The Amazing Robert Smalls

Before Reading

- What is slavery?
- What do you know about the history of African American slaves?
Robert Smalls was an enslaved African American. During the American Civil War, a war fought between the “free” Northern states and “slave” Southern states, he was a ship captain and war hero. He freed himself, his crew and their families from slavery on May 13, 1862, by stealing a ship from the South and sailing it to freedom in the North. His daring escape made him a popular and powerful symbol for African American freedom. This popularity later helped him to become a powerful politician as one of the first black members of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Robert Smalls was born to a slave mother in Beaufort, South Carolina in 1839. As a young boy, he worked on the docks of Charleston. Because Smalls was a slave, he didn’t earn any money. All of the money from his work went to his master, Henry McKee.

Young Robert loved the sea, and he became a very skilled boat worker. He learned how to repair boats and sails, and eventually he worked his way up to become a wheelman, which is like the driver of a ship. Black slave men were not allowed to become captains of ships, so wheelman was the highest position a slave could have on the ship. Robert’s work as a wheelman helped him to become very knowledgeable about the waters around Charleston.

In the fall of 1861, the Civil War between the free Northern states, called the “Union,” and led by president Abraham Lincoln, was fighting the slave Southern States, called the “Confederates.” Because of Robert Smalls’ experience with piloting boats, he was assigned to be the wheelman for a Southern Confederate gun boat called Planter. Robert hated being forced to work for the Confederates,
and he started to plan an escape.

On May 12, 1862, the three white officers on the Planter decided to spend the night in the town instead of on the boat. At about 3:00 am, Smalls and seven enslaved crewmen decided to steal the ship and try to reach the Union ships in the North. Smalls dressed in the captain’s uniform and sailed the Planter into the night, stopping at a nearby town to pick up his young wife and child and the families of other crewmen who were hiding with them.

Smalls’ daring escape succeeded. He sailed the Planter north past all of the Confederate guards in the harbor using the Confederates secret signals, and he surrendered the ship to Union Navy boats. The Planter was a very valuable ship
to the Confederates. It held powerful cannons and ammunition. More importantly, Smalls delivered a code book containing the Confederate’s secret signals, and a map of all the mines and torpedoes around Charleston harbor.

Smalls was now not only a free man, but he quickly became a popular man in the North. Newspapers wrote about him and his crew, and President Abraham Lincoln asked to meet Smalls, and awarded Smalls and his men a large amount of money as a reward for their brave work.

Smalls persuaded President Lincoln to allow black men to join the Union Army, and soon 5,000 African American men had joined. The African American men who joined the Union Army fought hard to defeat the slave states, and they played an important part in many Union victories.

The Planter became a Union gunboat, and Smalls became its captain and the first black captain of a United States ship. The Planter fought in several key battles, and Smalls and his crew used the Planter to fight bravely throughout the war. After the Union defeated the Confederates in 1866, all of the African American slaves were freed. Smalls returned to his hometown of Beaufort and bought his former master’s house. He lived there with his mother, wife, and children, and when his former master’s wife became old, he let her move into the home as well!

After the war, Robert Smalls became involved in politics. He was a hero to African Americans in his home state of South Carolina. Smalls served for over 20 years as a politician, first in the South Carolina House of Representatives, and later in the United States House of Representatives. Robert Smalls worked hard and was very successful during his political career at increasing equality for African Americans in the United States.
Robert Smalls is a hero in American history, and his memory continues today. His house in Beaufort, South Carolina is now a historical landmark, and in 2004 the first U.S. Army ship named after an African American was named the Major General Robert Smalls. Though Robert Smalls came from very humble beginnings as a slave, he became a war hero for the Union and a cultural hero for African Americans who is still remembered for his bravery and intelligence.

**Vocabulary**

Complete the sentences with the vocabulary words and sayings below

- historical landmark
- key
- mines
- torpedoes
- harbor
- daring
- wheelman
- worked his way up
- docks
- enslaved
- civil war

1. Another word for a driver is a ________________________________.

2. Robert Smalls ___________________________ from low level jobs on ships to wheelman.

3. A _____________________________ is a war with only one country fighting itself.

4. ________________________________ people are owned by a master.

5. A _______________________________ is a safe area for boats to stop and park near the land. It usually has several __________________________.

6. A ________________________________ is a building that is recognized for having outstanding historical significance.
7. In this story, _____________ means “to be very important.”

8. Missiles that move through the water are called ________________
   but bombs that float in the water are called ________________.

9. Robert Smalls’ escape was ________________ because it was both adventurous and very dangerous.

**Short Answers**

Try to answer each question in a full sentence.

1. Why was Robert Smalls a slave?

   ____________________________________________________________________________________

2. Why did Robert Smalls plan to escape from the Confederates?

   ____________________________________________________________________________________

3. What was the most important piece of information on the *Planter*?

   ____________________________________________________________________________________

4. What surprising thing did Robert Smalls do after he bought his old slave master’s house?

   ____________________________________________________________________________________
5. How does Robert Small’s memory continue today?

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Discussion

Robert Smalls is a hero in American history, but sadly, most Americans do not know who he is. Why is it important for Americans, and maybe more important for African Americans, to learn about Robert Smalls?

Writing

Write about a hero in your country’s history. Every country has many historical heroes. What did your hero do that was special, and why do people remember him/her today?

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