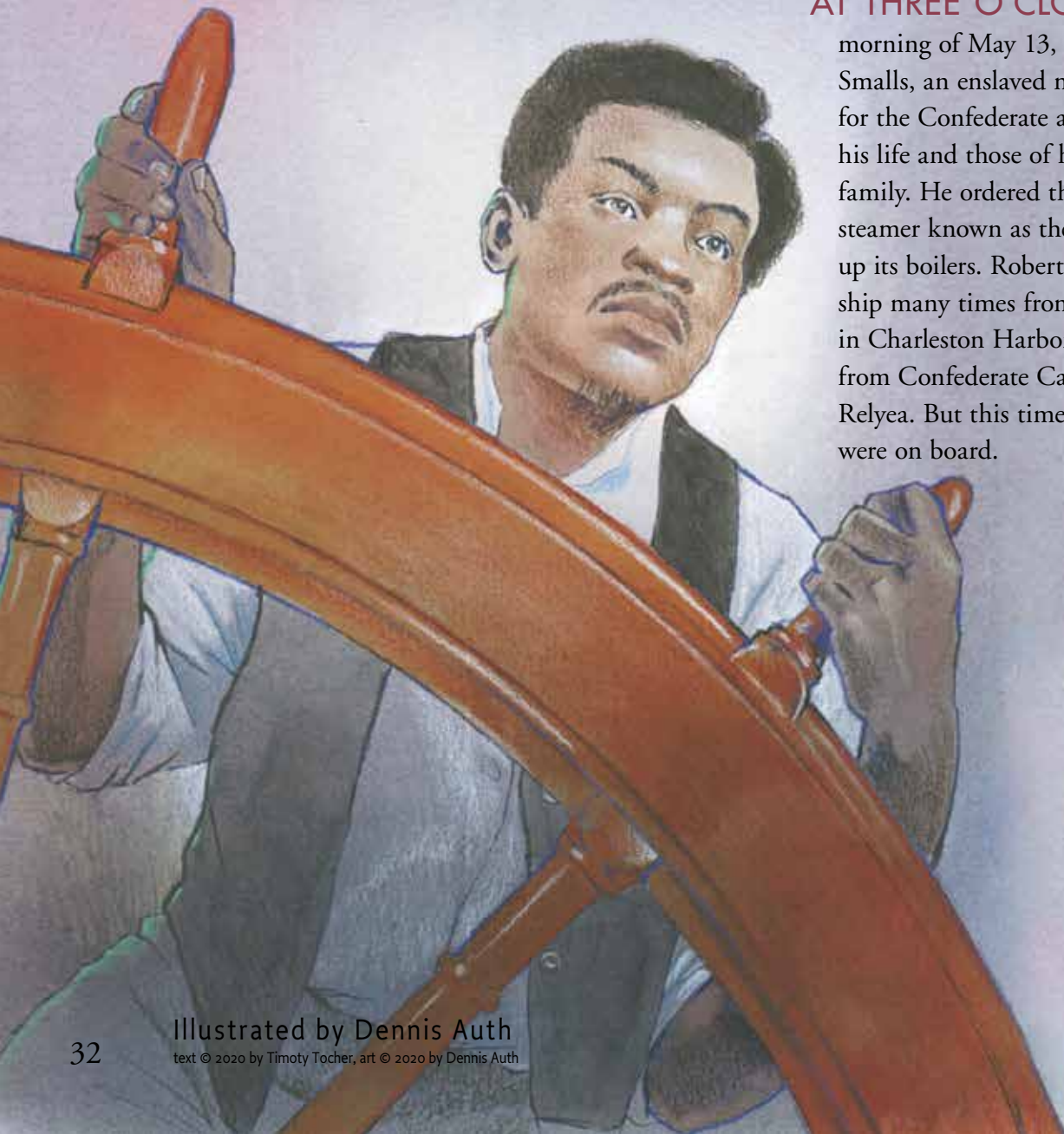


From Slave to Congressman

The Amazing Story of ROBERT SMALLS

BY TIMOTHY TOCHER

AT THREE O'CLOCK on the morning of May 13, 1862, Robert Smalls, an enslaved man working for the Confederate army, risked his life and those of his crew and family. He ordered the sidewheel steamer known as the *Planter* to fire up its boilers. Robert had piloted the ship many times from its mooring in Charleston Harbor under orders from Confederate Captain Charles Relyea. But this time, only slaves were on board.



