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Abstract

This paper discusses Robert Smalls' daring escape to freedom on the morning of May 13, 1862. Smalls was an enslaved worker on the Confederate ship the *Planter*. Along with other enslaved members of the *Planter's* crew, Smalls commandeered the ship and sailed past Confederate forts and ships in the Charleston Harbor until they reached the Union. I argue that the story of Robert Smalls validates arguments that enslaved people were not bystanders in the quest for emancipation; rather, the unique circumstances of the Civil War and the morning of May 13, 1862, allowed Smalls to enact his carefully created plan to seize his own freedom.

Keywords

Self-emancipation, Robert Smalls, Planter, Enslavement, Escape, Charleston

A STOLEN SHIP: ROBERT SMALLS' DARING ESCAPE TO FREEDOM

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At 2:00 a.m. on the hazy morning of May 13, 1862, the U.S.S. *Planter* glided out of Charleston Harbor. A formerly enslaved man by the name of Robert Smalls was at the helm, bringing with him a crew of five other African American men and their families. Smalls was born into slavery in Beaufort, South Carolina, on April 15, 1839, and in 1861 he became a member of the *Planter*'s enslaved crew. On the night of May 12, 1862, the enslaved men slowly unloaded the ship, and the white crew led by Captain Charles J. Relyea opted to go drink in town rather than supervise the rest of the work. Smalls seized this opportunity. The plan: commandeer the ship and sail it to freedom. He and the crew made one quick stop to pick up their families at the North Atlantic Wharf before slipping out of the Harbor. They first had to pass five Confederate forts. Smalls hoisted the South Carolina and Confederate flags to give the illusion that the *Planter* was on a routine supply mission. After safely passing four other forts, the ship approached Fort Sumter at 4:15 a.m. Smalls pulled the whistle cord: two long blows and

one short one—the Confederate signal. They advanced with no trouble. Now, under the cover of darkness, they traded the flags for a white bed sheet. Smalls hoped to approach the Union ships blockading Charleston harbor without the *Planter* being attacked. When the ship came up along the Union *Onward*, Smalls said to Captain John Nichols, “I’m Robert Smalls. I brought you the *Planter*. I thought it might be of some use to Uncle Abe.”¹

Robert Smalls successfully delivered himself and his passengers to freedom. For decades, scholars have debated the question of “who freed the slaves;” my paper adheres most closely with historians Vincent Harding and David Williams, who argue that enslaved people were principally responsible for emancipating themselves. However, many scholars disagree with this assessment. In his 1995 article “Who Freed the Slaves?” famed Civil War historian James McPherson answered the question with Abraham Lincoln. McPherson claimed that without the Civil War, emancipation would not have occurred—and many scholars do agree with him—but he further argued that the Civil War

¹ *Slavery and the Making of America*, narrated by Morgan Freeman, PBS Thirteen, 2005, https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/about/p_transcript4.html.

was fundamentally triggered by Lincoln's election, and that since the Union Army that interacted with emancipated slaves was directed by Lincoln, Lincoln freed the slaves.² Ira Berlin criticized McPherson's "elitist history," and argued that "the question of who freed the slaves...resonate[s] loudly in contemporary controversies about the role of 'Great White Men' in our history books." Berlin proposed his theory of "long emancipation" roughly twenty years after his critique of McPherson was published. Berlin viewed emancipation as a near century-long movement, rather than one distinct moment, in which the persistent struggle and bravery of African Americans who strove for freedom ultimately led to emancipation.³ Whereas Berlin did not use the term "self-emancipation," he essentially described the same process as Harding and Williams, who each defined emancipation as a result of the work of enslaved Black people. "While Lincoln continued to hesitate about the legal,

² James M. McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139, no. 1 (March 1995): 9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/986716>.

³ Ira Berlin, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of American Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 9. See also Ira Berlin responding to McPherson's "Who Freed the Slaves" Emancipation and its meaning in American Life published by Quaderni (1996): 27-34.

constitutional, moral, and military aspects of the matter, the relentless movement of the self-liberated fugitives into the Union lines...took their freedom into their own hands,” Harding wrote.⁴ The Emancipation Proclamation, then, was merely a legal document to confirm what enslaved people had been doing all along. Williams built on this idea, and presented newfound primary source evidence that enslaved people rushed towards freedom through both active and passive resistance.⁵ The story of Robert Smalls validates Williams and Harding’s arguments that enslaved people were not bystanders in the quest for emancipation as McPherson suggests; rather, the unique circumstances of the Civil War and the morning of May 13, 1862, allowed Smalls to enact his carefully-crafted plan to seize his own freedom.

