Robert Smalls: Slave, Hero, Congressman

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Would you steal a Confederate warship from a Confederate wharf in the middle of war? Would you be feared so much that you are the reason why the Ku Klux Klan was created? Robert Smalls, a hired-out slave since he was 12, did both of these. He managed to pass by Fort Sumter, several guard boats, and several checkpoints blocking his and his family's path to freedom. Along his perilous life path, from slave to Congressman, Robert Smalls broke physical, political, and personal barriers for himself, his family, others, and others' families.

Robert Smalls demonstrated his resourcefulness and bravery at a young age. This type of determination started with Smalls' mother, Lydia Polite. She was separated from her parents from age nine, after being taken from her plantation to work as a house slave. Her owner was John McKee. It was then her job to wash clothes, cook, and tend to the McKee children. Being a house slave, she was able to listen in on family conversations, making her more aware of the outside world than other slaves. As time went on, she came to serve Henry Mckee, and he moved to Beaufort, South Carolina, purchasing a fancy home with slave quarters behind it (Lineberry 31).

Lydia, at age forty-three, gave birth to Robert Smalls in the slave quarters behind the house. From a very young age Smalls was doing small chores, like cleaning and polishing his master's boots, carrying wood to the fire, and fetching water. As Smalls got older, his privileges grew. He was sometimes able to play with the older McKee children, and sometimes accompanied Henry on his trips to Ashdale. Even though he had these opportunities, he had never lost sight of his place. Robert was taught how to speak and understand two different languages: English, and Gullah. Even though he

was taught to speak Gullah, he didn't speak with the accent that normal Gullah people have. This allowed him to speak unrestrictedly to white people (LeGree 3).

With this ability, Henry sent Smalls to Charleston at age twelve. His first job was a bus-boy at the *Planter* Hotel; this ambition earned him a job as a lamp-lighter. He was now earning nine dollars a month for Henry. Next he became a stevedore, hauling cargo on and off ships at the harbor. After a few years of that work, he was hired in the rigging loft, getting rigging ready for ships, and in the summer months, he had become a part time sailor. Little did he realize at the time, this work experience would prove invaluable in a few short years.

Also at this time, Robert Smalls made changes in his personal life as well. He married Hannah Jones at age seventeen. The Smalls had their first child on April fifth, 1859. When this daughter, Elizabeth Lydia Smalls, was born, Robert began to work harder and negotiate with Henry about his now full-time job as a sailor. He was able to get about one dollar a month, out of his fifteen dollar wage, but the rest still went to his master (LeGree 4).

After he had saved up for awhile, Smalls tried to get a price on his wife's and his daughter's freedom from their master. That price was eight hundred dollars, a price far too high for Smalls. He decided his only option was to escape. He started listening to the news of the 1860 elections, looking for the perfect time to escape (Lineberry 50).

When war broke out, the ships in the harbor were now to be equipped for this situation, including the one Smalls was working on. The *Planter* was now lightly equipped with cannons, with it only being a transport ship. Relyea, the *Planter*'s

captain, saw Smalls' talent as a deckhand, and had him promoted to wheelman. This boosted his efforts to escape, by giving him a way to do so. This promotion also meant Smalls had to study maps and charts of the channels, which made him learn to read. At that time, it was against the law in South Carolina for a slave to learn to read. This is an example of Robert Smalls breaking a personal barrier.

Smalls started devising a plan, and introduced it to the other slave crew members. This was risky as those crew members could have spoiled the plan and gotten Smalls killed very easily. The crew decided that they would have to somehow get the white crew off the *Planter* in order to escape. They also recognized Smalls remarkable similarity to Captain Relyea, when Smalls was wearing the Captain's straw hat. The slaves now had a Captain for the escape. The next problem came with the families. They now had to figure out a way to smuggle them on board without anyone noticing or knowing. To do this they had to keep the ladies and children in the dark (Lineberry 38).

Smalls's plan was to get through all of the Confederate checkpoints without arousing suspicion. To do this, Smalls had to memorize the hand signals and other passwords and greetings used by Relyea on a normal basis. The crew had to memorize the passwords using the whistle and other instruments of *Planter*. The crew also had to know what speed to go at, and what path to take. The chance of escaping was very slim (LeGree 4).

The day of escape finally arrived on May 12, 1862, when the white crew decided to stay on land that night. Near dawn on May thirteenth, the *Planter* fired up.

Unbeknownst to the guard and a police detective, the steamship was not being controlled by its white captains. Next, the *Planter* then started inland, the opposite of its normal route. The *Planter* then pulled up to another ship, the *Etiwan*. "The *Planter* moved so slowly," Smalls once said,"that we didn't even need to throw a plank or tie a rope." The families were now on the *Planter*, having been picked up from the *Etiwan.* The steamship turned around and made towards its normal path. Two miles later, the escapees passed Fort Johnson, whose west brigade had fired the very first shots of the Civil War (Lineberry 45). They then turned up the steam on the way to Fort Sumter, passing several boats, including a guard boat. The Confederates had constructed a log boom to ensure that no boats could pass, unless they passed right by Fort Sumter's powerful cannons.