Illustrated by Dennis Auth

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Captain Relyea and his officers had disobeyed orders and gone to spend the night with their families. The crew had been waiting for this opportunity. Months before, in a playful moment, one of the crewmen had dropped Captain Relyea's hat onto Smalls's head. This innocent joke gave Smalls an idea. Since his short, stocky build was similar to the captain's, could he pass for the man if seen in bad light and from a distance? Once the thought entered Robert's mind, it obsessed him.

For a slave, Smalls had a good job. He piloted the *Planter* as it carried supplies, messages, and soldiers along the South Carolina waterfront. Yet he hated helping the Confederates fight the war. If the Union army were to win, there was a chance that President Lincoln would outlaw slavery. Robert longed to be a free man.

Smalls was twelve when his master, Henry McKee, had removed him from his family in Beaufort, South Carolina, and sent him to Charleston to earn wages. Robert's mother had been taken from her home at age nine to live with strangers. Robert could not bear the thought of losing his wife or children. Yet, with the stroke of a pen, he or any of his family members could be moved to a distant location, and there would be nothing he could do about it.

Robert spoke to his wife, Hannah, and she approved of his plan. She did not want her children to endure slavery. Robert would try to steal the *Planter* and reach the Union navy blockade ten miles away. If they

were caught, they would jump into the sea with their children, choosing death over enslavement.

By four o'clock, the ship was ready to go. Smalls picked up his wife and children, and those of some of the other crew, who had been hiding on another ship. As the *Planter* moved into the harbor, everyone knew there was no turning back. The penalty for moving the *Planter* without permission would be death for Smalls and the crew and severe beatings for the women.

Their first challenge was to pass Fort Johnson. From inside the wheelhouse, wearing Captain Relyea's hat, Smalls waved, inching the *Planter* forward slowly as if he had no reason to hurry. The sentry returned Smalls's greeting. Soon they met a patrolling gunboat. In the murky darkness, Smalls saluted with a blast from the *Planter's* whistle. He was allowed to pass.

The final barrier separating the *Planter* from open water was Fort Sumter, which was on an island that dominated the entrance to Charleston Harbor. The Civil War had begun a year earlier when Confederate troops had fired on the Union forces holding the fort on April 12, 1861. Since taking control of the island fortress, the Confederates had set up log barriers in the bay so that no ship could pass without floating under the guns that lined Sumter's walls.

At 4:15 a.m., Smalls sailed beneath the cannons. He blew two long and one short toots of his whistle, the Confederate signal that he was a friend. The sentry acknowledged



by yelling, “Blow them Yankees up!” as the *Planter* coasted past.

As soon as the ship was out of range of Fort Sumter’s guns, Smalls called for full steam. Instead of heading for Confederate held Morris Island, where the *Planter* was expected to deliver four captured Yankee cannons, Smalls turned seaward and ran toward the Union blockade. The alarm was sounded in Fort Sumter, but it was too late.

The *Planter’s* crew busied itself lowering the Confederate flag and raising a white bed sheet as a flag of truce, so that the Yankees would not try to sink them. But the morning fog was so thick they feared it might not be visible.

When the Union blockade saw the *Planter* heading for their position, the steamships spread out. They had the speed to avoid the *Planter* until they could determine whether or not it was a danger to them. But the sailing ship *Onward* had no such option. Its captain, John Nickels, knew his craft was too slow to escape. If the *Planter* rammed the *Onward*, it might sink. He ordered all hands to battle stations and prepared his guns.

As the *Planter’s* crew took cover, a gust of wind revealed the flag of truce. Captain Nickels allowed the *Planter* to approach. When he was within voice range, Smalls called out, “Good morning, sir! I’ve brought you some of the United States guns, sir!”

A stunned Captain Nickels boarded the *Planter* and gave Smalls an American flag to replace the bedsheet flying from its mast. The women and children came on deck and hugged the excited crew. Smalls had done

it. They were no longer slaves. For the time being they were considered “contraband”—a prize of war under the protection of the United States government.

Smalls turned over the badly needed cannons and a book explaining a Confederate code called “Wig-Wag” used by ship captains to exchange secret messages using flags or torches. He reported vital information on where rebel troops were posted and how many men were in each unit. Captain Nickels took Smalls and his crew aboard *Onward*.