Despite being favored by his enslaver and therefore shielded from the harsher aspects of enslavement, Small was purposefully exposed to the horrors of enslavement by his mother, Lydia, who hoped to caution him against resistance. However, her plan had the opposite effect. Enraged by the

⁴ Vincent Harding, *There Is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981), 228-235.

⁵ David Williams, *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

atrocities he saw, Smalls vowed never to be complacent in the system of enslavement. He was openly rebellious and confrontational from a young age, and he continued to revolt until he could perform the single greatest act of rebellion: self-emancipation. While Smalls never knew the true identity of his father, Smalls suspected that he was the son of John McKee, his first enslaver. Likely due to this supposed familial connection, as well as his intelligence and kind disposition, Smalls worked within the McKee household. Lydia feared her son did not understand the horrors of enslavement because of his preferential treatment, so she took him to the local arsenal to watch a slave auction.⁶ “I have had no trouble with my owner but I have seen a good deal in traveling around on the plantations,” Smalls said in a post-Civil War interview. Enslaved people were whipped “for the simplest thing if it was not done to suit the owner’s notion. They were whipped till the blood came and then washed down with salt and water,” he continued.⁷ While Smalls had “no trouble” with McKee, their relationship was

⁶ Okon Edet Uya, *From Slavery to Public Service: Robert Smalls 1839-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 4.

⁷ John W. Blassingam, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 380-381.

not representative of the usual power dynamic between masters and those they enslaved. So, it was only by “traveling around on the plantations” that Smalls witnessed the more common realities of enslavement. Seeing the unjust and violent treatment of other enslaved individuals, Smalls decided that he would rebel.

Over Robert Smalls’ years of enslavement working as a ship hand, he earned the trust of the white officers, which allowed him to plan his escape. By 1857, Smalls convinced McKee to allow him to hire himself out at a rate of fifteen dollars an hour, even convincing McKee to permit Smalls to keep a small portion of his wages. Smalls began as a stevedore, worked his way up to foreman, and eventually went to work for John Simmons, a prominent shipowner, who taught him how to be a sailor. By 1861, Smalls possessed a thorough knowledge of the harbors and waterways of South Carolina and Georgia.⁸ When the Civil War broke out, Smalls held a position as the most senior sailor that an enslaved man could be. On April 12, 1861, when the Confederate Army attacked the Union-held Fort Sumter, Smalls was employed by John Ferguson, the owner

⁸ Uya, *From Slavery*, 6-7.

of the sidewheel steamer the *Planter*. Shortly after the Union surrendered the Fort, the Confederate Government seized control of many of the ships in Charleston Harbor and forced the enslaved crews to work for the Confederate war effort.⁹ Smalls was infuriated by this forced service in support of the Confederacy. He was content to be employed by Ferguson because his work on the *Planter* was purely transactional; however, Smalls refused to labor in support of a system that perpetuated enslavement. While he had the option to purchase his own freedom with the funds he had already saved, he did not have enough money to purchase his family, so he stayed. Despite his decision to temporarily remain on the *Planter*, Smalls and the other enslaved men onboard met in secret to discuss potential escape plans. As an unnamed member of the group remembered after the war, they spoke about “plac[ing] themselves under the Stars and Stripes instead of the Stars and Bars.”¹⁰ Their self-emancipation was imminent—the men simply had to wait for the right time to seize their freedom.

While there are multiple triggers for the escape on the night of May 12, 1862, Smalls felt increasing pressure to

⁹ Uya, *From Slavery*, 12.

