

This is PortSide NewYork's first MiniHistory.

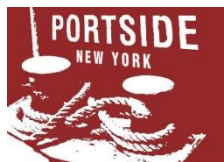
It is part of our African American Maritime Heritage program launched in May, 2018. Our goal is make this significant history more well-known.

If you want to get involved in growing this program, please get in touch!

www.portsidennyork.org
www.redhookwaterstories.org
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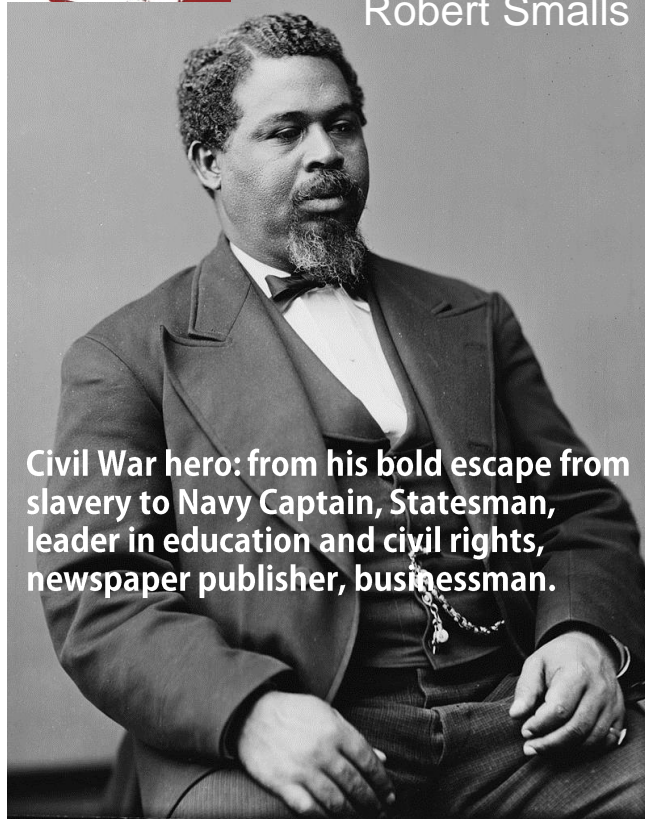
First edition of 100
May 2018

Images from the Library of Congress



African American Maritime MiniHistory

Robert Smalls



Civil War hero: from his bold escape from slavery to Navy Captain, Statesman, leader in education and civil rights, newspaper publisher, businessman.

A man of bravery, diverse talents and great forgiveness

Robert Smalls burst into fame during the Civil War, while only 22 years old, due to his daring on May 12, 1862, in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina.

He was working as a slave on a Confederate military supply boat, the PLANTER. Before dawn, Smalls commandeered the ship, and steered the PLANTER over 7 miles past 5 Confederate forts, mimicking the body language of the captain and sounding the security codes at two forts to get past the blockade. He ran the ship out to the open ocean where he delivered the fully-loaded PLANTER to the US Navy of the northern forces.

Even more audacious and generous, on his way out of the harbor, he stopped the PLANTER at another pier to pick up the families of the other enslaved black crew, along with his own, liberating 17 people (nine men, five women and three children).

More information

See PortSide NewYork's webpage

www.portsidenewyork.org/afam-maritime

We will add more information as we research it.

Books

You can come read related books in our maritime library. That is in the Captain's Cabin of our ship MARY A. WHALEN. The ship is in Atlantic Basin at the foot of Pioneer Street in Red Hook, Brooklyn.

Legacy

Robert Smalls was famous in his time. What happened to his story? How is history lost or erased? PortSide spends a lot of time on this question and works to recover lost histories.

We learned about Robert Smalls several years ago when NOAA Sanctuaries (the federal government stewards of underwater heritage sites) tweeted that they thought they had found the sunken remains of the PLANTER. On May 13, 2014, NOAA announced that they had!

Among his successful descendants is his great, great, grandson Michael Boulware Moore who is the founding President and CEO of Charleston's International African American Museum. This will be at the place where almost half of all African captives arrived in the USA.

The museum will present the largely under-told experiences and accomplishments of Americans of African descent. See his TEDx Talk at <https://youtu.be/w6T7ksyhUkw>

Enraged and stunned Confederates, many of whom could not believe that a black man had pulled this off, put a high bounty (\$4,000) on his head.

Robert Smalls became a celebrity in the north, giving public speeches, some during visits to New York City, and meeting President Lincoln.

For all the talk of ending slavery, the Union military was not integrated. Smalls lobbied the Secretary of War to enlist black men, and later reputedly recruited 5,000 soldiers himself. In October 1862, he was back on the PLANTER as pilot and was involved in 17 military actions including the assault on Fort Sumter.

Due to his bravery, nerves of steel and navigation skills, Smalls was promoted to Captain. As of December 1863, he was paid \$150 a month, making the Confederate bounty on him equal to 26 months of his salary, and making him one of the highest paid black servicemen of the Civil War.

He and his crew were compensated for the capture of the PLANTER via a bill in the U.S. Congress, though they were underpaid for the bold move. Smalls did receive enough (\$1,500) to buy his slave master's house after the Civil War.

He lived out his years in that home, and even took in the widow of his former slave master when she showed up one day, senile, thinking it was still her place.

