

Black History, Leaving a Legacy: Robert Smalls

By Trish Weaver

Robert Smalls was born into slavery in Beaufort, South Carolina. When he was 12, his master sent him to Charleston to hire out, where he found work on Charleston's docks and wharves. Smalls worked his way up to become a helmsman (though enslaved people were not permitted that title). As a result, he was very knowledgeable about Charleston harbor and was assigned to steer the *CSS Planter*, a lightly armed Confederate military transport, during the Civil War.

After the ship's captain and white crew departed the ship, Smalls and the other enslaved crewmen executed an escape plan to steer the *Planter* to the Union blockade ships that sat off the Charleston coast. Smalls put on the captain's uniform and sailed the *Planter* to another wharf to pick up family members. Smalls guided the warship past the five Confederate harbor forts – giving the correct signals at checkpoints while copying the white captain's mannerisms to fool Confederate onlookers. The *Planter* sailed past Fort Sumter and safely reached the Union blockade.

Smalls captured and turned over the *Planter* – a valuable Confederate warship – to the Union. In addition to the ship, the *Planter* carried artillery, 200 pounds of ammunition, and most valuable, the captain's codebook containing the Confederate signals and a map of the mines and torpedoes that had been laid in Charleston's harbor. Smalls' own extensive knowledge of the Charleston region's waterways and the Confederate military configurations also proved highly valuable to the Union effort. After learning from Smalls that only a few thousand Confederate troops remained to protect that area, the Union forces captured Coles Island without a fight. The Union would maintain a base there for the remaining three years of the war.

Smalls thereafter served in the Union Navy, especially valued for his detailed knowledge of naval mines near Charleston. By his own account, Smalls was present at 17 major battles and engagements in the Civil War. When the white captain of the *Planter* (now a Union warship) abandoned his post under Confederate attack, Smalls refused to surrender (fearing that the black crewmen would be killed instead of taken prisoner). He took command of the boat and piloted it to safety.

After his service in the Navy, Smalls returned to Beaufort where he established a school for black children. He also helped establish both a black-owned railroad and newspaper in the Charleston area. He served in the South Carolina state legislature, and ultimately was elected to the U.S House of Representatives. As a strong proponent of integration and racial equality, Smalls was met with efforts by white Southerners to strip him of his seat – which included violence, gerrymandering and election fraud.

Together with five other black politicians, Smalls strongly opposed the dominant white delegates in their passage of blatantly discriminatory laws, including rewriting the South Carolina constitution to allow such laws. Despite the efforts of Smalls and his colleagues, these laws resulted in the exclusion of African Americans from political participation and the crippling of their rights.

Robert Smalls leaves us all a legacy of bravery and heroism, as well as a duty to stand up for what is right. We must continue Smalls' efforts to combat the systemic racism that still pervades so many of our institutions.