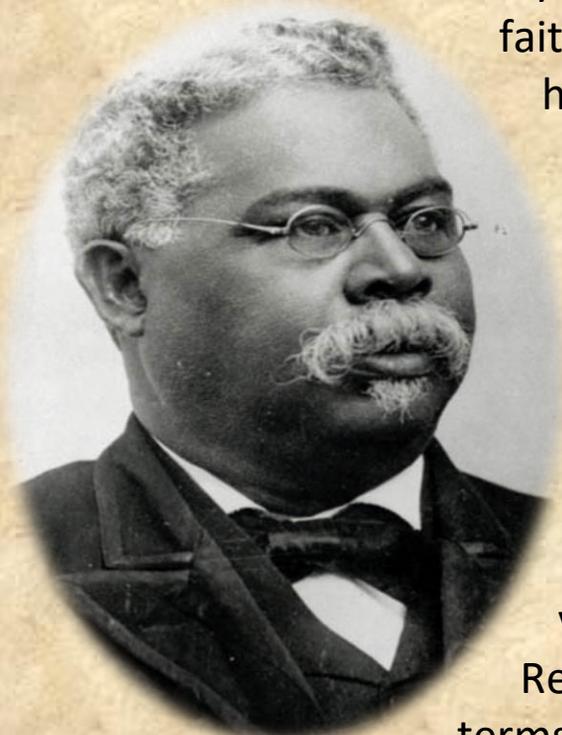
During Sherman's 'march to the sea' in December of 1864, a small ship called the *Planter* with her Captain, a man named Robert Smalls, was there in Savannah to support his army. In April of 1865, Smalls and the *Planter* was at Fort Sumter for the ceremonial raising of the American flag again. Smalls piloted the *Huron* and *Paul Jones* also, and was discharged on June 11, 1865. He continued to use the *Planter* for humanitarian efforts.

Controversy surrounds his position and rank during the war. It has been said Smalls never received a promotion to Captain; it has been said he was 'assigned' to act as a pilot; criticism has been tossed at his reward for 'appropriating' the *Planter* from Charleston Harbor. Most of the controversy is blatant racism.

Later in life, Smalls requested a Navy pension. A bill to do just that failed to pass committee in 1883. In 1897, a special act of Congress awarded Smalls a pension of \$30.00 per month. In 1900, he was given \$5,000 for his capture of CCS *Planter*, minus the \$1,500 he was awarded in 1862.

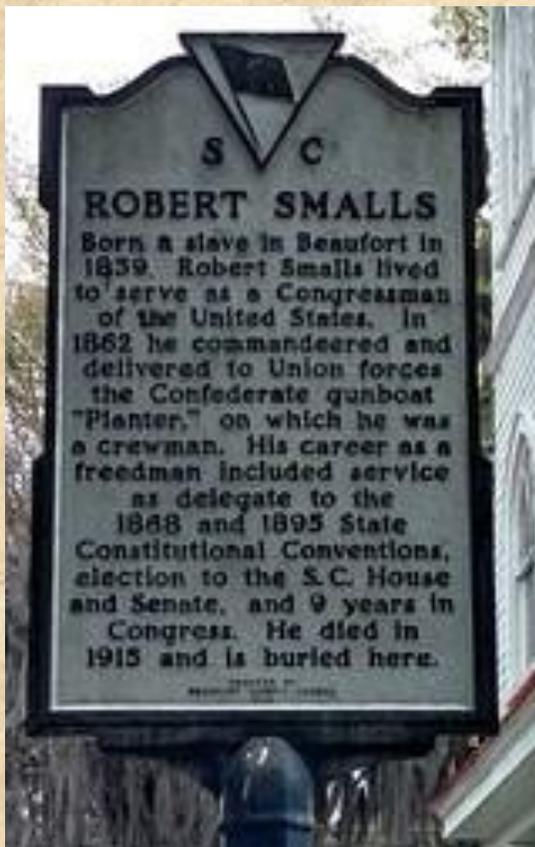
In 1866, Smalls returned to Beaufort, South Carolina where he bought his former master's house at 511 Prince Street. Smalls' mother, Lydia, lived with him for the rest of her life. Jane Bond McKee, the wife of his former master, was elderly and unwell. Small allowed Mrs. McKee to move back into her former home prior to her death.

The man who stole a Confederate gunboat became a successful businessman, a railroad entrepreneur, and owner of the black-owned newspaper, the *Beaufort Southern Standard*. Plus, his fluency in the Gullah dialect and unyielding faithfulness to the Republican Party helped him launch a political career.



Smalls served as a delegate to the 1886 South Carolina Constitutional Convention, served in the state senate, and was a delegate to the National Republican Conventions in 1872, 1876, 1884, and then continuously to each convention until 1896. In 1872, he was elected vice-president of the South Carolina Republican Party. Small served two terms in the United States House of Representatives representing South Carolina's 5th district, and served from the 7th district as a member of the 44th, 45th, 47th, 48th, and 49th Congresses.

Robert Smalls fought for freedom; he stole a gunboat to start his quest for freedom, he fought prejudice and racism all his adult life, he sought proper schooling for all children, he was a fighter by every definition of the word. Suffering from acute diabetes, he still had fight left in him in 1913 when, as a local community leader, he stopped a mob from lynching two black suspects in the murder of a white man. He simply advised the mayor and sheriff that if the mob was not stopped, the blacks he'd sent throughout the city would burn down the town. The mob was stopped.



Malaria and diabetes took the man in 1915 at the age of 75. He is buried in a family plot in the churchyard of Tabernacle Baptist Church in downtown Beaufort. A monument in the churchyard is inscribed with an excerpt from a speech he gave to the South Carolina legislature in 1895: **“My race needs no special defense, 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.”**