Legislator, State politics

He returns to South Carolina after the Civil War and becomes the 1st black man elected to the State Assembly. He founds the South Carolina Republican Party and helps draft the South Carolina Constitution of 1868.

Creates public education!

He writes the legislation that leads to the 1st free compulsory public schools in South Carolina – the first in the USA.

Robert Smalls and Hannah Jones Smalls had two children, one who died when two years old.

Hannah died in 1883; and 7 years later, Robert Smalls married Annie Wigg. They had one son. Annie Wigg died five years after the marriage in 1895.

After the death of Annie Wigg, Robert Smalls lived 20 years as a widower and died of diabetes and malaria at the age of 75 in 1915.

He is buried in his family's plot at the Tabernacle Baptist Church in downtown Beaufort. A monument to him there carries a statement 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."*

His former home still exists and is privately owned.

Business

With partners, he forms the Enterprise Railroad, an 18-mile, horse-drawn railway that moves people and goods between Charleston harbor and inland terminals. Its board of directors is mostly black; it has only one white director.

Family life

Robert Smalls was born into slavery in 1839 in a cabin behind the home of his master Henry McKee in Beaufort, South Carolina. McKee's son Henry is presumed to be Robert's father. He had a city childhood, but was influenced by the island Gullah culture of his mother Lydia Polite, a slave of the McKees. He developed a deep love of the sea and was skilled at many maritime trades.

He was a committed family man at an early age. At 17, he got permission to marry Hannah Jones, an enslaved hotel maid. She had two daughters and was five years his senior. He wanted to buy her liberation but didn't have the money, so he took her, their children and her prior children with him on the PLANTER.

Civil Rights Activism

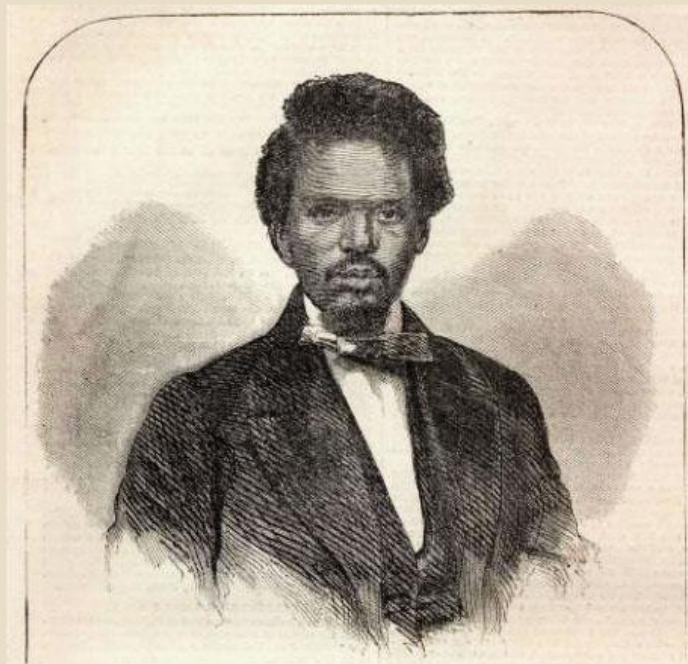
He leads one of the first mass boycotts of segregated public transportation. A Charleston city law permits integrated streetcars in 1867. These gains were rolled back under Jim Crow.

He opened a store and a school for black children in 1867, published a newspaper, the Beaufort *Southern Standard*, starting in 1872.

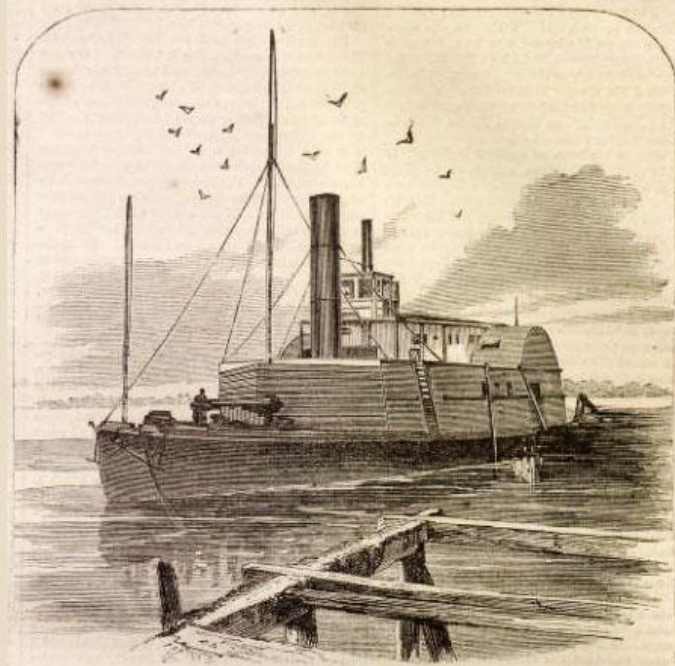
In addition to English, he speaks the Sea Island Gullah dialect which broadens his reach and popularity.

1st black man elected to US Congress

He serves 5 nonconsecutive terms in the U.S. House of Representatives (1874-1886).



ROBERT SMALLS, CAPTAIN OF THE GUN-BOAT
"PLANTER."



THE GUN-BOAT "PLANTER," RUN OUT OF
CHARLESTON, S. C., BY ROBERT SMALLS, MAY, 1862.