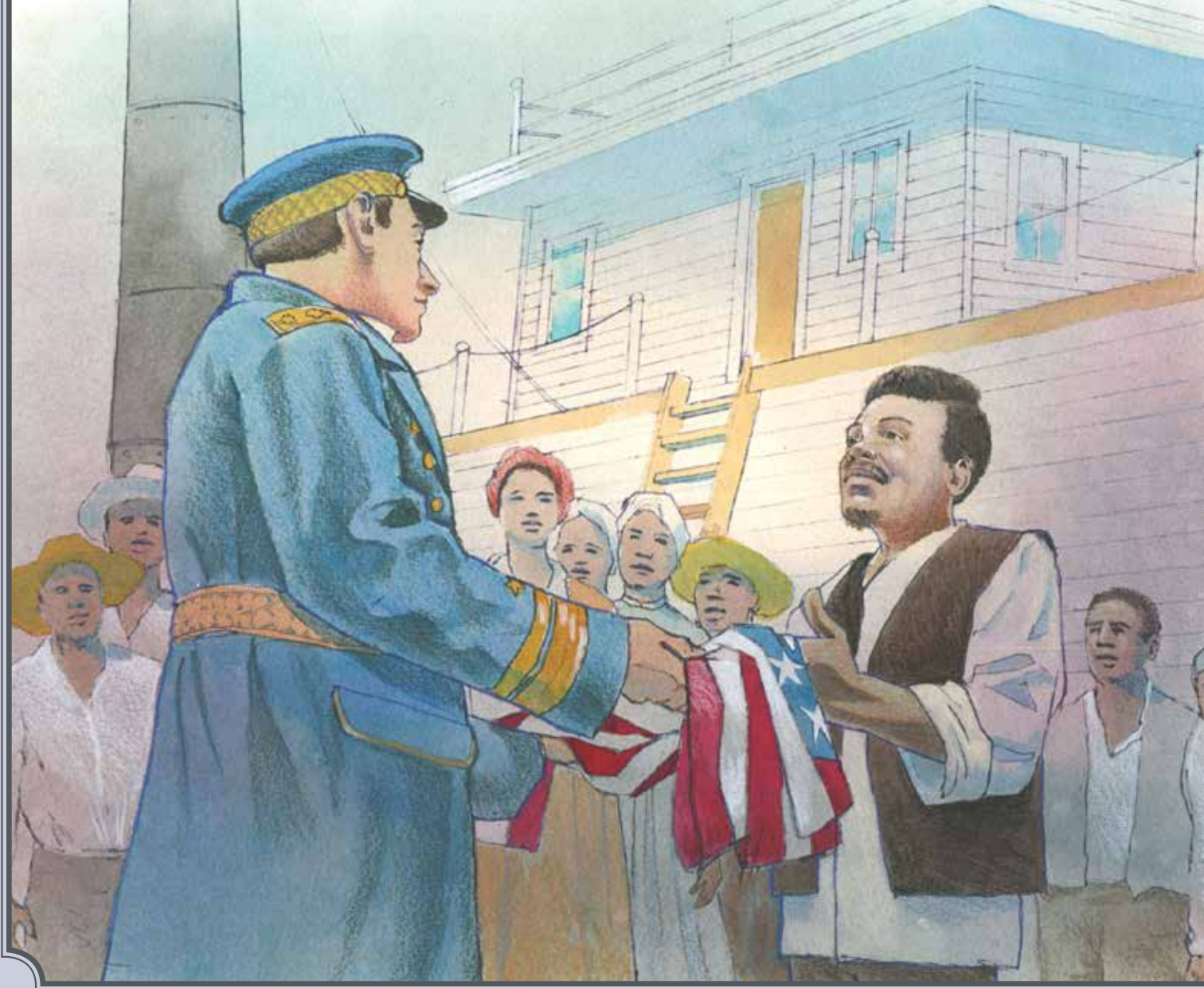
The next day, the former slaves rode as passengers on the *Planter* while a Navy crew sailed it to Hilton Head Island. There Smalls met Commodore Samuel Francis DuPont, the man in charge of blockading Charleston Harbor. Though a wealthy man from a slaveholding state, DuPont had always been antislavery. He was fascinated to hear of Small’s daring and impressed by his willingness to fight for the Union. In time of war, those who captured enemy ships or weapons were entitled to prize money. Even though Smalls was a civilian and a black man, DuPont filled out the paperwork for the crew to be rewarded.

DuPont assigned Robert to be the pilot of the *Planter* at a salary of forty dollars a month. He had earned thirty dollars for the same job with the Confederacy, but was allowed to keep only one dollar. The rest of his salary had gone to his owner, Henry McKee. The crew members enlisted in the U. S. Navy.

In Charleston, people refused to believe that a slave was smart enough to steal a ship out of the heavily defended harbor. The



THE PILOT OF A SHIP STEERS IT, AND MUST KNOW ALL ABOUT ALL THE PORTS AND WATERWAYS AND HAZARDS ALONG THE WAY. IT’S A VERY IMPORTANT POSITION.



