

## Fascinating Civil War Heroes: General Robert Smalls

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Among the multitude of heroes that altered the course of history through their deeds in the brutal Civil War, the story of Robert Smalls elucidates a story of true American heroism and courage. In the midst of the battle for freedom, Robert Smalls was an African American, who distinctively rose above the expectations of any slave at the time. His impressive determination and fortitude would shape a legacy in this critical chapter of American history.

Twenty-two years before the bombardment and surrender of Fort Sumter in 1861, Robert Smalls was born into slavery in Beaufort, South Carolina. At an early age, Smalls was relocated to Charleston where he worked as a boatman, eventually marrying and fathering two children and working to pay his family out of slavery. His naval skills “impressed [Smalls] into the Confederate Army” (Nofi 154) and he was made the steersman of the armed transport *Planter*, “a steam-powered side-wheeler shallow-draft craft... ideally suited for moving troops and material along South Carolina’s labyrinth of coastal waters” (Westwood 76). Along with Smalls, about a dozen of the *Planter’s* crew were fellow-slaves whose important work encompassed transporting Confederate military cargo and troops along the Intercoastal Waterway of South Carolina.

A little over a year after the Civil War had begun, Robert Smalls would execute an act that changed the course of the war and forever altered the social discernment of slaves during the war. The *Planter*, “for many months under charter to the Army with a civilian crew, had been doing good service on critical missions” (Westwood 74) within the Beaufort – Charleston waterways. Early in the morning of May 13, 1862, Harbor guards spotted “a man who seemed to

be her captain, for he had the captain's posture and wore his straw hat and jacket" (Westwood 75). The *Planter's* sharp whistle and flying Confederate flag made the early morning maneuver seem quite normal and unsuspecting. However the Confederate captain was not aboard the *Planter*, rather the slave crew was running the ship with wheelman Robert Smalls, his family, and a few other slaves whom he'd smuggled aboard earlier that morning. Smalls steered the *Planter* boldly towards the harbor entrance, and "steamed past in a rather leisurely fashion" (Nofi 154) unbeknownst to the captains staying ashore and the Confederate Commander General Roswell S. Ripley. The absence of the *Planter* raised suspicions as Ripley discovered its unpermitted departure later that morning. Smalls already had chartered the ship through five armed Confederate checkpoints, the Confederate administration "peered out at the forms of Union blockading ships at sea, well beyond Charleston Harbor's Confederate bastion, Fort Sumter. At first incredulous, finally, they were convinced. There was the *Planter*, riding between two of the Union blockaders" (Westwood 75). Flying where the Rebel banner had once waved was a plain white bedsheet from Smalls' quarters. Smalls, leaning off the rail shouting to the Union officers: "Good morning, Sir! I've brought you some of the old United States guns, sir" (Westwood 77). Smalls had freed the crew along with his family and was on course to change the direction of the Civil War.

Robert Smalls' achievement of freedom and Union victory did not end with the capture and recommissioned of the *Planter*. In the Confederate capitol, officials ordered the punishment of the parties involved in the loss of the ship, resulting in arrests and court-martials of the ship's officers, and A fiery condemnation from the Charleston press "branding the abduction of the vessel 'one of the most shameful events of this or any other war'" (Westwood 76). In short, the bravery of Smalls and his crew of slaves had directly humiliated the Southern navy.

For the Union, the capture of the *Planter* was more than a military victory, and for Smalls much more than a chance for freedom. Along with the armed and valuable freight runner, Smalls delivered the Union Navy locations of “Rebel fortifications all through the area where torpedoes had been planted in the rivers and creeks [as well as]... ‘the book containing the secret of the signals of the Confederacy,’ enabling Unionists to ‘read’ the rebel signal flags wagging around the harbor” (Westwood 78). Thus, Smalls’ heroic deed of capturing and escaping the cradle of the rebellion helped change the course of the war by providing the Union with critical information and supplies to benefit their position in the coastal waters of South Carolina. Smalls’ courage soon made way into the Northern public eye, gaining him a popular presence in Northern media, uncommon for most slaves at the time.

Smalls’ popularity for his heroism in the capture “signaled a new trend in wartime depictions of African Americans: the insistence that black men could be a ‘gallant’ as whites,” (Fahs 164) and led to a greater importance and popularity in employing African Americans as soldiers for the Union Army. Through his actions, Smalls pioneered a path for black soldiers in America and set into place the social change for African American’s through his heroism. “Smalls’ exploit made him a hero throughout the North... and [he] received a sizeable share of the prize money which was awarded to him and his men” (Nofi 155). Smalls continued to serve in the Union Navy after being appointed to a pilot by Lincoln, serving on some vessels, where he was once again cited for his courage. In December 1863, Robert Smalls became the first African American to command his own ship in the United States Navy.

The legacy of Robert Smalls is a story of true courage and heroism. His bravery not only degraded the Confederate navy but turned the tides of the war by providing the Union with

information and military assets. Smalls' actions also went far beyond the war, triggering the movement for freedom for blacks in America and changing the perception of slaves in America. The freedom of one ship, one crew, one family, and one man ultimately helped change the social and political course of a nation.

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