As the *Planter* went near Sumter, the women below decks started to pray. When the steam ship was passing the fort, Smalls ordered the crew to maintain the pace they had set, to not speed up, as many of us would have. Smalls then gave the signal of two long whistles and one short one. The sentinel at Fort Sumter mistook the *Planter* as the guard boat, which was in the harbor being fixed. As soon as the *Planter* was out of the range of Fort Sumter's cannons, it picked up speed and turned toward the Union blockade. When the *Planter* did this, an observant soldier on the fort noticed something was wrong. The fort was messaging the other forts and boats to see if anybody could stop them, but the *Planter* was already too far out to stop.

Robert Small's next obstacle in his daring escape was to surrender the ship's costly load of six desperately needed cannons to the Union, without getting fired upon.

As the *Planter* steamed ahead towards the Union blockade, the women were trying to raise a makeshift white flag, made from a bed sheet, on the flag pole. As the *Planter* neared the Union blockade, a thick log bank rolled in. When the *Planter* could see the Union ships, most of the faster ships, steamers like the *Planter* thought that it was a Confederate ironclad. A few ships, like the *USS Onward,* were old wooden ships with sails; they could not outrun an ironclad. On the deck of the *Onward*, Captain John Fredrick Nickels was calling the crew to battle stations, because neither he nor the other crew members could see the white flag of surrender, because of the fog. Moments before the cannons were ready to fire, Nickels saw the white flag and ordered his men to stand down. Once the *Planter* came within earshot, he yelled for the *Planter* to come aside, but the men did not hear. Nickels then yelled,"Stop, or I will blow you out of the water (Linberry 27)!" The *Planter* came aside to the *Onward*.

Smalls then said, "Good morning sir, I've brought you some of the old United States guns, sir!... that were for Fort Sumter, sir!" All the men and women on the *Planter* were rejoicing, and some were singing, for those seventeen slaves had gained freedom. Robert Smalls had successfully navigated Charleston harbor, passed Fort Sumter and Johnson, and surrendered the priceless cargo of six cannons over to the Union, all in the middle of war. Smalls had successfully broken physical barriers for not only himself but the other families on board the ship.

After he escaped the South, as a reward for the valuable cannons, he was supposed to receive the full value of the *Planter* and its cargo, but he received half. Smalls then became the first African American Captain of the Civil War, commanding

the *Planter*. In addition to breaking barriers for himself and his family, he also lobbied Secretary of War Stanton to enlist black soldiers in the war. Some records indicate that Smalls himself recruited 5,000 black soldiers to serve for the Union (Gates, Henry).

Not only did Smalls break physical and social barriers during the time of war, he continued to do so after the war. After the war was over, Robert Smalls went back to his old home on 511 Prince Street in Beaufort, and purchased the home where he had once been a slave. Then the old white mistress, who had dementia, forgot the property was no longer hers. She thought she belonged in her old house. Breaking social barriers, Smalls let her back in and let her be the mistress of the house, all to not confuse her (Allen, Jannie). Clearly, this is an example of a broken barrier of a personal, heroic type. Not many others in this situation would have done the same.

Additionally, Smalls broke many barriers politically and socially. As an example to society, Smalls and his white friend refused to ride on a segregated street car, and preferred to walk in the rain. Because he was elected to a political office, Smalls was hated by prominent white men in the South. They retaliated by starting the Ku Klux Klan. Even though the KKK was against him, he was able to serve in the forty-fourth to the forty-ninth congresses. To win his elections he sometimes had to contest the elections, especially when he was against George Tillman. Smalls chose a particularly targeted town, by the South Carolina “Red Shirts”, as a case study. Smalls won the support of the Committee on Elections by testifying that his voters had been scared away by Tillman’s “Red Shirts,” which was South Carolina’s version of the KKK. Smalls now had a seat in the US House of Representatives (history.gov), where he served five

terms. Along with being a leader for the nation, one item of particular note is his refusal to sign or endorse the Jim Crow laws.

Robert Smalls played a pivotal role in the significant transformation of the United States in the time period immediately following the Civil War (Reconstruction Era National Historical Park). His success in government provided an innovative example for the rest of the U.S. Just a few blocks from his personal home, former President Barack Obama dedicated the Reconstruction Era National Monument in 2017. Rededicated in 2019 as the Reconstruction Era National Park, this action proves the historical significance of Smalls' representation and leadership of the African American community breaking political and social barriers by changing society in South Carolina and leading the way as an example for the nation.

Throughout his life, Smalls broke the color barrier by: learning to read maps when all learning by slaves was banned by South Carolina's Legislature, by posing successfully as a white captain, and by being one of the first African American Congressmen. Smalls also broke the barriers for a hired out slave, by: learning to read, learning to steer a ship, and escaping with such valuable cargo.

Robert Smalls managed to commandeer a Confederate warship with eight desperately needed cannons, and bring it straight to the Union, along with freeing numerous families. He was able to do all this whilst being a slave. He overcame many challenges, like the ominous Fort Sumter, guard boats, a log boom, and surrendering. Any of these could have killed him, and his mission. After this, he faced massive opposition by the Klu Klux Klan and his political rivals, but he still persevered and led

the way politically by serving in the House of Representatives for multiple terms, leading national change. Without a doubt, Smalls broke physical, personal, and political barriers for not only himself, but his family, others, and others' families. Our history books need to tell his story fighting for freedoms right alongside the stories of other notable historical figures like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Robert Smalls, a African American Legislator

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