Charleston Mercury newspaper reported that an investigation was underway to determine which white citizens had planned the theft. A \$2,000 reward was offered for Smalls, dead or alive. Ignoring the threats, Smalls continued to pilot the *Planter*.

Commodore DuPont granted Smalls permission to visit Washington, D. C. Robert gave his first public speeches there, in an effort to raise money for former slaves who

had escaped to freedom. Smalls met President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who eagerly listened to his account of his adventures. Stanton wrote an order authorizing the formation of the first unit of black soldiers in the U. S. Army. Smalls was given the honor of delivering the order to Port Royal, South Carolina.

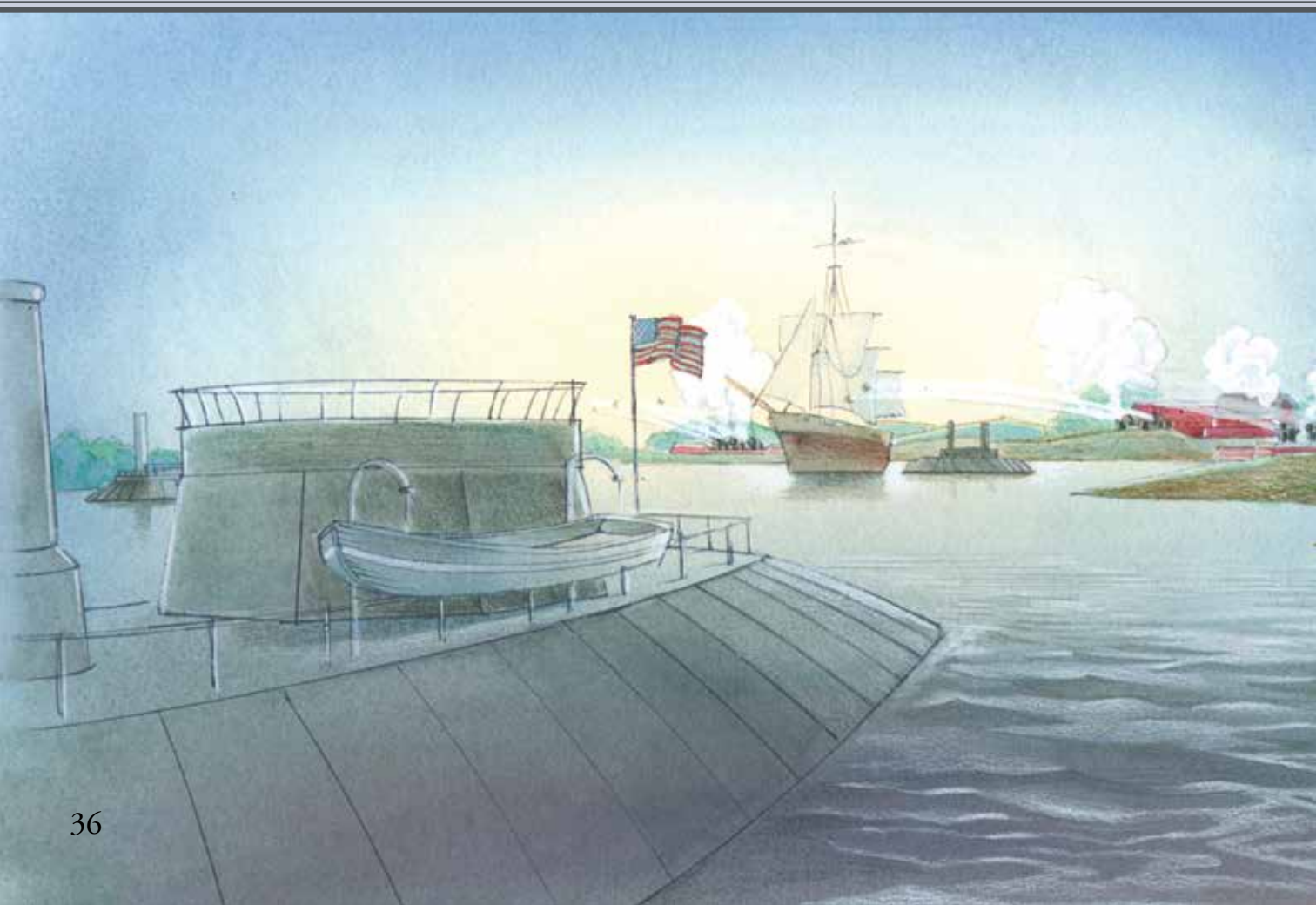
On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation,

freeing the slaves in Southern states. A massive army and navy attack on Charleston was planned. Smalls was chosen to pilot an ironclad ship named *Keokuk*. Ironclads were wooden ships whose sides had been covered with sheets of metal to make them harder for cannon balls or mines, then called torpedoes, to damage. The disadvantage was they were slow and difficult to maneuver.