¹⁰ Uya, *From Slavery*, 14.

escape following his mother's newfound emancipation at the hands of the Union Army, his wife Hannah's desire to raise their children in a free state, and Major General David Hunter's emancipatory proclamation. In the early spring of 1862, the Union Army captured the plantation where Lydia Smalls was enslaved and freed her. After Smalls received the letters she sent that described the happiness she felt to work for the Union, he brooded over her freedom and his enslavement, even though they were physically separated only by a few miles.¹¹ It is surprising that both Smalls and his mother were literate, considering that many enslaved people never had the opportunity to learn to read or were banned from doing so by their enslavers. In 1864, Smalls addressed the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and remembered his conversation with Hannah right before their escape. Smalls did not want his children to witness the cruelty Lydia forced him to see when he was their age, and Hannah agreed with him. "It is a risk dear, but you and I, and our little ones must be free," Smalls recalled Hannah telling him.¹² Smalls was greatly concerned

¹¹ Uya, *From Slavery*, 13.

¹² "Capt. Robert Smalls Addresses the General Conference of 1864, Daniel A. Payne, Presiding," *The A.M.E. Church Review* 70 (1955): 23.

by the issue of his family's freedom and this desire for freedom motivated the rest of the *Planter's* enslaved crew members to involve their families in the escape plan. It is clear from Hannah's comment, that she and Smalls understood the major risks that went along with their plan. Hannah proclaimed that if Smalls died in the attempt to gain their freedom, she would die with him: "I will go, for where you die, I will die."¹³ Major General Hunter's May 9, 1862, General Order No.11 placed Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina under martial law and emancipated all enslaved people in those states. Only ten days later, Lincoln issued a new proclamation that voided General Hunter's proclamation. Lincoln claimed that General Hunter had no authority to emancipate enslaved people, and such a decision could only be made by the President or by Congress.¹⁴ While it is not officially clear if Smalls knew of this proclamation, given his proximity to Confederate officers who would have been outraged at what they would view as General Hunter's

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Letter by Abraham Lincoln, "Abraham Lincoln papers: Series 1. General Correspondence. 1833-1916: Abraham Lincoln, Monday, May 19, 1862 (Proclamation revoking General David Hunter's General Order No. 11 on military emancipation of slaves)," May 19, 1862, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mal1604600/>.

overreach and theft of their property, he likely would have overheard such conversations. Smalls' escape occurred before Lincoln revoked this order—so, Smalls believed he would be safe in the hands of the Union Navy, if he could reach it. The conditions of the Civil War allowed General Hunter to issue General Order No. 11, which follows McPherson's logic that Lincoln and the Union Army freed enslaved people. In reality, however, since Smalls' enslavers were supporters of the Confederate Army, they were not required to abide by General Hunter's orders, since he was neither their commander nor in their same army. For this proclamation to mean anything realistic to an enslaved person, they had to emancipate themselves and flee to the Union Army.

Smalls encountered five major obstacles to overcome as soon as the moment of escape dawned: stealing the *Planter* without the Confederate officers noticing, maintaining the support of the other enslaved crewmen because he could not run the ship alone, piloting the ship and passing for the white Captain Relyea, sailing undiscovered past four heavily armed Confederate forts, and finally, approaching the Union ship without being fired upon. There were many places Smalls could have failed, yet he

succeeded—why did everything go right for him? It appears that luck worked in Smalls' favor. The June 17, 1862, issue of the *New York Daily Tribune* printed a verbatim copy of the *Planter's* logbook from the night of May 13th in an article called "Capture of a Rebel Steamer," but it provides little insight into the steps Smalls and his crew took to ensure a successful journey. The language is concise and direct: "we leave Charleston at ½ past 3 o'clock on Tuesday morning. We pass Fort Sumter at ¼ past 4 o'clock. We arrive at blockading squadron at Charleston Bar at ¼ to 6. We give three cheers for the Union flag once more."¹⁵ In this basic account the only new piece of information is that the members of the ship gave "three cheers for the Union flag" once they arrived alongside the U.S.S. *Onward*. Historian and author Andrew Billingsley analyzed this segment in his book *Yearning to Breathe Free* and stated that the first mate John Smalls (of no relation to Robert) must have written the entry, as he omitted his name from the list of enslaved men

¹⁵ "Capture of a Rebel Steamer," *New York Daily Tribune*, June 17, 1862, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030213/1862-06-17/ed-1/seq-1/>.

