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Abstract

This paper addresses the accomplishments of the slave Robert Smalls and his absconding with the valuable Confederate steamship, the Planter, from the Charleston, South Carolina harbor in the early morning hours of May 13th, 1862. Smalls went on to become a pilot and eventual captain of ships for the Union contributing substantially to the Civil War effort. After the war, Smalls became a Congressman. Through his contributions, Robert Smalls left an indelible mark on the history of the United States.

Keywords

Robert Smalls, Smalls, Steamship Planter, Charleston, Slavery

Robert Smalls and The Steamship *Planter* : Turning the Tides for the Union Military in the Civil War

William K Donaldson

When Robert Smalls was born on April 5, 1839, in Beaufort, South Carolina, he could not have known that he would spend the next twenty-three years of his life as property. Smalls also could not have known that he would be caught up in a deadly war in his homeland that held his continued enslavement or eventual freedom in the balance. Smalls possessed courage and determination that allowed him to take risks that many of his race could ill afford. In May of 1862, Smalls successfully coordinated the theft of the Confederate steamship *Planter* and gained freedom for his family and co-conspirators. Smalls was hired as a civilian boat pilot to serve in the Union military. Because of his “hero” status, he was recruited by Reverend Mansfield French to speak in the North about his escape and the success of the Port Royal Experiment in coastal South Carolina. Though Smalls made many contributions to nineteenth-century American history, this paper focuses specifically on the tactical military contributions he made during the Civil War and how they played a role in eventual Union victory.

Smalls was born to a house slave by the name of Lydia Polite. She had been the property of John McKee, and his son Henry McKee inherited her. Smalls was born in the slave quarters behind the McKee home and was likely the son of a white man. He may have been born as a product of an illicit affair between Polite and one of the McKees. Smalls was a favorite of both men and acted as a personal servant to the elder McKee and his son. In 1851, at the age of twelve, Smalls was sent by Henry McKee to Charleston to live with McKee's sister-in-law. Smalls' master agreed to allow Smalls to keep a portion of his earnings from his various jobs.¹

After arriving in Charleston, Smalls took on work as a waiter at the Planter's Hotel. He was then employed as a lamplighter for a city contractor. Smalls eventually went to work for John Simmons, driving a hoisting horse at the wharves of Charleston harbor. Simmons liked Smalls and began teaching him sail making and ship rigging. For seven years, Simmons employed and tutored Smalls teaching him shipboard work and elements of navigation.² Simmons once remarked of his

¹ Edward A. Miller Jr., *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress, 1839-1915* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 7.

² Philip Dray, *Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008), 5.

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pupil, “That boy’s got the makings of a pilot. Ever see him at the bar when the tide’s going out? ‘Stead of dropping anchor and waiting for high tide he just backs up the ship and rides in with the swell.”³

In summer 1861, Smalls first boarded the steamship *Planter* and began working as a deckhand for \$16 per month. Smalls kept \$1, and he sent \$15 to his master, Henry McKee. In late 1861, the Confederate government leased the *Planter* and, soon after, Smalls became a wheelman, a position that gave him steering control of the steamship. Though he served as the “pilot” of the ship, he could not carry that title, as slaves were not allowed to hold such positions. Smalls was aboard the *Planter* when Confederate Lieutenant John Randolph Hamilton used the steamship to survey sand bars off the coasts of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. The ship and her crew participated in the destruction of the federal lighthouse at Hunting Island, South Carolina, transported cannons, ammunition, soldiers, and laid sea mines (called torpedoes during the Civil War) in the Edisto and the Stono rivers in South Carolina.⁴ It was in this role that Robert Smalls learned Confederate military intelligence and refined his

³ Dorothy Sterling, *Captain of the Planter: The Story of Robert Smalls* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958), 45.

⁴ Miller, *Gullah Statesman*, 6.

skills as a boat pilot along the southern coasts. These experiences would eventually make him an invaluable asset to the Union.

In December 1861, the United States Navy began sinking old ships in the mouth of the Charleston harbor. The vessels were filled with granite and sunk to cut off the harbor to supply boats attempting to enter the port to resupply the city, and the Confederate forces positioned there. The so-called “Stone Fleet” and the presence of warships of the Union navy kept Charlestonians fearing that an attack on the city could come at any time.⁵ As the wheelman of a Confederate vessel, Smalls was keenly aware of the Union blockade, because the U.S. Navy ships were visible from Charleston. Smalls hatched his plan to escape in April 1862, meeting with several other crew members of the *Planter* and other enslaved shipmen from Charleston.⁶

For two weeks in early May 1862, the *Planter* was tasked to remove cannons from Cole’s Island and move them to James Island, in Charleston harbor.⁷ On May 12, 1862, crews

⁵ “Charleston and Savannah: The Points of Operation of the Stone Fleet,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1861.