When the battle began, six Union ships steamed into Charleston Harbor with *Keokuk* and its two cannons in the rear. DuPont's fleet was shot up so badly that Smalls was ordered to take *Keokuk* into the lead and protect the other ships while they made their escape. He fearlessly piloted *Keokuk* into

danger, absorbing ninety-three hits from cannon balls in a mere thirty minutes. The outgunned *Keokuk* was able to fire only three shots. Somehow Smalls nursed his damaged ship and its crew to safety, with all hands bailing water. After everyone had safely transferred to another ship, *Keokuk* sank.

The *Planter* was next used as an army transport ship. Smalls remained pilot with his salary increased to seventy-five dollars a month. On November 26, 1863, the *Planter* was sailing up a narrow creek, carrying food and supplies to six thousand Union soldiers camped on Morris Island. Confederate guns fired from both banks, catching the ship in a crossfire. The white captain of the *Planter*

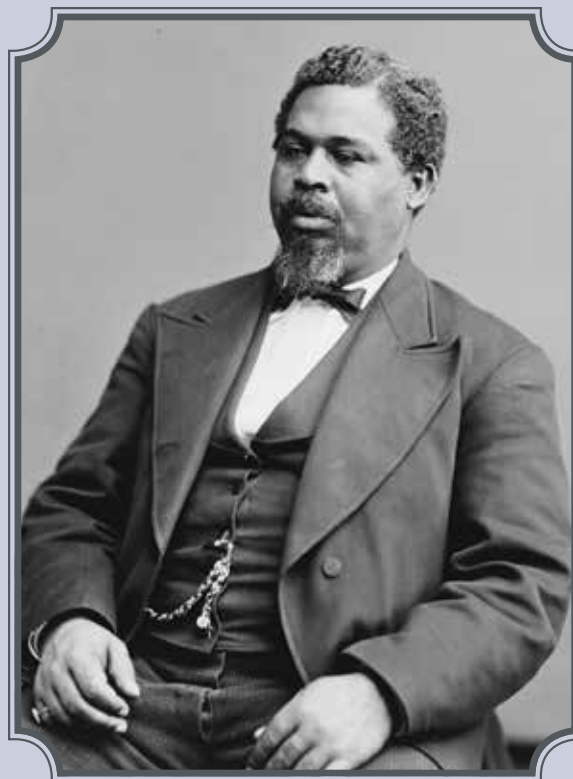


panicked, running below deck and hiding in a coal bin. Smalls assumed command and zig-zagged down the creek without losing a man or the ship. The U. S. Army named Smalls the new captain of the *Planter*, doubling his pay to \$150 per month.

With Charleston and Beaufort under constant attack from land and sea, white citizens deserted, burning their crops and leaving most of their possessions behind. Smalls was able to buy the Beaufort home where he had grown up as a slave.

Smalls was ordered to sail the *Planter* to Philadelphia for a complete overhaul. The extended stay gave him his first chance to learn to read and write, something it was illegal for a slave to do. A black man named Octavius Catto instructed Smalls and wrote him letters afterward, suggesting books he should read.

After the war, Smalls stayed in Beaufort. His former owner, Henry McKee, had died, and his family was in financial trouble. Smalls wrote to Jane McKee and invited her and her children to stay at their former home where he now lived with his family. The McKees accepted and Smalls sent them train fare. Despite his generosity, Jane McKee refused to sit at a dinner table with blacks. Robert had one room of the house converted to a special dining area for the McKees.



Robert Smalls in middle age

Smalls ran for Congress, winning election and serving five terms from 1875 to 1887. He fought for equal rights for all men, despite death threats from an antiblack group called the Red Shirts. One of the first black congressmen, Robert was a victim of prejudice. Many hotels did not accept black guests, so he often had to eat and sleep apart from his fellow representatives.

In 1889, president Benjamin Harrison appointed him U. S. Customs Collector for the port of Beaufort. He held that important post until retiring in 1912. Smalls passed away in 1915, having realized his dream of freedom. The man who was not allowed to learn to read or write saw all his children graduate from college. 🐛