and women that preceded it.¹⁶ In 1883, the United States Navy produced a report for the House of Representatives that described the reactions of white officers who interacted with Smalls shortly after his escape. This report also included a short preface to provide readers with background information about the escape. Ironically, this source provides more context than the *Planter*'s logbook. The report reads more like a historical novel than a review of the events. It begins at 2:00 a.m. on May 13, 1862, when Smalls donned Captain Relyea's wide-brimmed straw hat to better resemble the Captain. Smalls had practiced pacing on the deck of the ship with his arms folded exactly in the way that the Captain did so that, in the dim early morning light, the two were indistinguishable. At 3:25, the *Planter* continued "her perilous adventure," and Smalls blew the ship's whistle while it sailed past Fort Johnson. At 4:15, the ship passed Fort Sumter, and "the signal required to be given by all steamers passing out was blown as coolly as if General Ripley was on board going out on a tour of inspection."¹⁷ General James Wolfe Ripley, a member of the Union Army

¹⁶ Andrew Billingsley, *Yearning to Breathe Free: Robert Smalls of South Carolina and His Families* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 63.

¹⁷ Robert Smalls, H.R. Rep. No. 47-1962, 2d Sess. (Feb. 19, 1883).

and the Chief of Ordnance for the U.S. Army Ordnance Department was solely responsible for modernizing the artillery's weaponry. The comparison drawn between Smalls and Ripley contextualized Smalls' greatness for all readers because, in that era, Ripley's name was synonymous with military prestige. Smalls' "perilous adventure," as the report labeled it, was successful because of the circumstances of the Civil War, the careful preparations Smalls made to closely imitate the Confederate crew, and a great deal of luck that just happened to be on the side of the *Planter's* crew.

Immediate reactions to the *Planter's* achievements were mostly full of surprise. Regardless of modern historians' arguments about the frequency of self-emancipation, similar stories are nonexistent. In a letter to another Union officer, the *Onward's* Captain Nichols described encountering the *Planter* and Robert Smalls. Captain Nichols reflected on the fact that enslaved people had performed this great deed, and informed his fellow officer that "I sent for the hero, Robert, and he soon came, a pleasant-looking darky, not black, neither light, extreme amount of wooly hair, neatly trimmed, fine teeth; a clean and nice linen check coat with a very fine linen shirt having perhaps been of the wardrobe of the Navy officer who

commanded the boat but fitting him very well.”¹⁸ With the inclusion of details about his physical appearance and clothing, Captain Nichols’ description of Smalls is the only one in existence that illustrates how Smalls looked on the morning of his escape. Nichols praised Smalls, calling him a “hero,” yet he used racist and dehumanizing language in the rest of his description, referring to Smalls as a “pleasant-looking darky” with “wooly hair” whose “fine” clothing could only have belonged to a white officer, as an enslaved person would rarely (if ever) own such items. Nichols’ letter read as if he was trying to praise Smalls for his extraordinary bravery, but some of the language he used was pointed and racist. Other Union Officers, however, had clearer respect for Smalls’ actions. Flag Officer S.F. Dupont’s letter, written on May 14, 1862, was compiled into the U.S. Navy Report on the incident and offered Smalls genuine praise. “Robert, the intelligent slave and pilot of the boat,” he began, “is superior to any who have come in our lines—intelligent as many have been. His information has been most interesting, and portions of it of the utmost importance.”¹⁹ Flag Officer Dupont called Smalls “intelligent” twice and asserted that

¹⁸ Billingsley, *Yearning to Breathe Free*, 60.

¹⁹ Robert Smalls, H.R. Rep. No. 47-1962, 2d Sess. (Feb. 19, 1883).

the information Smalls brought along with the *Planter* was of the “utmost importance” to the Union cause. Rather than rely solely on a description of Smalls’ physical characteristics like Nichols, Dupont referred to Smalls’ intelligence and value as a future Naval Officer, not just a newly emancipated person.

Just as scholars Harding and Williams suggest was possible for enslaved African Americans, the actions of Union generals and politicians further supported enslaved individuals’ quest for freedom. Smalls’ contemporaries and modern historians fail to note that Smalls did not pilot the *Planter* to freedom to be famous, or to be a Union Naval Captain. As he stated on November 1, 1895, while reflecting on his escape and the status of African Americans in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, “My race needs no special defense, for the 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.”²⁰ And that is precisely what Smalls was trying to accomplish on May 13th: setting himself up for his own “equal chance in the battle of life.”

²⁰ Uya, *From Slavery*, 1.

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