⁶ Okon Edet Uya, *From Slavery to Public Service: Robert Smalls 1839-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 13.

⁷ Charles Cowley, *The Romance of History In "the Black County," : And the Romance of War in the Career of Gen.*

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loaded four large cannons and two hundred pounds of ammunition on the ship for delivery to Fort Ripley, then under construction in the harbor.⁸ Circumstances quickly arose, creating an opportune moment for Smalls to execute his plan to escape. First, Smalls became aware that the three white Confederate officers serving on the *Planter* would be spending the night in Charleston instead of on ship which, “violated Confederate naval policy – at least one officer was required to remain with the ship at all times – but the rule was often disregarded.”⁹ Second, the Confederate guard boat that patrolled the entrance to the inner harbor was out of commission at that time.¹⁰ Lastly, due to the fear of impending attack by the Union, the Confederate forces in the city of Charleston announced that martial law would be implemented on the following day, May 13. Attempting to escape after martial law was declared would have

Robert Smalls, *"the Hero of the Planter"* (Lowell, Massachusetts, 1882), 10.

⁸ Uya, *From Slavery to Public Service*, 14.

⁹ Dray, *Capitol Men*, 7.

¹⁰ Samuel F. Du Pont, *The Blockade: 1862-1863*, vol. 2 of *Samuel Francis Du Pont: A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, ed. John D. Hayes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 23.

dramatically increased the chances of discovery and possible capture.¹¹

Robert Smalls knew that the stolen steamship would prove valuable to the Union forces for the war effort. Equally, the loss of cannons by the Confederate troops of Charleston would be significant militarily, as cannons were scarce and costly to manufacture. Because Charleston had effectively been cut-off by sea, and moving large cannons by land proved difficult, the loss of the *Planter* and her cargo would be a blow to the Confederacy.

Smalls' plan was fraught with likely failure and possible death. The idea endangered not only his life but also those of his wife, children, and the other slaves who joined the plot to escape. At 3:25 am on May 13, 1862, the *Planter* and its "contraband" crew steamed away from the Southern Wharf, positioned adjacent to the headquarters of Confederate General Roswell S. Ripley, the commander of the Second Military District of South Carolina. His command oversaw Confederate military operations in and around Charleston.¹² The

¹¹ Cate Lineberry, *Be Free or Die: The Amazing Story of Robert Smalls' Escape from Slavery to Union Hero* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), 17.

¹² U.S. War Department, *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), ser. I, vol. 14, 825.

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next stop was the North Atlantic Wharf, where Smalls and his crew of seven retrieved Smalls' wife Hannah and their three children, as well as three other women and one child. The families were then hidden down below in the ship. The *Planter* turned for a final pass through the harbor as a Confederate vessel.

Six Confederate outposts in the Charleston harbor were obstacles to the success of Smalls' plan. The *Planter* first steamed within view of the Charleston Battery and Castle Pinkney, passed by Fort Ripley, (under construction,) and then headed toward the first manned fort with serious firepower, Fort Johnson. After passing Fort Johnson without raising any alarm, they noticed a guard boat patrolling the harbor but received no hail or approach. Fort Sumter was the greatest challenge of the plan. The fort was heavily fortified and had massive guns. The shipping channel was narrowed with the addition of a floating log boom to prevent unauthorized entry into the harbor but would allow blockade runner ships to enter under the watchful eye of the fort. For Smalls, passing this close to Fort Sumter must have been terrifying. He kept his composure, donned a disguise to help him to resemble the actual captain of the *Planter*, C. J. Relyea, and gave the properly coded steam whistle

signal. The signal allowed the ship to pass the fort as if going about its regular business.¹³

The *Planter* appeared to be on a regular mission for the Confederates. Not until the *Planter* made way for the main ship channel, parallel to Morris Island, did the Confederate forces at Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie suspect that something was amiss. A relatively small craft like the *Planter* would not sail out to the blockade for any reason. The fort's cannons were out of range, and due to the late hour, the Confederates raised the alarm too late. Smalls, his crew, and their stowaways made it out of the clutches of slavery and the Confederacy, but they had one more challenge to surmount. The *Planter* was approaching the Charleston Bar, "a series of submerged sandbars that formed the outer limit of the Charleston harbor."¹⁴ Due to the location of the Stone Fleet, there was only one way out of the shipping lane, to sail directly toward the U.S. Naval blockade fleet just beyond the Bar. As the *Planter* approached the blockade ships, it was mistaken for an enemy vessel attempting to ram or otherwise attack the fleet. The black crew of the *Planter* quickly lowered the Confederate flag

¹³ Stephen R. Wise and Lawrence S. Rowland with Gerhard Spieler, *Rebellion, Reconstruction, and Redemption, 1861-1893*, vol 2 of *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 97-101.

¹⁴ Lineberry, *Be Free or Die*, 25.

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and raised a white bed sheet to alert the Union ships of their intention to surrender. As a dense fog rolled in, the first ship they approached was the *Onward*, a three-masted clipper ship.¹⁵

The captain of the *Onward*, Lieutenant John Frederick Nickels, called the crew of his ship “to quarters,” and they quickly turned the *Onward* to point her cannon at the *Planter*.¹⁶ With moments to spare, Nickels saw the white sheet and ordered the crew of the *Onward* to stand down.¹⁷ The last obstacle to the freedom of the clandestine crew of the steamship *Planter* was gone. Immediately after his relinquishment of the *Planter* to Lt. Nickels, Smalls handed over a collection of Charleston newspapers. The papers assisted the Union leaders to decipher what Confederates might know about Union military movements and gave some view of daily life in the city of Charleston and the

¹⁵ James M. Guthrie, *Camp-Fires of the Afro-American: Or, The Colored Man as a Patriot, Soldier, Sailor, and Hero, in the Cause of Free America: Displayed in Colonial Struggles, in the Revolution, the War of 1812, and in Later Wars, Particularly the Great Civil War, 1861-5, and the Spanish American War, 1898: Concluding with an Account of the War with the Filipinos, 1899* (Philadelphia: Afro-American Pub. Co., 1899), 312.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁷ U.S. Naval War Records Office, *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 27 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1901), ser. I, vol 12, 822 (hereafter ORN).

surrounding areas.¹⁸ Smalls also turned over a book from the *Planter* that contained secret signals that the Confederates used to communicate between forts called “wigwags.”¹⁹ “Wigwags were coded messages transmitted across line-of-sight distances by an officer performing specific combinations of motions with a flag; each motion represented an alphanumeric character determined by the signaling code. At night the Confederates used torches instead of flags.”²⁰ Until the Confederates could account for the lost book, the Union military forces would be able to decode messages sent between forts all along the South Carolina coast.

Aside from the obvious benefits to the Union of having gained a ship, weapons, and contrabands, they also gained a psychological edge over the Confederates and the citizens of Charleston. On May 14, the *Charleston Daily Courier* published, “Our community was intensely agitated Tuesday morning by the intelligence that the steamer *Planter* . . . had been taken possession of by her colored crew, steamed up, and boldly run out to the blockades.”²¹ The *Charleston Mercury*

¹⁸ Ibid., 821.

¹⁹ “Report to Accompany S.1313,” April 18, 1898, in “Committee on Claims Report,” in Lineberry, *Be Free or Die*, 73.

²⁰ Lineberry, *Be Free or Die*, 73.

²¹ “The Steamer *Planter*,” *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 14, 1862.

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reported on May 14, “The result of this negligence may be only the loss of the guns and of the boat, desirable for transportation. But things of this kind are sometimes of incalculable injury. The lives and property of this whole community are at stake and might be jeopardized by events apparently as trifling as this.”²²

Robert Smalls became a hero within Union lines, so too to hundreds of thousands of free African Americans in the North and those still in bondage in the slave states during the war. John Forbes, a Boston businessman, and abolitionist said in a letter to a friend, “The moral effect of such practical emancipation was worth much more than money.”²³

While the citizens of Charleston reeled from the loss of the steamship and the slaves, Lt. Nickels turned the *Planter* and crew over to Commander Enoch Parrott. The commander immediately assigned a Union crew to man the *Planter* and took the ship and its inhabitants south to report to Commander Samuel Francis Du Pont. As commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, Du Pont later wrote that the *Planter* was, “a fine boat, can carry seven hundred bales of

²² “Disgusting Treachery and Negligence,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 14, 1862.

²³ John M. Forbes to Charles Sumner, May 16, 1862, in Uya, *From Slavery to Public Service – Robert Smalls 1839-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 17.

cotton, has a fine engine, and draws but little water and will be of greatest use to us---so that in herself she is a valuable acquisition, quite valuable to the squadron.”²⁴

Smalls met with Du Pont, and he shared important military information with the commander. Smalls divulged the abandonment of the battery at Cole’s Island, the source of the extra cannons aboard the *Planter*. The Confederates leaving Cole’s Island rendered James Island unprotected. If the Union army were able to capture James Island, they would have a manageable approach to attack Fort Johnson. Success in taking over Fort Johnson would allow the Union to control the entire inner harbor. Smalls gave Du Pont information about the construction of Fort Ripley. He informed Du Pont that only a few thousand Confederate troops were remaining in Charleston. A majority of the soldiers in the city had been redeployed to Tennessee and Virginia.²⁵ Du Pont was impressed with Smalls and said in a dispatch to the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Wells, “His information has been most interesting, and portions of it of the utmost importance.” Du Pont went on to say, “I shall continue to employ Robert as a pilot on board the

²⁴ Du Pont, *The Blockade: 1862-1863*, vol. 2 of *Samuel Francis Du Pont: A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

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Planter for the inland waters, with which he appears to be very familiar.”²⁶

The *Planter* carried a cargo of slaves on that early May morning, but it also transported some critical military hardware. The steamship carried her own two deck guns but also had the Cole’s Island weapons and a considerable amount of ammunition. A quartermaster’s list of the ordinance and ordinance stores aboard the *Planter* when delivered to the Union blockade included, 1 long 32-pounder weighing 7,200 pounds, 1 short 32-pounder weighing 3,300 pounds, 1 short 24-pounder weighing 1,476 pounds, two 8-inch Columbiads weighing 9,240 pounds each, one 7-inch rifle weighing 10,500 pounds, 200 pieces of 32-pounder shot, 150 pieces of 8-inch 32-pounder shot, 1000 additional pieces of ammunition, and 1000 powder charges. The estimated value of the ordinance aboard the *Planter* was more than \$10,000 based on United States wartime prices.²⁷

As he had mentioned in his letter to the Secretary of the Navy, Du Pont hired Smalls to become a civilian pilot for the Union navy. Du Pont chose this position because he could not enlist Smalls in the military. Enlisted African Americans

²⁶ Du Pont to Gideon Welles, May 14, 1862, ORN, ser. I, vol. 12, 821.

²⁷ House Committee on Naval Affairs, *Authorizing the President to Place Robert Smalls on the Retired List of the Navy*, 47th Cong., 2nd sess., 1883, Rep. No. 1887.

could not serve as more than deckhands with the classification of “boy.”²⁸ Smalls served as the pilot of the *Planter*, conducting military operations and transporting personnel for three months before being reassigned.

By May 31, the information Smalls supplied allowed Du Pont to take the Stono River and begin staging the attack of Charleston from this strategic vantage point. In a letter to Welles, Du Pont wrote, “From information derived from the contraband pilot Robert Smalls, I had reason to believe that the rebels had abandoned their batteries and accordingly directed Commander Marchand, the senior officer of Charleston, to make a reconnaissance to ascertain the truth of the report. This was done on the 19th instant and, the information proving correct, I ordered the gunboats on the next day...to cross the bar.” Du Pont further added, “This important base of operation, the Stono, has thus been secured for further operations by the Army against Charleston of which General Hunter proposes to take advantage.”²⁹

The evidence suggests that the carefully planned actions of the slave wheelman Robert Smalls led to immediate tactical advantages for the Union military. Due to his efforts on May 13, 1862,

²⁸ Welles to William W. McKean, September 25, 1861, ORN, ser. I, vol. 16, 689.

²⁹ Du Pont, *The Blockade*, 92-93.

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Smalls made significant assistance to the war effort. The contributions came in the form of military information he recalled of the Charleston harbor, maps, and documents from the *Planter*, the *Planter* itself and her weapons, and his experience as a competent boat pilot, knowledgeable of the coastal waterways of South Carolina. From 1862-1865 the Union used The *Planter* in eleven actions of the Civil War.³⁰

The theft of the *Planter* was a daring and memorable feat placing Robert Smalls in a long list of American heroes. In the remainder of the Civil War, and throughout the rest of his life, Robert Smalls contributed substantially to the betterment of his country, family, and race. He served as a major-general in the South Carolina Militia, as a Senator in the state house of South Carolina, as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for the 5th congressional district of South Carolina, as a private businessman, and as a customs collector in his home city of Beaufort, South Carolina.

³⁰ Bruce G. Terrell, Gordon P. Watts & Timothy J. Runyan, *The Search For Planter: The Ship that Escaped Charleston and Carried Robert Smalls to Destiny*, series 1, (Silver Spring Maryland: NOAA National Marine Sanctuary Program, 2014), 6.

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